

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0444

SYMPOSIUM G1 | Beaumaris Lounge

Chaired by Richard Waller

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White working class young men's engagement with higher education: Accessing voices of the 'hard to reach' and (frequently) 'left behind'

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Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract: This paper reports on an ongoing SRHE funded research project [RA1837] which aimed to access and listen to the voices of a group of under-represented and rarely heard university students, white working class young men. The project, which runs across 2019 did so through employing a range of qualitative approaches I consider more appropriate than 'traditional' research approaches for the group in question given their 'hard to reach' status. In particular this included trialling innovative research methods showcased in a 2018 joint SRHE/OFFA workshop *How can we meaningfully listen to students' voices to shape policy and practice?* The methods employed were *Digital Storytelling* and *Listening Rooms*, developed by Dr Liz Austen and Dr Emma Heron (both SHU) respectively.

Paper: *Background*

Despite numerous policy initiatives addressing the issue, white working class young men remain one of the social groups least likely to attend university, and are widely considered excluded from full social participation. They figure prominently amongst those referred to as 'left behinds' during the post-Brexit fallout, and remain voices rarely heard in HE. This project primarily sought to establish the utility of innovative research approaches employed to access a group consider 'hard to reach' for both policy interventions concerning widening participation to university, and when researching HE experiences. It also seeks to understand the motivations of those who do 'make it' to university, and by involving their peers who did not go, consider possible local and national policy interventions to address this.

Historically there have been numerous research studies into working class male educational underachievement at school, with key examples over time including Jackson and Marsden (1962) and Willis (1977). However, notwithstanding this ongoing concern, their 'underachievement' in higher education remains relatively under-researched, despite its central importance to social inclusion

more generally, and in particular social mobility, especially in light of the (unequal) expansion of higher education participation in the last quarter of a century or so (Milburn, 2016; Waller *et al.*, 2014).

Lyng (2009:463) suggested that within the literature on working class male educational achievement, 'school commitment and masculinities are fundamentally incompatible', even where researchers propose 'multiple possible masculinities' (e.g. Waller (2006)). The theoretical framework employed within the research outlined here employs Bourdieu's conceptual tools of *habitus* and capitals, and extends Connell's 'hegemonic masculinity' in arriving at what a research colleague and I have previously called 'composite masculinity' (Waller and Ingram, 2016).

The phenomenon of negligible higher education participation rates amongst white working class young men has led to scrutiny and comment from both media and policymakers too. Recent TV documentaries include the Professor Green's 2018 Channel 4 series *White working class men*, and Grayson Perry's 2016 Channel 4 series *All man*. Within public policy, recent reports from the Parliamentary Education Committee (2014) and Sutton Trust (2016) demonstrate persistent underachievement by white working class young men. The causes of this are complex. It is often – incorrectly to my mind – attributed to 'aspirational deficit' (Harrison and Waller, 2018), and notions of a 'crisis of masculinity' are cited too during times of changing employment, including the disappearance of traditional male working class jobs, and the hollowing-out of communities upon which they were based.

Research Questions:

Methodological

1. *How useful are the innovative research methods in accessing the voices of the participants; is there something about the cohort in question that makes them more appropriate than more traditional research approaches?*
2. *How might the research approaches be further adapted to better access the voices and narrative accounts of young white working class men?*

Theoretical

3. *Why did the participants choose to go to university when the majority of those in their situation do not?*
4. *How do participants feel their lives will differ from their peers as a consequence of them either going or not going to HE?*

Methods

Following an extensive literature review and appropriate ethical clearance, a small sample (n=8) of young (under 25) white male working class third year undergraduates was recruited from a range of programmes across my university. They were recruited through adverts around the campus (e.g. the

students' union), and, when necessary, through approaching colleagues to ask students in their lectures. Third years were targeted for participation in this study to 'surface' and test key themes and ideas by reflecting on their and their peers' educational experiences. The eight undergraduates were asked to recruit a friend with the same demographic characteristics who did not go to university (i.e. two friends who are both white working class young males, one an undergraduate and one who is not). This was necessary to employ the innovative *Listening Rooms* approach outlined below.

The eight university students were trained in the Adobe Spark *Digital Storytelling* film-making technique (outlined below) and asked to each make a short film (c2-3 mins) on their experiences of higher education and motivations for attending university. These were shown to the two focus groups comprising both HE participants and non-participants (four matched friendship pairs per focus group) and used as discussion prompts. The focus group conversations were synthesised into six key topics for the *Listening Rooms* discussions.

Digital Storytelling

This method was developed by Liz Austen (2018), and involves digital storytelling employing the Adobe Spark tool (e.g. <http://yorkshireuniversities.ac.uk/digital-storytelling>). I taught participants the technique and asked them to make a short film (c2-3 minutes) using still images (their own or from other sources), and a voiceover narrative. These were also excellent resources for prompting discussions (e.g. in the subsequent focus groups).

Listening Rooms

The second approach was developed by Emma Heron, and involves an approach modelled on Radio 4's *The Listening Project* programme in which two friends or family members record conversations on a given subject in a radio booth. Heron's (2018) adaptation of this format involves two student friends talking for an hour, for ten minutes on each of six topics from prompt cards. Time was managed through using a large egg-timer. To allow a freer, less inhibited and more natural discussion the researcher was in the adjoining room to the participants during their conversations, which were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Findings

This is an ongoing project. At the time of submitting this proposal the detailed analysis of findings has not taken place, but it will have by the time of conference some six months hence.

For discussion

The utility of such innovative approaches

How they may be adapted for use in other settings

Ethical dilemmas facing researchers employing them

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