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'I would not recommend university to my friends unless they were sure they knew what they wanted to do in life, this has left me more confused than when I came': habitus and the emerging self (0259)

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### **Abstract**

A wide body of existing literature highlights the complexities associated with working class students' experiences of higher education. Such research tends to focus on initial feelings and expressions of doubt, where students identify a perceived lack of fit between themselves and the institution relatively early on after their transition into higher education. This paper takes this theme up but develops it further by exploring the experiences of students who after establishing a sense of fit, hit a stumbling block through an incidence of academic failure. Using data from an on-going study into the experiences of working class students in higher education, at a post-1992 university, this paper explores the ways in which students re-construct their sense of self in relation to their university as a result of the experience of academic failure.

### **Context**

Expansion of higher education (HE) across Europe has seen the growth of a theoretically diverse student population (Osborne, 2003; Agasisti and di Milano, 2009). Whilst the increase in student numbers appears to be high on European policy agendas and generally viewed as positive, the HE experiences of students vary according to their social background (Archer and Hutchings 2000) with some first generation students in particular feeling like 'fish out of water' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009: 1106). It has been noted that universities with the lowest rates of retention, which are also those deemed as less elite, have a more diverse student population (National Audit Office, 2007) and tend to be mainly populated by first generation students (HESA, 2011). A number of possible explanations for this have centred on academic and social experiences (Rose 1989, Holloway 1997, Parr 1997, Reynolds 1997, Skeggs 1997, Reay 2001). This paper takes up the theme of 'fit' but focuses its attention on first generation students, who are also identified as working class through other accepted measures, including parental occupation and postcode. It specifically explores their educational journey after they experienced a period of adjustment to the requirements of an HE context and established a sense of 'fit' but also as they hit a stumbling block through academic failure. Data is taken from students in a post-1992 institution who are enrolled on a Joint Honours in

Education course. On the surface, students appear to rationalise their failure in relation to their own perceived failings: none explore the institutional practices that contribute to their academic failure. This raises some interesting questions in relation to the on-going development of self-identity, as working class students seek to align themselves with the middle class contexts of education.

### **Theoretical/Methodological Approach**

This paper, although located within a wide body of research concerning university choice, is also situated within policy discourses around widening participation. Students, who identified themselves as being the first in their family to go into higher education and could also be categorised as working class, across the three years of an undergraduate joint honours programme, were invited to participate in the research. This provided us with a longitudinal aspect to the research in which we could consider how students cope with the changing perceptions of fit they may have over the course of their programme. Importantly, it also enabled us to explore the ways in which they re-aligned themselves with the institution or home. That is, the extent to which their habitus could be experiencing a disconnection between home and the institution.

In exploring processes of (re)alignment, this paper utilises Bourdieu's notion of habitus. In putting habitus to work, the ways in which students explained their academic failure following a period of successful integration into university was explored. Building from previous work that explores habitus in relation to possible 'trajectory interruptions' (see Byrom, 2009), the paper seeks to further develop theoretical explanations for working class transitions and educational success. Important to the study are processes of perception and appreciation that can alter the stability of an emerging secondary habitus (Reed-Danahay, 2005). Not only did the methodological approach facilitate exploration of the idea of a change of habitus over time, it allowed deeper scrutiny of the specific understandings students had as they were making the transition from one class to another.

Much research conducted within this field is qualitative in nature and we take this approach up within this study. Creswell (1998) views qualitative research as an 'intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colours, different textures, and various blends of material' where the fabric 'is not explained easily or simply' (Creswell, 1998:13). Thus the methods used within this research seek to uncover the complexities of identity transformation through the students' understandings and perceptions of how they believed academic failure contributed to their positioning within the field.

In order to explore this issue, the following methods were used: questionnaire with both closed and open ended questions; e-mail communication; focus group discussions; individual interviews.

**Ethics**

This research complies with the code of practice for the conduct of educational research as provided by the British Education Research Association.

## **Analytical Approach**

The analytical approach intends to facilitate understanding of the students' experiences as being part of the 'social world [which] can be represented as a space (with several dimensions)' and where 'agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions within that space' (Bourdieu 1985: 723 - 724). Analysis of data is in its initial stages and comprises: SPSS analysis of questionnaires including cross-tabulation and frequency counts of closed questions; post-code data was entered into the Office for National Statistic (ONS) web-site to gain understanding of the students' home location in terms of multiple indices of deprivation; open ended questionnaire questions, focus group and individual interviews will be fully transcribed and thematically coded.

## **Preliminary Findings**

At this stage, the initial data collection through questionnaire, focus group and individual interviews has been completed and is partially analysed. Findings initially would suggest that students understand their academic failure within the context of their own failings: they do not apportion blame towards the institution. In working out next steps, students rarely seek out tutorial advice believing that they should have been successful with their work in the first place. Some students realign with a home based habitus and seek advice and comfort from parents or friends at their primary home. Others seek out increased levels of guidance from their university tutors. Interestingly, despite this advice being available prior to submission, students often reported feeling as though they would be 'wasting their tutor's time' or would feel 'stupid' if they approached their tutor with questions that would suggest they did not know what they were doing.

Whilst the theoretical analysis of this work is yet to be completed, and there is work to be done around habitus transformation, these findings contribute to our on-going understanding of the discomfort some working class students feel within the field of higher education and the extent to which they attempt to cope when faced with academic failure. The experiences of the students illustrate how resilient they can be as they draw from experiences aligned with an emerging secondary habitus but also how some are more likely to revert back to the safety of their primary habitus as established through their home context.

It also raises some questions around the transparency of support structures within HE institutions and the perceptions working class students have of accessing such support.

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