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To cite this article: Philip Woodward (2021): Location and locational capital: an examination of factors influencing choice of higher education applications by working-class students in a sixth-form college, Educational Review, DOI: [10.1080/00131911.2021.1874306](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1874306)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1874306>



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Published online: 15 Feb 2021.



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Location and locational capital: an examination of factors influencing choice of higher education applications by working-class students in a sixth-form college

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the differential ways that working-class sixth-form students in England utilise cultural and social capital when applying to university. This process is examined in terms of the university and course choices made and associated social advantage and prestige. It employs an interpretive paradigm using qualitative methods and a conceptual framework derived from Bourdieu. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were employed and a grounded approach to data analysis was utilised. Findings suggest that access to cultural and social capital is limited to familial influence and educational environment had a limited impact on student decisions. When making choices the most notable themes linked to general locality. Locational preference linked to degree of geographical cultural knowledge and led to the development of the notion of *locational capital*. This corresponded to intentions to avoid certain locations such as “the rural” or “the provincial” and helps to understand choice. These geographical constructions, linked to perceptions concerning Higher Education Institutions, often triggered concerns regarding “fitting-in” and “social class” and for many resulted in limitations on choice. This imposed a limitation on applying to prestigious HEIs.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 December 2019

Accepted 5 January 2021

KEYWORDS

Locational capital; higher education; choice; social class

Introduction

The last sixty years have seen a monumental increase in the higher education sector, in terms of participation and the corresponding number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Government policy and the need for a highly qualified workforce has driven change, as has increased birth rate linked to a public desire for increased participation (Chitty, 2009). In the United Kingdom, undergraduates now number 1.75 million (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018), and are spread across 162 HEIs (Universities UK, 2018). Despite such an increase to a point of “mass” participation, inequalities linked to social-class still persist and link to participation and choice. Whilst there has been much debate concerning inter-class differences between middle-class and working-class students (Hutchings & Archer, 2001; Reay, 1998, 2001; Thomas & Quinn, 2007), and intra-class differences within the middle-class, there has been a limited focus on the differential choices that working-class students make.

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This paper explores the different ways that working-class students in a sixth-form college in the south of England have access to and utilise non-economic capital, in the form of cultural and social capital, to inform the process of applying to university and the extent to which this leads to a “prestigious choice” and the associated potential advantage. In doing so this paper examines the range of influences that can impact on choice and the themes that emerge as determinants of choice. Respondents list a range of influences that have some bearing on choice including family, social networks and institutional influences. In terms of themes, a range of factors emerge including: locality, institution, course enjoyment, fitting-in, prestige or ranking, pragmatism and concern over crime. However, this paper focuses on the influence of location, which was highlighted as most significant.

The findings of this paper are drawn from research undertaken at a medium-sized sixth-form college in a small town close to an urban area on the south coast of England. The college offered a broad range of academic and vocational courses, including a good range of Advanced Level GCE provision. The students at the college are drawn from a broad geographical area, including some areas that are recognised as significantly economically deprived. The research involved twenty-seven participants who applied to attend university through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in the United Kingdom. Through a series of focus groups and interviews, the primary reasons for university choice amongst respondents and the significant link to locality were established. This paper focuses on the intra-class differences amongst respondents that primarily link to “moving away” or “staying local” when attending university. The “fear of the provincial” is also apparent for some respondents. It is concluded that the intra-class division that emerges can extend or limit choice. The choice to move away from the family home and from the local area can result in broader access to prestige. Some working-class respondents, who do not have significant access to economic capital, have access to aspects of social and cultural capital that enables broader geographical possibilities. The specific resources employed by such respondents are here termed *locational capital*, which is an extension of aspects of cultural capital.

Context

To explore choice, a conceptual framework is employed that considers capital and its impact on educational outcomes that stem from the work of Bourdieu (1998; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1998) who addresses the relationship between *economic* (wealth, material resources), *social* (connections, social networks, obligations) and *cultural* (knowledge, tastes, preferences, qualifications) *capital* (Savage et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2002). Those who lack economic capital are disadvantaged in terms of educational achievement (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; Douglas, 1964; Halsey et al., 1980; Palmer et al., 2007). However, here the focus is on the significance of non-economic capital and the way that individuals can also obtain advantages through the acquisition, development and utilisation of cultural and social capital. Whilst the possession of cultural capital, that encompasses distinctive cultural norms, has a direct relationship to a high social class position (Bourdieu, 1998), and serves as a mechanism to exclude lower social class groups and maintain advantage, here it is suggested that this is also exhibited in intra-class differences in working-class students. Some working-class students do appear to have higher levels of cultural and social capital than others and appear to make more informed HE choices. The way that such students establish higher levels of cultural and social capital is not significantly addressed by Bourdieu and others and consequently becomes a focus here.

Much has been written to highlight the importance of social and cultural capital and the extent to which this is linked to higher educational choice and potentially occupational mobility (Ball, Davies et al., 2002; Ball, Reay et al., 2002; Pugsley, 1998; Reay, 1998; Woodward, 2019). These studies show the extent to which possession of, and access to, non-economic capital are linked to socio-economic position. Additionally, they demonstrate that those from higher socio-economic groups have broader access to social and cultural capital, which they utilise to gain significant educational advantage including the transition to university. It is acknowledged that the intersection between social class and other criteria, most notably ethnicity (Croxford & Raffe, 2014; Reay et al., 2005; Scandone, 2018) and gender (Brooks, 2004; Egerton & Halsey, 1993; Reay et al., 2005), also have a significant impact on capital formation and HEI choice. However, the primary focus for this paper, and the focus of the data, links to social class, although to a lesser extent some of the data points to the importance of gender.

The expansion of higher education has not democratised education, and a situation of inequality persists (Ball, Davies et al., 2002; Egerton & Halsey, 1993; Keep & Mayhew, 2004; Office for Fair Access, 2010; The Sutton Trust, 2011, 2000). Students from different socio-economic groups do have differential access to non-economic capital and correspondingly do make different higher education choices (Ball, Davies et al., 2002; Jackson, 2006; Reay, 1998; Wildhagen, 2009). Most studies underlining inter-class differences in higher education choice have focussed on outcome and not on the processes in relation to choice of higher education (Egerton & Halsey, 1993; Iannelli, 2007; Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Most studies have been large scale and quantitative rather than qualitative and small scale (Connor et al., 2001; Egerton & Halsey, 1993; Gayle et al., 2002). Qualitative studies have often been London-based (Reay, 1998, 2002; Reay et al., 2005; Ball, Reay et al., 2002). More small-scale qualitative studies that are not London based are needed in respect of inter-class differences in higher education choice, particularly among sixth-form students.

In relation to higher education choice, the majority of researchers have highlighted inter-class differences. Those who have examined intra-class differences have focussed on middle-class students (Ball, 2003; Brooks, 2004; Power, 2000; Power et al., 2003). While middle-class homogeneity has been questioned and differences identified (Bottero, 2004; Brooks, 2003b; Power, 2000), intra-class differences in relation to working-class students have been under-researched and under-theorised. A limited amount of research (Hutchings & Archer, 2001) acknowledges that the working-class may also be fragmented and suggests differential experiences of education. However, this needs further investigation. Hence, a question on whether students from similar socio-economic backgrounds, in particular working-class backgrounds, employ social and cultural capital when making higher education choices is justified. This question does not diminish the significance of inter-class difference, but does add more complexity to understanding how working-class students access non-economic capital. Various factors have been found to play a key role in higher education choice such as family (Bourdieu, 1998; Coleman, 1988; Thomas & Quinn, 2007; Power, 2000), community (Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1995; Reay, 1998), social networks (Hutchings & Archer, 2001), school (Power, 2000; Reay, 1998), peer group (Brooks, 2004; Reay, 1998; Roberts & Allen, 1997), media (Reay, 1998), employment (Power, 2000; Reay, 1998) and geographical constraints (Reay, 1998). However, most research has been concerned with characteristics linked to students, but not the decision-making process that leads to choice. Hence, a second focus of this investigation was the extent to which specific factors such as the role of family, peers, community, social

networks, employment, geography, and media influence higher education choice for working-class students.

Methodology

The approach corresponds to a broadly interpretative paradigm that seeks to examine the outlook of the students being investigated to gain a broader understanding of their motivations and the meanings and reality of their behaviour. This is to explore questions relating to access to, and uses of, social and cultural capital and the extent to which this links to intra-class differences. The research instruments employed were focus groups and semi-structured interviews followed by data collection and analysis that corresponded broadly to a grounded theory approach. This approach is supported through analysis utilising a conceptual framework derived from Bourdieu.

Initially, a pre-test focus group was utilised involving seven first-year students to indicate the extent of knowledge about university choice prior to application. The main phase of research was undertaken once students had completed their UCAS applications. Three further focus groups were completed comprising 12 students in total.

Semi-structured interviews were also completed with 18 students. Ten of these respondents had already participated in the focus group stage of the research and they were selected through “theoretical sampling” undertaken as part of a grounded theory approach to data analysis. These participants had raised important issues that were identified as significant through grounded theory coding. Eight additional students also participated in the semi-structured interviews. The interview stage of the research continued until theoretical categories were saturated.

In total, nineteen students participated in the focus groups: nine males and ten females. The semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eighteen students: ten females and eight males. The research as a whole involved the participation of twenty-seven different students, with twenty-four finally hoping to attend HE.

Given the social and demographic characteristics of the college, located in a low socio-economic status postcode, most participants were located in the lower half of the NS-SEC scheme (Office for National Statistics, 2009). However, to check on this parental occupation was identified through a short questionnaire. These identified parental occupational background as an indication of social class. This confirmed that the participants belonged to broadly lower socio-economic groups.

To ensure that the research did not lose sight of the actual experiences of respondents, aspects of a grounded theory approach were utilised. This linked to a desire to establish how students make choices and subsequently to formulate theories in relation to these choices. Grounded theory inverts a traditional approach that aims to test a hypothesis or theory with data, suggesting instead that research should commence through examining data and subsequently develop theory from such “grounded” data (Birks & Mills, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). However, here a solely grounded theory approach was not employed for the overall research, but was employed for data collection and analysis. Although keen to examine the relevance of the concepts of cultural and social capital, such categories were not imposed, and the intention was to establish the “grounded” experience of respondents in relation to the significance of different types of noneconomic capital in terms of influencing choice. This ensured, to some degree, that the theory that emerged was grounded in the data. Theory did

not solely stem from experience: nevertheless, experience significantly modified theoretical constructs examined. In terms of a process for grounded theory, Charmaz's (2006) constructivist approach was followed as this linked to the research perspective.

The practical stages of this approach involved initial coding of the focus group and interview responses to identify conceptual ideas. Analytic memos were then produced to develop "tentative" analytic categories (Creswell, 2007). This process led to further theoretical sampling to further explore analytic categories and enable a constant comparative method until theoretical saturation was achieved. Consequently, where themes were identified during the focus group phase of the research they were further prioritised in terms of questioning in later stages. These in particular focused on "locality" and "sibling influence". Students who raised points that seemed particularly significant in terms of the development of analytic categories were then asked to participate in the later interview phase of the research.

Findings and discussion

Respondents identified a range of factors that influenced where they choose to study; these were coded as locality, institution, course, enjoyment, fitting-in, prestige or ranking, pragmatism and a concern over crime. However, the most significant factor and overriding determinant of choice appears to be general location, whilst the type of HEI was generally less significant.

In relation to location, the 24 students, twelve males, and twelve females, are quite polarised in terms of their choices. Thirteen elected to remain in the local area (within reasonable commuting distance), whilst eleven elected to move away.

Students who wish to remain in the local area on the south coast of England have a choice of eight institutions that fit within the area they identify as within reasonable commuting distance. This limits the range of courses available, but also provides a limitation in terms of prestige or ranking. In terms of ranking the only real choice of a prestigious institution in this area is the University of Southampton: a member of the Russell Group.¹ Consequently, a choice in terms of locality can be limiting as this narrows choice not only to local institutions but also in terms of the possibility of attending a prestigious institution.

Only two of the participants who will remain in the local area have chosen the University of Southampton. In terms of those choosing to move out of the local area, and hence gain access to a much broader range of choices, four have chosen (and gained places) at prestigious universities, Birmingham (Russell Group), Bath (pre-1992) Bradford (pre-1992) and Sussex (pre-1992).

This raises the question of how the respondents decided to "stay local" or "move away" and highlights the significance of intra-class differences in relation to locality. A range of studies have looked at geographical mobility and the way that students make decisions concerning whether they will stay at home, remain in the local area or move away (Holdsworth, 2009b; Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005). Some have focussed on distance travelled and not the status of the HEI; additionally research has focussed on both national and international student mobility (Holton & Riley, 2013). Student decisions appear to be for a number of reasons, but in part can be linked to socio-economic status. Those from higher socio-economic groups have correspondingly higher geographical mobility (Christie, 2007; Holdsworth, 2009a; Holton & Riley, 2013; Murphey-Lejeune, 2002; Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005; Reay et al., 2001). Students from more affluent areas travel further, whereas those from poorer areas travel the least distance

from home (Farr, 2001). Interest in this area has become more significant as a consequence of the expansion of higher education, and through increases in the number of students attending their local HEIs (Holdsworth, 2009b), including the often less prestigious post-1992 institutions (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005). Popular, dominant, middle-class media discourses about HE tend to promote a view that mobility and moving away from home and a regional locale are the norm (Christie, 2007), despite increased local participation. Such increases also link to large numbers of students who remain local and in the family home (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005).

The reasons for limited geographical mobility are various. Whilst economic reasons can clearly be cited (Christie, 2007; Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005), other factors have a bearing such as degree of cultural capital (Christie, 2007; Jamieson, 2000; Reay, 2003b), degree of support from family and peers as well as staying close to home to retain emotional security, add confidence, increase control, reduce risk and maintain local employment (Christie, 2007; Ball, Davies et al., 2002; Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005). Family specifically appears to be significant in relation to students' decisions to stay local as decisions are often collaborative. In contrast, those who are more mobile might have a class-based family tradition of leaving home to attend HE (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005). This research accounts for some of the respondents who follow a "traditional" local trajectory. However, some findings challenge this.

With reference to international or trans-national student movement in Europe a small group, an elite, can be identified who have high levels of economic security and belong to higher socio-economic groups (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002). These groups have a high degree of mobility, which is characterised by geographical and cultural flexibility. These mobile students, for Murphey-Lejeune (2002), possess *mobility capital*, a scarce resource, that in her terms is "a subcomponent of human capital, enabling individuals to enhance their skills because of the richness of the international experience gained living abroad" (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002, p. 51). *Mobility capital* is constructed through familial background and experiences, previous experiences of travel and individual personality (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002). Students who possess *mobility capital* report significant experiences of family mobility, sometimes because of "family migratory mobility", but often as a consequence of professional occupational mobility (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002). In relation to these students, mobility had also often been experienced by children as a consequence of being sent away for educational experiences. Additionally, "virtual mobility" has often been experienced by families who invited foreign guests into their homes (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002). This elite group, in contrast to the working-class respondents in this study, have acquired *mobility capital* through their socio-economic position and access to a wide range of resources including economic capital. Other factors are also highlighted as significant in developing *mobility capital*. These link to sibling travel experiences, parents with an international outlook, experiences of adaptation, initial experience of travel and the frequency of mobility experiences (Murphey-Lejeune, 2002). In contrast, some of the respondents in this research have also developed resources linked to mobility, that are not linked to economic capital, that utilise knowledge of locality to facilitate extended choice. These are further developed below in relation to the concept of *locational capital*.

A number of parents from lower socio-economic groups, who have relatively low economic capital, whose children have chosen to live away from home, want their children to have a similar experience to their middle-class peers (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005); this might build cultural and social capital and facilitate a smoother transition to HE. In terms of these working-

class students who move away from their home and local community, “mobility becomes a form of embodied cultural capital ... leaving home is the right thing to do” (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005, p. 516). Leaving home might create *mobility capital* or *cultural capital* through mobility itself, as “mobility can be seen as facilitating a student habitus” (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005, p. 516). The process of mobility appears to be important in itself for generating cultural capital and facilitating a propensity for future mobility.

Whilst one might be concerned about different levels of geographical mobility, and see trends in terms of movement and social class, the question remains as to the relative advantage that geographical mobility might provide. As noted, moving away from home is seen as the norm in the dominant discourse concerning the *student experience* (Christie, 2007; Holdsworth, 2009b). However, this is very much a middle-class discourse and may not have responded to widening participation, demographic and generational changes in recent years (Holdsworth, 2009b). In many metropolitan areas, a wide choice of HEIs are available for students and this might eliminate the need for geographical mobility. This situation has resulted in the advantages of moving away being questioned (Christie, 2007). Staying local can present advantages to non-traditional applicants who will gain family and peer support in their community. Consequently, “getting a degree ... [will be] ... an achievable goal” (Christie, 2007, p. 2454). This means that staying local can provide a clear advantage and help working-class students to fit-in and make the transition to HE (Holdsworth, 2006).

To gain access to the broadest range of elite HEIs one could certainly argue that a national outlook is required. Focussing on only a regional segment of the HE market could pose a limitation on choice, particularly in rural areas. Staying local might also pose its own problems in terms of preventing an individual from feeling fully part of an HEI. Through maintaining close familial and peer relationships, opportunities for networking and building social capital at an HEI might be diminished (Christie, 2007). Whilst working-class students might gain a significant benefit from retaining local employment, this reduces their opportunities for extra-curricular HE events and social capital formation. Finally, remaining local also potentially poses the problem of being overly dependant on the local community, through retaining familial and social ties, commitments and obligations, which might create distance from the culture of the HEI (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005). This leads back to an advantage for working-class students who do move away.

Those who do stay at home potentially have a disadvantage in relation to other students and the university community. Remaining at home can create extra barriers for students when trying to fit-in with peers who are living away from home. Some working-class students fit-in more effectively because they do move away and “moving away from home may make it easier for students to overcome the contrast between their home communities and student life” (Holdsworth, 2006, p. 515), whilst those at home might have a conflict. For those who move away, their mobility creates cultural capital and a propensity for further mobility. In general terms these mobile students are more likely to be from middle-class backgrounds.

Findings point to an intra-class division or polarisation in relation to the choice of locality and a range of factors or sub-themes that seem to illustrate why students make such choices.

“A love of the local”

Students (whose names have been anonymised) who wish to remain local cite a number of reasons. Sometimes they stay home to save money (Leah), although the majority wish to

move out of their family home to get the “university experience” (Megan, Scott, Sophie, Gary). The local area has attractions as it is “convenient” and for many “familiarity” seems important. Others are uncomfortable with the prospect of moving too far away (Thomas and James). A concern is raised of moving to a metropolitan community where they will experience a “chaotic” and costly environment. The benefits of staying local link to a sense of provincialism: a quiet environment where there is countryside, local amenities and familiarity.

Ryan is a student who has applied to a university in London, but in his final choices prioritised staying local. He seems concerned to stay in reasonable proximity to home, “I wanted to move out but not too far away ... to be in reaching distance from home”. He has decided to go to Chichester University as opposed to London. Nevertheless, he wants some distance from home; choosing his immediate locale is too close, it would, “feel a bit like school”. However, Ryan does want a “nice community ... a nice sort of feel”. Gary also reflects a desire to stay relatively local, and for similar sounding reasons, “I prefer a more relaxed environment where you’re more likely to see familiar people”. He also expressed concerns about “inner city places”. Megan also wishes to stay local so that she can look after her horses, although she was prepared to look at the University of Bath and Paige also “never really wanted to move away that far ... maybe it’s family and friends back here”.

Neil is more emphatic; he wants to stay local because, “it’s easier than going miles away where you’re not going to see anyone ... like friends and family”. He points to the importance of familiarity. Finally, Scott, who did consider moving out of the area, elects to stay local. He has realised that he wants to be near his family; however, he also sees the benefit in remaining close to his current local employment, “I have to work when I go” and local work is guaranteed.

“The pleasure of independence”

For some, moving away is the most significant factor in choice, in terms of geography not HEI. Social life is important and if this is missing the university may be rejected. Moving away represents independence and enjoyment. Those who support this view, such as Vicky and Kate, do not link choice to cost. The way that choice links to the experience of university overrides cost. For some respondents a fear of moving away is mitigated by an extended family member living near the proposed choice. For others moving away is important, “but not too far”. They desire independence and self-sufficiency, with a reasonable proximity to home.

Pete is a student who wants to move away and is the only respondent who is prepared to move to the north of England. Pete discusses the importance of independence and sees few problems with moving to the north. Two of his choices are Liverpool and Sheffield, “you can drive it in a day ... it’s not far at all”. Alice is another student who is prepared to travel a reasonable distance and sees general location as important, “I wouldn’t want to go to a university that hasn’t really got a town to go out into because then you’re stuck on a campus”. She also links moving away to “the experience”.

A further group of students wish to move away, but restrict distance. Beth is typical of this group. Her firm university choice is the University of the West of England, “It was important to get far enough away that I’m not going to come home every week, but not too far away, so that [if] there’s a problem ... I can easily get back”. Emily is also drawn to moving away to Brighton, “I like the way of life down there, I like all the shops and ... the nightlife”. Emily likes the fact that, “there’s a lot going on”. She also wants independence, “I think it will be good for me to grow-up a little bit”. However, she does note that the HEI is also as important as the area.

Emily is quite clear that some locations are too far, citing, “Manchester, Liverpool, and all those northern places ... I think I would feel a bit on edge”. Emily also links a northern location to her potential academic performance, “I suppose that I would feel uncomfortable and unhappy ... I wouldn’t do as well as I probably could somewhere else”.

For Vicky, both institution and location seem important, although location has primacy. Vicky links choosing Brighton, and the University of Sussex to a cosmopolitan experience, “it’s got a broader range of people ... it’s obviously quite a diverse scene”. Vicky also gives primacy to choice of HEI over choice of subject, “the universities I applied for, they were quite good for their subjects and the results, but it was more the university than the subject”. She points to a consideration of a combination of factors: location, distance from home and academic standing.

Finally, Fiona raises some interesting comments about location. She is happy to travel quite a long distance (but not as far as “Cumbria”). She links her current local area to “narrow-minded people” and sees that moving will give “new experiences ... trying different things and meeting new people”. The attitudes of her peers in the local community have frustrated her:

I’ve encouraged some of my friends to go further afield because I think once they get out there and they realise that this isn’t what life is like everywhere, that there are people around that they’re going to be so much happier and they’re going to be so much more open-minded.

However, Fiona also raises some quite revealing comments about location in terms of a fear of provincialism.

“I’m going to be stuck in fields” – “a fear of the provincial”

Whilst some respondents wish to move away, they also wish to avoid a sense of provincialism elsewhere. Moving to an institution that might largely attract regional students is a risk for Fiona. She wishes to move away to meet a broad range of people. Her fear links to being excluded from a local community. Her choices link to bigger more prestigious institutions that will attract a cosmopolitan student body. She sees this as “less risky”. In a similar way, “rural”, “local” and “small” institutions are identified as risky by other respondents (Scott, Emily) who, “don’t want to end up in someone else’s back yard”. The risk links to possible isolation through a perception of more rural settings. This leads to a rejection by some respondents of more prestigious institutions, such as the University of Essex and the University of Kent. This is not only a concern for those wishing to move away from the area, but appears to be a general concern regardless of general preferred location. Consequently, this section considers both “a fear of the provincial” and “a fear of the rural”.

Rural locations can present the risk of “isolation”. Scott expresses worries about rural locations. He has chosen Winchester, which although semi-rural, “was one of the most modern universities I’ve ever seen”. Scott rejected the arguably more prestigious Keele University because of its rural setting. He felt it was, “isolated ... [and] ... literally I felt like I’d gone back to the middle ages”. Part of Scott’s concerns link to a lack of familiarity with this type of campus university: “it definitely wouldn’t feel like anything I was used to ... there wasn’t that much to do”. Scott also expressed strong views about Keele’s accommodation, “Keele was literally like cottages, and I felt like I was going to walk in and everyone would be cooking pies ... rather than going out and having fun”. Other respondents reflect similar concerns: Paige points to

avoiding being “in the middle of a field ... with nothing”, whilst Harriet wishes to avoid HEIs that are “associated with the countryside”. Alice raises concerns about Canterbury (and the University of Kent Campus). She explains her position, “my Nan told me, because she grew up there, it was full of hop fields ... I thought, ‘oh flipping heck, I’m not going to be able to do anything. I’m going to be stuck in fields”.

Jess, Beth, Sophie, Emily and Callum are also concerned about a rural location. They have grown up in a small city and point to preferring an urban lifestyle. Jess links such a preference to familiarity, “I have never been around the countryside, I live in a busy town ... you have got everything around you that you need”. Sophie does not think that rural or urban is the “main issue”, however she does nevertheless have a view, “I don’t feel as comfortable in rural situations as I do in the city ones”.

Respondents reject *the rural* for a number of reasons. These include perceptions over isolation, a lack of social life or a fear over fitting-in or being comfortable. In general *the provincial* is seen as rural and students reject locations such as Canterbury, Keele, Kent and Essex, although these appear to be no more rural than many options they select but have more familiarity with, such as Chichester and Winchester. Nevertheless, the issue of perception could be significant as it results in students imposing limitations on themselves through applying the *too rural* label. It is suggested below that possible misconceptions regarding some of the HEIs link to a broader issue of *locational capital*.

In addition to concerns over *the rural*, Fiona, introduces an interesting dynamic that links to a notion of moving to *someone else’s back yard*. This view suggests that small or rural HEIs could be too risky. They could be linked to a fear of “not fitting-in” and being “cut-off”. Fiona suggests that the larger HEIs are “less risky” because they will attract students from diverse locations and more cosmopolitan backgrounds. Fiona has concerns about one of her choices, University Campus Suffolk, as she links this institution with a high percentage of local students. She considers that because people will have an established network of friendships one could feel cut-off, “you’re never going to be able to get in there and be really close friends”, and so she feels that she may not be accepted, “it’s going to be harder to just click, like fit-in with people”. Fiona is broadly against remaining in her locale, as she would not be able to attain an offer from the most prestigious institution, as she links other local HEIs and staying in the local area with “narrow-minded” people. Her concern over moving to a fairly small HEI in a rural location links to a concern that she will be amongst similar “narrow-minded” individuals in another location and additionally will be an outsider as they will have clearly established “friendship groups”. *The fear of the provincial* is diminished through choosing more cosmopolitan locations. Fiona is able to countenance bigger and cosmopolitan options as she has a good degree of *locational capital*, “we’ve always gone on holiday to different places ... gone abroad and ... I’ve always had new experiences”. She also grew-up away in another area, Bath, and feels that this has prepared her for the high degree of middle-class participants at university, “Bath [is more] a middle class area than say around here, so I think that the people that I was brought up with are more like the people I’m going to meet at university”.

Location

Responses suggest that location is the most significant factor in terms of choice. Research concerning inter-class differences points to a geographical constraint on choice that only

applies to working-class respondents (Reay, 1998, 2003b), however this nevertheless leaves an intra-class difference in terms of locality chosen. Nearly half the respondents in this research did have broad geographical choices and so this questions those who suggest that it is predominantly middle-class students who move away from home. Students from higher socio-economic groups, with access to all forms of capital, have higher rates of geographical mobility (Christie, 2007; Holdsworth, 2009b), however here it is established that some working-class students also move away. Those who consider a broad range of geographical locations have a broader range of HEI choice. One can conceptualise students in terms of locations between those who are applying to one of the eight local HEIs, or applying elsewhere.

Students who remain local have imposed a *limitation on choice*. This is not to say that they won't have a rewarding and successful university experience, but a question remains as to why they imposed such a limitation. Students who have elected to move away from the local area have given themselves a broader range of choices and potentially wider access to prestigious HEIs. For these respondents access to prestige may be non-direct. In general, the students do not significantly prioritise prestigious institutions, however they largely rule out prestige by limiting choices. Prestige for many is non-direct or unintentional; for others it is a later consideration after general location. However the probability of access to prestige, at least in a relative sense, increases when fewer limitations are placed on location.

Unlike students from middle class backgrounds, who often prioritise HEI over subject, or arguably general locality (Reay, 1998, 2003a), these respondents largely prioritise location over other considerations. Where Brooks (2003b) identified a range of approaches and knowledge of status and prestige, respondents seldom recognised ranking beyond knowledge of an "Oxbridge" elite, and when judging degree of prestige this was a secondary consideration.

Pugsley (1998), in her study of higher education choices in South Wales, established that working-class respondents had parents who wanted them to remain in the local area to retain contact. In contrast, her middle-class respondents had a better understanding of the status of HEIs in a range of locations and also thought that moving to another locale gave independence (Pugsley, 1998). Ball, Davies et al. (2002) also point to some concerns over financial cost that link location to HEI choices. Consequently, in this study, differences in terms of occupational class in the sample, perhaps between different factions within the working class, require consideration.

The sample is drawn from working class participants, with two exceptions. Regarding the four students who intend to move away to the more prestigious institutions, seven of the eight parents have occupational roles that place them in lower social class groups according to the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) (Office for National Statistics, 2009). These range from cleaners to welders, and care workers to electricians. There is one exception, one of the two middle class students, Alice whose mother works as a Physiotherapist, although her father is a welder. If one makes a comparison with other students moving away, no significant differences are identified as these participants also fit into a similar pattern. Again, this group has one exception, the other middle class student Pete, whose father is a bank manager. In terms of the students remaining in the local area, again no real difference is apparent and, again the same patterns are discovered.

Limitations on choice and extended choice

For those who stay local, one might suggest that certain criteria impose *limitations on choice*. This often links to a fear of isolation or being in a minority, linked to the issue of “not fitting-in”. Whilst this has been specifically linked to social class, and concerns over elitism at prestigious institutions (Reay, 2001), this research can also link not fitting-in to worries about locality. Gary had particular concerns about a “chaotic” lifestyle, whilst Ryan couldn’t picture himself in a big city. Respondents like Neil link this to concerns over leaving the locality and diminishing access to friends or family. This pertains to concerns over feeling “intimidated” in another locale. However, with the exception of one student, all from this research intended to move out of their family home and live independently, even when staying local. This is perhaps a means of obtaining the *student experience* and this questions previous research (Christie, 2007; Holdsworth, 2009b) suggesting that working class students perceive and experience HE in a very different way.

Another noted concern links to a “fear of the provincial” or “the rural”. To avoid this some of the respondents have decided to stay in the local area. This however, also impacts on the group who are prepared to move away because some have avoided supposed “provincial” or “rural” locations. This again is connected to a concern over “not fitting-in”. Small and local institutions can be seen as risky as they could lead to isolation.

Locational capital

Concern over “fitting in” in a particular locale relates to a broader issue of *cultural capital* linked to location. Whilst a part of *cultural capital*, one might term this geographical capital or *locational capital*. This is a significant extension of cultural capital that influences habitus and plays an important role in the field of university choice. Respondents have individual reactions to different geographical locations, however some exhibit more concerns than others and so place limitations on themselves. It was noted earlier that the general geographical location of an HEI was probably the most significant factor in choice. Given this, those in possession of *locational capital* are better able to make informed choices about location. Fiona is a good example, as she points to experiences of living in different locations, undertaking family holidays and travel. Whilst she has concerns over provincialism, her concerns are well informed, and she can make sophisticated links between HEI, location and fear of marginalisation. Fiona would appear to have acquired *locational capital* as an aspect of *embodied cultural capital* through her family. *Locational capital*, then, is the accumulation of knowledge, perceptions and familiarity with a broad range of geographical locations. Taken to its most significant level it influences choices about moving in general. Fiona was able to construct a cosmopolitan understanding of a given locale, utilising *locational capital* in the *field* of higher education choice. However, one could suggest that, although she was encouraged to reflect on this process during this research, she has *internalised* her values regarding location through her *habitus*, her “habitus is embodied” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 437).

Other respondents who choose to move away also exhibit differing degrees of *locational capital* and this may form part of their habitus. Vicky’s mother has encouraged her children to travel and Vicky’s sister studies at Sussex. This would appear to have given her a degree of *locational capital*, influenced through the *social capital* that she has been able to utilise in this *field*, but this does not extend to all locations. The same is true of Emily,

who has been exposed to Brighton through her cousin, and Alice whose mother has encouraged her to travel and accompanied her on HEI visits. Again, *social capital* produces *locational capital* in the *field* of Higher Education (HE) choice. This suggests that working-class students can effectively achieve geographical mobility through the possession of *locational capital*. This questions the link between social class and mobility and the necessity to possess *mobility capital* generated primarily through extensive travel during childhood and youth. Whilst Murphey-Lejeune (2002) does not foreground the significance of social class or socio-economic position, it is apparent that those who possess *mobility capital* appear to be from higher socio-economic groups. In this research some working-class respondents are prepared to travel away from home. They have however not reported extensive travel or in particular the residential aspects of travel and mobility as part of their experiences. Nevertheless, approximately half of them desire to move away from their local area. One can suggest this is possible as they utilise *locational capital* that they have derived from a range of sources. Consequently, mobility is not solely linked to those in higher socio-economic groups nor is it necessary to possess *mobility capital*. One can however note, in common, a link to sibling influence, again although this is not restricted to respondents in higher socio-economic groups. Those who do move away might develop increased levels of cultural capital through their own mobility by moving away to an HEI (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005), but in this research, they have not built cultural capital significantly through previous mobility.

Where proactive parental advice is provided this links to extended choice in terms of HE. This also links to a clear picture in relation to gender reflecting a suggestion by Hutchings and Archer (2001). Findings support Ball's (2003) contention that mothers make more impact, but Ball was concerned with middle-class families and a necessity for "status maintenance". In this research, working-class mothers have identified that education is a means to social mobility for their children. This offers a new dimension to this debate.

Brooks (2004) discovered, through looking at intra-class differences amongst middle-class students, that fathers had greater interest in choices. In this study, regarding working class students, the opposite is true. Where students made more proactive and informed choices that led to broader geographical options, they were more likely to have support directly from their mothers, sisters and female relatives. Mothers who are proactive, and who support a range of HEI choices contrast to the localism identified by Brooks (2004). Female respondents appeared more likely to discuss choices than their male counterparts, in common with Reay (1998). However, these discussions fundamentally seem to have been with their mothers and sisters. These family members were also more likely to have experienced HE themselves. This does correspond to previous research (Brooks, 2004; Thomas & Quinn, 2007) that highlights the importance of parental participation in HE, but is not reflective of occupational position here. In many cases, such experiences of HE attendance were undertaken later in life as a consequence of an Access to HE programme. This resonates with Edwards (1993b) who identified that working class mothers, who had experienced HE as "mature mother-students", were aware of the impact of HE on working class life and particularly the potential impact on their daughters' lives. However, these experiences point to a potential conflict or dissonance between working class family home life, working class communities, and transformational experiences of HE (Edwards, 1993a). Therefore, mothers may wish their daughters to avoid this through encouraging them to consider broad geographical choices and moving away.

This implicitly increases the potential for prestige. However, this may also reflect an explicit desire to access status and prestige as mothers may recognise the distinctions between different kinds of HEI, the status these confer, and the benefit as an “investment” and tool for “status transformation” (Edwards, 1993a, 1993b). In contrast fathers are often rejected for having limited knowledge of HE. However, in agreement with Brooks (2003a), peers had limited influence on choice, in relation to location or other themes, although they did seem to persuade respondents to avoid the “worse” institutions.

In contrast, one could say that those who wish to stay in the local area lack *locational capital*. They may be more likely to have limited or inaccurate knowledge of other regions, and this may be as a consequence of familial influence. A lack of knowledge of the locality may add to concerns over fitting-in. Therefore in relation to the overriding thematic influence of general location, familial influence from parents and siblings appears to be the most significant identifiable influence. What is apparent however, is that although some of the respondents might lack the *locational capital* to move away from the local area, they nevertheless wish to move away from their family home and this questions the notion that they require the emotional security that home provides (Holdsworth, 2006). Nevertheless, staying in the area might mitigate some of the problems of reconciling student life, but whilst minimising risk, retaining opportunities for employment and allowing to some degree the opportunity to integrate into the culture of the HEI.

A further *limitation on choice* that again links to fitting-in appears to be a fear of prestige linked to social class and possible rejection. Paige gave a good indication of this with her experiences at The Arts University College Bournemouth. Emily also considered that she wouldn’t “fit-in” with “elite socialisation”, and Scott points to “pretentious” people at the University of Exeter. Finally, Gary is concerned that he won’t fit-in with those who have “dinner parties” at their HEIs, perhaps indicating a fear of the middle-class. This would certainly link to a Bourdieusian notion of *distinction* (Bourdieu, 1998). Gary appears to be intimidated by the culturally distinctive behaviours and *tastes* of middle class students, which exclude those from lower social class groups. He accepts this subordinate position, as do Ryan and Scott, as a consequence of the *symbolic power* exerted, and through internalising, “the natural order of things” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 25). According to Winkle-Wagner,

Bourdieu’s claim is that these students anticipate that they will be sanctioned for not possessing the cultural capital that is rewarded by the educational system – the cultural capital of the dominant class – and they react to this anticipated rejection. (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 19)

If “location” and “prestige” or “social class” can be a *limitation on choice*, so the same factors can also facilitate, enable or *extend choice* for some respondents. Therefore certain facets of *social capital* and *cultural capital* can facilitate broader options and in all possibility widen access to prestigious institutions. As suggested, *embodied familial cultural capital* can lead to the acquisition of *locational capital* and broader choice. However, *institutional cultural capital* might also facilitate broader choices.

In the questioning and discussion with respondents, the extent to which the college might influence or support HE choices was addressed. The responses given demonstrated that the college, as an institution, was fairly ineffectual in terms of providing, or enhancing, *institutional cultural capital* and choices. Respondents’ experiences were inequitable and point to sporadic support. Some respondents did report a big impact, but seldom in relation to specific choices.

What did emerge was informed support from a small number of teachers and tutors, for example, Paige points to specific advice about choice. This corresponds to Brooks (2003b) who also discovered that teachers provide a broad influence. However, many respondents report a lack of support, such as Fiona. She indicated that her tutor knew very little. Whilst this might correspond to Reay's (1998) findings, suggesting some teachers possess cultural bias, this was not systematically supported in this research. Here it is not adequate to say that the college *institutional habitus* directed students at restricted options (Reay, 1998), however the sporadic nature of support renders the college relatively neutral. Consequently, as an influence the college, and any educational policy that it promotes or supports, offers little impact.

Conclusions

The findings of the research point to the concept of *locational capital*. Locational capital is the accumulation of knowledge, perceptions and familiarity with a broad range of geographical locations and is acquired through exposure to both cultural and social capital. It is a significant extension of cultural capital and important in the field of HE choice. Students who have acquired locational capital appear to be more able to consider a broad range of locations, and so open access to more HEIs and potentially prestigious institutions. Whilst middle-class students might have greater access to this resource, the working-class respondents in this research also have differing access to locational capital which points to an explanation for intra-class difference.

The research has revealed a great deal about the way that students make choices and the differential advantage or disadvantage that some groups receive. The importance of locational capital and associated concepts is unique to this research. It gives a clearer understanding of the way that HE applicants extend or reduce their opportunities through using location as an overriding factor rather than HEI, prestige or course. Locational capital also provides a development of Bourdieusian social theory as a means of understanding educational inequalities. It offers a new conceptual model to understand higher education choice and goes some way to explaining why working class respondents display intra-class differences.

Note

1. Prestige or ranking in this paper is linked to the advantages associated with the Russell Group, and to a lesser degree pre-1992 HEIs. In the UK, the Education Act 1992 sought to unify different HEIs to form a unitary HE system. In response to this a group of the most prestigious HEIs established a mission group, the Russell Group, to represent their interests and maintain their standing. The broader group of HEIs that were classed as "universities" prior to this act are termed the pre-1992 HEIs. Attendance at these HEIs is linked to advantages in relation to the labour market and remuneration (Belfield et al., 2018; Boliver, 2015; Office for National Statistics, 2017; Woodward, 2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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