Pathways to social mobility through investment in the future (0094)
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Abstract

This paper considers pathways to social mobility for young graduates, as they move through and beyond higher education (HE). HE is considered a key route to social mobility in the UK, and there is growing interest in graduate destinations, particularly the opportunities and constraints faced by graduates from different social backgrounds. This paper is based on a longitudinal study, which has followed young people from the start of undergraduate study, through to lives beyond graduation. It focuses on two key questions: What can we say about whether participants in the study have been socially mobile? What can we say about the potential for mobility amongst these young graduates? Drawing on extensive qualitative data gathered over six years, the paper explores the complexity of processes of social mobility, and highlights different orientations and practices towards investing in the future, ranging from investing in the present to cultural entrepreneurship for the future.

Pathways to social mobility through investment in the future

This paper considers pathways to social mobility for young graduates in the UK, as they move through and beyond higher education (HE). HE is considered a key route to social mobility in the UK (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2015), and there is growing interest in graduate destinations, particularly the opportunities and constraints faced by graduates from different social backgrounds.

An increasing amount of published work uses statistical data to establish a picture of social mobility in the UK population, including the mobility of graduates from HE (Lindley and Machin 2013, Macmillan and Vignoles 2013, Macmillan, Tyler and Vignoles 2015). What this paper aims to do is to provide an understanding of the complex experience of social mobility on the ground, using qualitative data from a longitudinal study (the Paired Peers project), which has followed young people from the start of undergraduate study, through to their lives beyond graduation. It focuses on two key questions: What can we say about whether participants in the study have been socially mobile? What can we say about the *potential* for mobility amongst these young graduates?

The work of the project has focused on how social class shapes participants' experience. Paired Peers I showed that the social space of higher education is saturated with class, and sought to understand how participants' social class positioning affected their experience of HE (Bathmaker et al, 2016). Paired Peers II follows the participants into their lives and employment beyond HE. It is now three years since participants in the project graduated. This paper considers what we can say about participants' social class positioning now, and what we can say about their mobility from their family class origins to the present time. The aim is not to propose a new index or measure for social mobility, rather to consider how participants experience their movement through social space as they establish their lives and careers post-HE, and the ways in which social class shapes that experience.

The Paired Peers project followed 70 students throughout their undergraduate study, and 54 of these students have continued to participate in the project in the three years since they graduated. Participants in Paired Peers II have been interviewed three times (once per year) since completing their undergraduate degree, mainly through skype and telephone interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data have then been coded and analysed using NVivo, using a coding manual developed by the research team. The codes are drawn from themes in the literature, which have informed the interview schedules, as well as themes that have arisen in the data. The coding manual has been adapted over the duration of the project to reflect new issues and ideas that have occurred.

The paper draws on a range of sources and ideas about mobility and social class as a basis for examining the data we have gathered on young people's progress through undergraduate study and on to graduate futures and destinations. These include revised classifications of social class, most publicly visible in the work of the Great British Class Survey (Savage et al 2013), but also involving work by for example Atkinson and Rosenlund (2014) and Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2015). Our interest in how class is experienced engages with recent work on the notion of habitus (Friedman 2015, Ingram 2011, Abrahams and Ingram 2015), and habitus and the psychosocial (Reay 2015). Research using capability theory (Robeyns 2003, Walker and Wilson-Strydom 2015, Wilson-Strydom 2014) and literature on possible selves (Clegg and Stevenson 2010, Stevenson and Clegg 2011, Markus and Nurius 1986, Oyserman et al 2004) have informed our thinking about desired and realisable graduate futures, while work by Lareau (2011), Devine (2004) and DiMaggio (1982) has helped to think through practices amongst some graduates in the Paired Peers study, that involve deliberate and strategic investment in the future, through concerted cultivation and cultural entrepreneurship.

The paper draws on data from across the two phases of the project to consider processes of mobility amongst participants. In addition, specific examples from the second phase of the project are presented in order to consider the complexity and messiness that constitute many of these young people's lives in their first years following graduation. While terms such as 'pathways' and 'progression' give a strong suggestion of moving forward with intent, the data from the Paired Peers project offer a more complex picture. Moreover, the data show how mobility is affected by social class, and that processes of consolidating position and increasing advantage amongst the middle classes are at least as prevalent as evidence of upward mobility amongst working-class participants. The paper concludes by considering how the knowledge and evidence that can be gained from in-depth, longitudinal, qualitative data on graduate destinations provide vital understandings of the social mobility of young graduates for both policy and practice.

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