Split Habitus and Othering : first generation students, habitus transformation and higher education (0301)

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Background

Patterns of higher education participation have identified differentiated experiences according to social class (see for example, Archer, 2003; Donnelly, 2015). It has been well documented why such patterns persist despite Government attention to raising the participation rates of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Ball, 2003; Byrom, 2015). However, much of the literature surrounding this issue, whilst identifying the key barriers to participation and identifying the possible theoretical explanations, do not illuminate particular incidents that could explain working class higher education participation.

Habitus is frequently used to understand the attitudes and dispositions of groups of people and therefore indicative of class based practices. Habitus is therefore a useful tool in exploring difference: in attitudes and behaviour in relation to higher education participation. Traditional social classifications and indices of multiple deprivation used by government agencies theoretically group people and assume that those living in close proximity to each other will share common characteristics. Whilst this could be true in relation to levels of economic capital, this theoretical approach does not account for the idea that individuals have distinct family histories that may not mirror those of the people around them. In addition, the idea that habitus could be 'permeable and responsive to what is going on around them' (Reay 2004) offers some flexibility in explaining why some working class young people do make it into elite forms of higher education.

Much of the sociological literature that focuses on working class attitudes to education do so in relation to processes of 'othering', where working class experiences of education are compared with that of the middle class (see Plummer 2000; Reay and Lucey 2000; Archer 2003; Ball 2003; Power, Edwards et al. 2003: Reay, David et al. 2005). Bourdieu argues that an individual's habitus is 'embodied history' (Bourdieu 1990: 56), it therefore makes sense to explore habitus as a malleable, adaptable and regulating internal force; it can adapt both to context and subsequently change with the caveat that is does not stray too far from its class roots. Bourdieu emphasises this aspect of the habitus

> Early experiences have particular weight because the *habitus* tends to secure its own consistency and its defence against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information, if exposed to it accidentally or by force, and especially by avoiding exposure to such information.

(Bourdieu 1990: 60 - 61)

Accepting that habitus can be subject to change and transformation provides the space to consider the development of both habitus clivé (Reed-Danahay, 2005) where the habitus is under tension and also the development of a secondary habitus: one that has been influenced by the structuring structures within which individual students were located.

Methodology

A total of 16 students were interviewed over a period of 18 months pre-university participation and during their first year at university. Students self-selected into the study and identified themselves as both first generation students and from low socio-economic backgrounds based on parental income. The study aimed to explore students' understandings of their journey into higher education and how they explained this in relation to their other family member's non-participation. Specifically, the research sought to identify the key moments in the lives of the young people that had interrupted what would have been an expected trajectory. As such, it required methods that illuminated their life trajectory/ies complete with constraints, opportunities presented, influences, critical moments and outcomes. This was in accord with Creswell's (1998: 13) notion of 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'.

Ethical processes were followed in line with those set by BERA (2011).

Data was thematically analysed within a Bourdieuian framework, with a particular focus on habitus. Themes that emerged from the analysis include:

-   Habitus influenced by home context

-   Habitus influenced by institutional structures

-   Habitus transformation

Within each theme, key incidents were identified in the student's trajectories that could explain how they came to higher education.

Findings

Each student had a unique story to tell and their narratives provided a rich source of data to illuminate the ways in which key incidents appeared to change their life course from that expected. Whilst each story is unique, there are also similarities across the sample. For example, building positive relationships with particular teachers served as a 'way in' to understanding education when family members did not appear to align with its principles or underpinning philosophy. The stories of the young people also illuminated their construction of themselves and their othering – both in relation to how they felt they aligned to education but also how they felt others did not. This was frequently reported as being a result of key interactions that were remembered: the strength of which was evident given the distance from some of the experiences cited. For example, one student (Emma) spoke about her primary school teacher who 'picked her up' when her mother died. It was the closeness of this relationship that served as the first trajectory interruption for Emma. Whilst the memory is strong given its context, Emma highlighted its importance in her journey into higher education. Emma also identified difference: she knew that since going to university, the distance

between her family and herself had grown and that she felt different to them. This identification of difference is not unusual for first generation students who make the journey into higher education and is frequently reported in the widening participation literature. However, the data gathered from this study provides further insights into specific actions that contribute to trajectories: some that confirm social position and others that bring it into question.

Implications

It was evident from this small scale research project that key incidents from an early age ultimately influenced the young people's decision to go to university. For practitioners involved in widening participation and access, this therefore has some implications to when interventions should be implemented.

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