

'My friends made all the difference': Getting into and succeeding at university for first-generation entrants

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on research findings from first-generation entrants at university in the UK. It examines their reasons for taking on higher-level study and what enables them to succeed. It points out that the phrase 'first-generation entrants' has been used interchangeably with the term 'working-class students' when there is not always a direct relationship between the two. Drawing on life history methods to gather the data, the paper examines the different experiences of working- and middle-class students and highlights the role of friendship as a key determinant in deciding to study in HE as well as in creating student success once at university. The article argues that friendships should be seen as a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Coleman, 1994; and Field, 2005) which can operate to militate against the effects of middle-class cultural and economic capital but can also be seen, in certain circumstances, to cement taken-for-granted practices.

KEYWORDS

friendship class, social capital, life histories, student success

Widening participation in higher education

Widening participation has had high visibility in the UK since 1997 when New Labour came to power (DfES, 2003). Concern about the socio-economic mix of higher education (HE) students is not only a British concern. Since the civil rights movement in the USA, programmes to encourage people from

under-represented groups studying in HE have been common (Kahlenberg, 2004). In Australia, since the late 1980s, targets and programmes to encourage under-represented groups into study have been a feature of the HE landscape (Chapman and Ryan, 2003). In the UK, despite government's commitment to changing the social mix and increasing the numbers of people in HE, the gap in participation between working and middle class students has not decreased, although the overall numbers of students in HE has significantly increased (HEFCE, 2005). It is not only an issue of entry; there is evidence that 'non-traditional' students have greater risks attached to completing their study (Archer *et al*, 2003; Christie *et al*, 2004).

In the literature, there is some confusion of terminology: categories such as 'non-traditional', 'under-represented', 'working class', 'widening participation students' and 'first-generation entrants' are often used interchangeably when they each reflect a different, although sometimes overlapping, group of people. This means that research is often muddled and findings may not actually be reflecting the experience of specific groups. While there are several groups of 'non-traditional' students and several groups who are 'under-represented' in the HE population, it is the lower socio-economic groups (SEGs), who have caused the most concern for the current government in the UK, as Newby points out:

While overall participation in higher education has moved from one in seven to just one in two...the gap in participation rates between the top and the bottom socio-economic classes has moved only slightly... No matter how we look at it, their life chances, in terms of their ability to access higher education and thereby graduate-level jobs remains severely restricted. (Newby, 2005, p 5)

A number of strategies to encourage more working class students into HE have been funded (HEFCE, 2002) but there is still a limited amount of research that helps us understand why certain people from these groups take on HE study and why some do not.

This article reports on research on first-generation entrants at university: why they chose to study for a degree, what their families' reactions were to their decisions and how they have succeeded in the HE environment. A first-generation entrant is someone who is the first person in their family to go into HE. First-generation entrants should not be conflated with students from lower SEGs. This study reveals that many first-generation entrants have been from middle class backgrounds.

The research uses a life history methodology. The overall dataset includes life histories from people who began their studies during the 1950s through to people currently studying in HE, all of whom were the first person in their families to go on to a university.

This particular article focuses on a sub-set of this overall data; those

students who are currently at university, their experiences and decisions that led them to study at university as well as their own perceived support networks. It places significant emphasis on the role of friendship in providing that support and suggests some theoretical considerations which could explain the students' choices and success. Brooks (2003) highlights that 'the influence of young people's friends and peers has remained under-theorised' (p 238). This paper attempts to contribute to this debate.

The focus on current students' experiences is for two reasons. HE has changed significantly over the last five years and insights into student motivation and decision making within the current environment is useful. The second reason is the high profile that the current government has given to widening access to HE as part of its strategy for social inclusion and regeneration in the country. While the article focuses on the current students, it also provides some background to the overall sample to set the detail presented here in context.

The article tentatively offers a contribution to the debate on 'what works' for students with no family history of HE trying to tease out distinctions in culture and experience between middle and working class students through an examination of their life histories. It begins by examining the collection of the data and the use of life history methods.

Working with their own meanings: The life history method

The research began in 2003 using a biographical methodology. Two different techniques to gather data were used. In the first instance, contact was established with large numbers of people through education email forums. The forums target people working across the education sector. Caution must be taken in assuming that the findings from this research could simply transfer across all first-generation entrants in HE. There are, however, significant advantages to targeting this group, as they are more likely to have some understanding of current developments in HE, such as the widening participation agenda. Once a message was posted asking for volunteers, individual respondents made contact. Drawing on the extensive and well-known work undertaken by the Mass Observation Archive, which provides a detailed and rich data source on social life in Britain, a 'directive' (a series of prompt questions) was sent to the respondents asking them about their family, community, school and HE experiences. A statement of confidentiality was attached. A total of 92 life histories were received from people who are now working across the education sector; FE lecturers, administrators, teachers and classroom assistants in schools, clerical staff, HE lecturers and senior managers in education. This meant that the sample contained people across the professional/clerical divide, but none were employed in manual jobs.

To gain access to students who are currently in HE, the same 'directive' was used, but students were contacted through teaching faculty in two differ-

ent institutions, one new and one old university. A total of 28 students sent in their life histories.

Life history methodology is based on a belief that subjects seek to make sense of their own lives and can provide, through linking life experience with particular events, deep insight into life choices and chances. As Armstrong (1987) says:

The life history method assigns significance and value to the person's own story, or to interpretations that people place on their own experience as an explanation for their behaviour. (p 8)

While 'what works' to widen participation in HE should be explored in terms of structures, such as policy frameworks and institutional structures, the processes by which individuals engage with those structures should also be studied. As Rustin (2000) points out, biographical studies offer particular insights in this area:

Ethnography and biography explore process, rather than merely structure. It is because it is through single cases that self-reflection, decision and action in human lives can best be explored and represented that the case study is essential to human understanding. (p 49).

The use of life histories as a method of understanding a learner's development have been particularly applied to mature students (Johnston and Merrill, 2004; Merrill and Alheit, 2004; West, 1996) but very little biographical work has been undertaken with young people despite the fact that the notion of the learners' voice in studies of school education is growing in popularity (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). The use of biographical approaches with young people is potentially fruitful, especially in the context of widening participation, because it offers personal insights into what affects learning and engagement with learning. Thomas (2002) used focus groups to gain students' views of successful strategies in HE and while focus groups do allow for the student voice, the life history method provides a more rounded and fuller explanation of decisions and approaches to success.

The respondents in this research are obviously people who are interested in 'telling their story'. Many said the act of writing their life story was 'cathartic'. They must have had a particular concern about learning to take on the task in the first place. Therefore these findings will need to be further tested with other groups. However, the richness of the personal experiences of the respondents offers valuable, and seldom collected, insights into the lives of new learners in HE. As Apple (1986) argues, 'We do not confront abstract learners, instead we see...people whose biographies are intimately linked to the economic, political and ideological trajectories of their families and com-

munities' (p 5). Life history studies provide opportunities to examine the complexity of such real lives. The next section provides information on the overall dataset to contextualise the data presented in this paper.

Counting and categorising individual lives

The total number of life histories received was 129. Some wrote their autobiography in a free flowing style while others used the prompts more directly. Of the 129, 86 were female and 43 were male and there were 14 respondents who were from minority ethnic backgrounds. While some respondents spoke about being dyslexic, none identified themselves as having a disability.

There were 48 people who had gone into HE as mature students, some trying to gain a degree more than once. One hundred and twenty-two had been, or were, full-time students and seven part-time.

Respondents entered higher education during the following periods:

Period of entry	Number
Pre-1963	13
1964–1983	59
1984–2004	29
At university now	28

Several researchers have been concerned about the measurement of class in the widening participation debate (Forsyth and Furlong, 2004), and any definition of class is complex. In the sample, while the respondents were self-reporting their class background, the prompts also asked about their family circumstances, what their parents or carers' occupations were and about their financial situation. Thirty-seven respondents said that they had grown up in a middle class family and 91 said they grew up in a working class environment. One respondent said her family background was upper class, although she had grown up in rural poverty when her mother decided to leave her father and both families disowned her. Most of the sample reported growing up with some experience of poverty (96); examples cited include having second-hand clothes and toys, not being able to afford holidays, having free school meals, not having a television or not being able to pay the rent. Overall there seems to have been a greater perception of poverty than the class position would imply, particularly in earlier generations of the respondents.

The personal definitions of class were not always in agreement with the approach taken by the researcher. Some people identified having working class backgrounds when their parental occupations were middle class. Sayer (2002) argues that it is often difficult for respondents to talk about their class and responses often reflect what they feel their class position should be. In order to create a common framework to enable comparisons, class position has been defined by parental occupation in this study, even if this contra-

dicted the self-reported class definition. If the student was over 21 when beginning their HE studies, their own occupational status was used to define their class. Even with this clear framework, there are still some difficulties with defining class background through occupation. For example, one of the respondents, Pat, who went to a new university in the 1970s, says she came from a working class background but her father was an office manager, making him lower middle class, but the family home was poor, her mother did not work, and she remembers having hand-me-downs into her teenage years. Pat's perception was that they had very little. Her story indicates that she had a deprived background, despite her class position.

Payne *et al* (1996) highlight that deprivation cannot automatically be equated with class position, although class position in the labour market is often a key determinant in family wealth. They argue that class analysis often ignores 'the conditions and causes of poverty and social exclusion' (p. 17).

Access to resources has increased over the last forty years and affluence in our society is much greater than in earlier generations and this experience is reflected in many of the respondents' life histories. In any analysis issues of poverty and wealth should be explored alongside definitions of occupation.

In widening participation research there are further complications. In a recent study of working-class students moving into HE, Forsyth and Furlong (2003) found that:

The majority of the sample in the research, those who got as far as Scottish Highers were female. Also, nearly half were more advantaged, i.e. parents not manual workers. (p 4)

They argue that even in 'working-class areas', as in their study in Glasgow, it is the more advantaged within the working class who are more likely to succeed. The study discussed in this paper found a similar pattern. Of the total 129 life histories, although 96 experienced poverty, only 38 would, based on parental occupation, be from manual classes. Examples include; farm labourers, care assistants, carpenters, lorry drivers, miners and cleaners.

Further confirmation of Forsyth and Furlong's thesis comes from the story of John, who came from a working class background. His father was a printer and both his grandfathers were miners. Growing up in Dundee, in the late 1950s, life was hard. They had few 'extras'. Food was filled with staples, like 'stovies', a potato dish with very little meat. However, when they moved to Northern Ireland his father's position improved and John could see they were better off than many around them. His family had strong trade union and deep religious affiliations, where education was important to the family and seen as a way of bettering yourself (Hall, 1999).

Most of the students who went to university in the 1950s–1980s had grants and while many worked in the holidays very few worked in term time. This

contrasts with those who went to university later. A major structural change for students since 1997 was the different financial position; from an HE system where there were grants and no fees, to one with loans and, for some, fees to pay. Further changes to the system in 2006 in England will affect future students' experiences. Having provided some background on the overall dataset and discussed issues of categorisation, the rest of the paper focuses on the students currently in HE. The article has deliberately chosen to focus on this group as it is of particular interest for current practice to widen participation in HE.

The life experiences of current students

The respondents who are at university now all entered HE in 2003 and completed their biographies at the end of second year at university. As more than half of the full-time students who drop out of HE do so in their first year (Yorke, 1999), it is likely that second year students will complete their studies. The respondents attended one of two different institutions, each with a different mission and in different locations across England. Of the 28 respondents, 23 were female and five were male, three were from minority ethnic communities and 25 were white. Three were mature students. Seventeen said they were from working class backgrounds and 11 from middle class backgrounds, but, as in the overall data, perceptions of class are complex. For example, Margaret said she was middle class because she recognised she had a good lifestyle at home although her father is a lorry driver. She lived with her mother who had separated from her father and subsequently married a man who owned a scaffolding business. Another example of the complexity of class definition is Sara, whose father is a double-glazing sales man. He threw Sara out of the house when she was 16. She lived on the streets for several years before returning to study. Her experiences led her into one of the most socially excluded groups in society.

Further complications arise in these definitions of students from middle class backgrounds. For example, one respondent's non-graduate father was a lecturer in hotel and catering management and another who did not have a degree was a senior accountant in a law firm. Nowadays these professions would require degree qualifications. This level of detail is important in trying to understand class experience and highlights the value of qualitative research approaches in attempting to develop evidence-based policy.

Most of the respondents had done A-levels before coming into HE. This is not surprising given the profile of students in HE in the UK, where nearly all students who do A-levels go on to HE, while less than half of those with other Level 3 qualifications continue.

In writing about their school environment the students seemed most concerned about their friendships. While some respondents mentioned teachers as important role models – 'There were one or two important teachers' (Kelly) – the comments about friends are more common:

Friends were the most positive part of school. (Petra)

I have a few negative memories of primary school but once I'd moved schools it was mostly positive due to the friends I made. (Jane)

However, there are some more worrying aspects about the accounts of the school environment. The stories reveal a picture of the school playground where kids knew their place.

I think there were clear social hierarchies. It was a country village so there were really rich kids and very very poor kids – this caused a divide. (Henrietta)

At primary school everyone seemed to be the same but as we got older a social hierarchy definitely emerged as people segregated into their own groups. (Abi)

...hierarchies are at every school and to some extent harsh to live with but I guess it is a way of life. (Dave)

There were groups; 'grungers', 'tarts', 'populars'. (Jack)

There was a regular hit list and fights with other schools. (Sara)

This suggests that peer relationships shape young people's identities. Friends were more important to them than teachers and school was a space where they were discovering who they were and how to respond to differences between peers.

Once at university the importance of friendship seems to be central to the students' success.

I rely on my friends to help relax me after working hard. (Jenny)

My social life is really important to me. I was tempted to give up during A levels but not at Uni. I have some really lovely friends. (Henrietta)

The students are great. I have made some really good friends. (Jack)

When friendships are more precarious, students felt more insecure about being at university:

I thought Uni would be great and I would meet a whole new group of friends. I knew the work would be hard, but I thought, it would be worth it for the social life. It's not as great as I thought – haven't met many people I click with – some are quite pretentious... I am just an average student – feel a bit stupid sometimes – I still sometimes feel I should not be here. (Kelly)

Christie *et al* (2004) found this to be a significant factor in non-completion in their study of universities in Scotland:

The non-continuers reported more difficulties in meeting new people, getting involved in student activities and were more likely to perceive the environment as alienating. (p 625)

Kelly is from a working-class, single-parent family. Thomas (2002) argues that experiences such as Kelly's may well relate to the middle-class *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1985) evident on many university campuses, where middle-class values are taken for granted and held by the majority of the student body.

As in the accounts of their schooling there is some mention of inspiring tutors but they do not play as important a role in the students lives as perhaps those working in HE think they should.

Of course I've had some great lecturers that are very enthusiastic and passionate about what they are talking about, but not as many as I thought, and it is my friends who keep me going when I feel down or don't understand things. (Margaret)

Friendship is central to these respondents' success. It provides networks of support and encouragement not found elsewhere in their lives. Brooks (2003) challenges the notion that friendship is unproblematically a key factor in helping young people decide on studying in HE. She particularly focuses her study on instrumental issues such as choice of institution or choice of course. In contrast, this study focuses on more diffuse and general decision-making, i.e. the decision to go to university at all and the support required to create academic success. However, Brooks does point out that friendship groups can become strained if differences in attainment become evident between young people.

The role of friendship and peer support in creating educational success has been used extensively by Coleman (1994) who developed the concept of social capital from Bourdieu (1984). Coleman's view of social capital is however, rooted in the family with peers and friendship growing out of a strong patriarchal family base. Given the complexity of family circumstances as illustrated by some of the life histories, such as Margaret and Sara discussed earlier, Coleman's notion of social capital is interesting but also seems problematic. Other critiques have also pointed to Coleman's lack of attention to difference and class position in his use of social capital. In this study, while friendship was important to all the current students, there are significant differences in the experiences of the middle class and working class students and this is explored in the next section.

Different cultural, social and economic power

In looking across all the current students in the sample there are areas of common experience. The students are heavily focused on 'going out' and socialising as important parts of their lives, whether from middle- or working-class backgrounds.

However, middle-class students seemed able to draw on a range of resources not available to working-class students. Using Bourdieu, Reay *et al* (2001) highlight the importance of 'institutional *habitus*', where organisational culture reproduces particular social and cultural capital usually of benefit to the middle classes. Bourdieu (1984) argued that the middle classes used a variety of 'capitals'; economic, cultural and social, to reproduce their privileged position. The life stories of the respondents in this study found pervasive cultures across the home, community and at school and university which affect decision making and success for the students. In other words the research indicates that economic power and social and cultural capital, as well as a supportive set of institutional environments, work together to create individual responses to future life choices and chances. This is not to argue that this determines and fixes students' life chances completely, but rather that other factors have to intervene to challenge traditional trajectories for particular groups. To give one example from the life histories; even though their parents had not gone to university, students from middle-class backgrounds had considerable encouragement from their parents to take a degree:

I went to Uni because my dad said it would be a great opportunity. (Henrietta)

University was a family goal for all of us kids. (Melissa)

There was also clear support for homework from parents and for completing applications to university. The middle-class students seem to be less concerned about their job prospects, or about doing well, than the working-class respondents:

I am studying social psychology because I am interested in the way people work. (Henrietta)

I could do better but I am getting acceptable grades, so doing okay so far... (Melissa)

These results are similar to those found by Reay *et al*, who say:

For many middle class students who move in their world as a fish in water going to, and choice of, university is simply what people like them do. Working class students, in contrast, were driven by necessity... (2005, p 161)

Amongst the working-class respondents there is a strong sense of personal determination:

I always believed I should strive to do my best. (Cath)

I always studied hard, had goals and high aims. (Claire)

The single most important thing that keeps me studying is my own personal determination. (Sara)

There is almost a kind of rigidity about their responses, which may shatter. This sense of self-determination illustrates Beck's (1992) view of our individualised society where people bear social risks personally:

In the individualised society the individual must therefore learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the centre of action,... Under these conditions of a reflexive biography 'society' must be individually manipulated as a 'variable'...what does that mean for forging my own fate, which nobody else can do for me? (135).

Beck goes on to point out that the individual risks for working-class people are more extensive than for middle-class groups. Personal determination is essential if students from working-class backgrounds are going to succeed. The working-class students have to rely on their own capabilities. They do not have the other resources that middle-class students have to fall back on. Despite reporting how close their families were, many working-class students had difficulty with their parents, especially their fathers, understanding their interest in study.

Many working-class families simply were unable to offer the academic support that was needed:

After I was 15 I was expected to use my own initiative. (Jack)

They would try and help if I asked for it, which was useful during my early days at school but as it got harder they were less able to understand the work I was doing some of the time. (Claire)

Many also reported that they had no private space for study and needed to complete homework on the kitchen table with 'mum cooking at the other end' (Dave).

Another important difference is the relationship between community and schooling. Working-class respondents indicated that there was a wide gap between their school environment and their local community, whereas middle-class respondents talked about a direct connection between the two. Middle-class parents, mothers in particular, were more heavily involved in school events such as fetes and sports days. Working-class respondents said that their parents seldom engaged with their schools or local events in the community. Egerton (2002) found that middle-class families were more likely to be involved in their communities than working-class families, especially as trade union activism has declined, limiting the potential for working-class

involvement in civil engagement (Hall, 1999). Bourdieu (1984) argues that the middle-classes are able to exploit their social capital to extend their influence across the generations.

Students nowadays, especially those from the lower SEGs, are in part-time employment for most of their studying life (Hatt *et al*, 2005). The working-class students in this study started part-time work as early as 13 and continued throughout their HE studies. However, despite that significant structural change, in these life histories, having to work to get money to live does not seem to feature as a major influence on their decisions. On average the respondents were working 14 hours a week in term time but most simply took this for granted.

I worked all through my secondary school. I knew I would have to at Uni too.
(Claire)

Middle-class students were often able to use family contacts to get better paid work, such as Melissa: 'Dad had a friend in the town who needed help so he got me the job.'

Working-class students were working more hours and often in poorer paid employment, so despite their acceptance of the need to work, it is likely that this would have affected their studies.

Having the economic advantages and social networks of middle-class life brings with it other forms of cultural capital, despite the lack of personal HE experience in the family. Christie *et al* (2004) argue that 'class based explanations... present students from lower income backgrounds as being uniformly disadvantaged...[or] victims...' (p 620). This research confirms their point: students from lower SEGs are active agents shaping their own destiny; and they were very determined to succeed. However, the resources available to first-generation entrants from lower SEGs are more limited than those from middle-class backgrounds. It is less about having experience of HE in the family and more about perceptions of what opportunities are available. Because of the socio-economic position of the middle-classes, there is greater access to social networks where educational achievement is taken for granted. These parents will therefore have greater expectation of their children continuing into HE even though they had not done so.

The role of friendship in supporting first-generation middle-class students is part of a suite of support mechanisms including access to economic power, expectation of family and the surrounding middle-class community as well as the social networks of friends. This is classically Bourdieu's form of social capital. For working-class students the role of friendship is often even more significant because there is a less homogeneous environment of support. These networks can, however, also be seen to be a form of social capital.

In arguing that social capital provided support for educational attainment

Coleman (1988–1989) emphasised the use of social capital as a tool underpinned by the family. However for some working-class students decisions to go to university are sometimes taken against the family. Friends provide the information and support required to take this step. The bonds between friends are strong and affect lifestyle choices and decision making. This is therefore a different interpretation of social capital, not rooted in family rather rooted in personally decided intimate bonds. Giddens (1991) argues that this form of social group is an important feature of late modernity. He suggests that this new form of intimacy is increasingly replacing traditional ties in society, freeing up individuals to make choices outside of their conventional backgrounds. Miles (2000) argues further that young people are ‘willing to undergo debt and family conflict in order to retain group solidarity’ (p 104). If friendships are significant in this way, it suggests that any analysis of educational attainment and student success should examine these friendship networks specifically. Field (2005) using Morgan (2000) suggests that there are different types of social capital, bonding, bridging and linking social capital. Each has different characteristics. Bonding social capital is directly linked to family with strong ties supporting traditional learning. Linking social capital is more loosely defined and more open to innovation in the network and in supporting learning opportunities. Bridging social capital offers strong ties in friendship and network but being less connected to family and traditional community. This perspective is a helpful analysis of the experiences of the students in this research.

Although all of the respondents highlighted friendship as significant in their decision making and in their support for success in learning, from the evidence of these life histories, different classes use social capital differently and have a different relationship to their networks. While these types of bonds and networks are common across all social classes in this study how social capital is used differs depending on the social class background of the respondents.

Many of the working-class students saw their friends fulfilling the role of family and community in influencing their decision to go on to higher-level study:

My parents discouraged it; I was stubborn and wanted to prove them wrong.
(Petra)

I did...feel that it was the best thing to do, despite what they [her parents] said, as most people in my year applied... (Claire)

My friend who is two years older started university and his experiences influenced my decision, my dad said it was stupid but really where I live there are limited opportunities in terms of work and I reckon a degree will help. (Dave)

Going to school with girls brought me out of my shell – I became more extravert and believed I could carry on... (Kelly)

While all students indicated that they were keen on the subject they were studying, the main focus was on completing their degrees to get a good job. In particular working class students, in contrast to their parents, saw HE as a way of developing their future:

I want to work with people and have an honest rewarding job. (Sara)

I was told Uni would be great for my life chances. (Claire)

I wanted to get a degree to help with my career. (Pete)

For students from working-class backgrounds, education as a means of changing one's status in society is an individual and difficult pathway. For students from working-class backgrounds, this requires significant sacrifice. Forsyth and Furlong (2003) point out once in HE, there are other personal pressures:

...the pressures of having to forego the youthful social life apparently being enjoyed by both their now employed former peers from their own background and their new more affluent peers at university. (p 44)

The picture that emerges about the working-class group of students is one in which friendships and personal determination feature much more significantly than any other factor in their lives. The role of friendship as a form of 'bridging' social capital (Field, 2005) for these groups is significant and possibly works to mitigate against the lack of other forms of economic power. It suggests that social ties and support can overcome perceived barriers to continuing in education. Working-class students need to draw on their friendships to provide the support and knowledge needed as well as considerable personal determination to succeed. There are few academic supports in their lives. Teachers and tutors do not seem to be fill this gap and it is friendship groups that powerfully affect these students' lives. For students from middle-class backgrounds, even if there is no experience of HE in the family, there are other forms of capital and stronger social capital rooted in family connections that enable them to succeed. The next section shows how these findings are played out in the context of two of these students' life histories. Working with the whole life story reveals detail and provides clear explanations for choices and processes which are often missed by other approaches.

George and Alex

The two life histories chosen for analysis, George and Alex, are from working-class backgrounds. They are quite different in their age, gender, their back-

ground and their reasons for being at university, but in many ways they are typical of all the working-class students. Their stories represent many of the challenges that the students from working-class backgrounds face and despite their differences, they deal with these in similar ways.

George is a mature student studying sociology. Born in 1954 of Jamaican parents who had come to Britain to work, he was taken into care at an early age: 'I still feel angry that they took me away'. He has now entered HE at the age of 50, as the 'first to have the opportunities as an ethnic minority in this country where there were few chances'.

He has spent most of his working life supporting people in care and has built up his qualifications to get him into HE over many years having not gained any qualifications at school. He highlights the lack of support from his carers:

I had no direction from my carers really. They just insisted I was good at school but did not press me to do well. I did my homework myself, no one helped or cared.
(George)

Although George was in unusual circumstances by being in care, the distinction between being 'good' and 'doing well' is common in these stories from working-class respondents as families and carers found imagining academic success difficult but still wanted their children to behave correctly.

George felt his friends were important: 'I was very sporty and so were my friends. I played a lot of football and did athletics. The only way to get out of the home was to play football'. He also said he got out in another way:

I read many, many books to fanticize... There were a lot of books in the home and that is one thing I did a lot of fictional reading. (George).

George's love of reading indicates his potential, but the care home did little to develop his abilities and, although he behaved well at school and did not get into trouble, he was not able to gain any qualifications. However, George was popular and being good at football gave him some standing with his peers. This friendship group was only interested in sport: 'We played all the time. We didn't think about schoolwork'. It was a rational decision to emphasise the abilities he had in sport but ignore his schoolwork because he 'could not see the point in it'. We can see the influence of peers in deciding where to place his efforts. No one explained to George that he could or should work hard but he gained respect from his friends because of his success at football.

George worked as a care assistant for many years and while at work he began taking qualifications, which finally led to university at the age of 50: 'It had been in my head for over 20 years, the what if question. I longed for

higher education and when the opportunity came along to take time out I decided to do it'.

Through his life experiences George has come into contact with many people who have been to university and he felt that this helped him understand what he was letting himself in for: 'I have known hundreds of people who have attended university so it was an easy transition to make. A why not me scenario'.

For George friendship is important at university as well. He regards his social life as a vital way of maintaining his self-identity: 'It is a huge part of who I am today and allows me to be me'. He is actively involved in the Students Union in the Afro Caribbean and Africa Society and the United Nations Society. Unlike many other mature students who find university isolating (West, 1996), George has developed his own community of friends: 'despite the age differences there are no differences'.

Financially, George has a full loan and has saved some money towards his studies so only works five hours part-time in a local care home. He sees himself as highly motivated to study and despite his age George also talks about studying for a degree for a vocational reason: 'The ability to further my understanding and the application of research methods will be advantageous for my career in the future'.

Mature students are generally seen to be hardworking and diligent and so perhaps George is only reflecting his age and experience, but the second case study is a young woman from a working-class background who is also extremely hardworking. Alex is 19 years old, in her second year at university, and was born in the south of England. Her parents separated when she was young and she lives with her mother.

I come from a single parent household, my father is a carpenter and I live in an ex council house (can't get more working class than that!). (Alex)

She says that her mother is very clever but never had any opportunities to study. Alex points out that 'towards A levels mum didn't really know what it was all about though this is fair enough, she hasn't done it before'. Neither of her parents engaged with her school:

I was always good in school so they never got involved in school matters, e.g. open days, parents evenings, simply because I was alright and wasn't in any trouble. (Alex)

Although the circumstances are different, this is a similar attitude that George described about the care home; being good was considered enough. Alex clearly cares about her family but did not get support from them to develop her academic abilities:

I was the one who put pressure on myself to do well, as I guess I wanted to prove something... (Alex)

Despite their evident closeness to each other, Alex's father's attitude to her academic abilities was negative, not believing that she would be able to get into university and thinking that he would have to pay for her to go which he told her he could not do. Alex got a full loan and is exempt from paying fees, but her father did not understand this was possible. Misinformation of this kind could have prevented Alex from going on to university, despite the fact that she got top grades:

My dad asked me if I was lying when I told him I got three As, and that I could go to University, although my dad is very proud of my achievement he does admit that it is a shock. (Alex)

Her father's reaction draws out a lack of aspiration and belief that 'people like us can't do well academically' (Cath). Alex was personally very determined and needed her self-belief to counter her father's attitude, but she also needed support and proper information to enable her to progress into HE. Her friends seemed to have made the difference:

I hated lower school in secondary school because at that point my friendship groups were changing and becoming more important. Once I began spending time with people who worked harder...than the people I had spent time with before who were rebelling and hating school and becoming frustrated with having to be there when they could be out earning...things got better then. These students weren't as well off as the hard [working] ones and I could see patterns arising, so deciding to be friends with hardworking individuals really benefited me. (Alex)

Youth studies confirm Alex's observations, most young people move within friendship groups linked to their family social background (Roberts, 1997). However, because she wanted a different life Alex deliberately chose a friendship group contrary to her own background, unlike George who stayed with the peer group who idolised football above everything else. She talked about not having any friends in her local community because they had all given up on school. Her decision to change friendship group to provide the academic and emotional support she needed to succeed can be seen to reflect Giddens' (1992) notion of the 'pure relationship', maintained as long as it is beneficial to the individual's needs.

Alex understands how students divide in secondary schools along class lines. She felt sorry that people from around where she lived did not do as well as her:

I feel the school could have done more for the students from backgrounds like me, who don't have the determination/will power like I had to do well. I think the school let them become apathetic towards study, as did the wider community, and more could be done to combat this and keep them in school and help them achieve. (Alex)

Her course choice at university was informed by her need to get a good job, being aware of her family situation:

I have always wanted to be a child psychotherapist and also importantly my mum has always struggled with money and raised us, and I want to achieve something, and give the help she has given me back to her when I graduate. (Alex)

The relationship between mother and daughter is crucial here and is reflected in other research (Archer *et al*, 2003). Like the other students in this sample, Alex was a strong reader and she commented that her mother gave her this love: 'We always had books and mum would read a lot. She encouraged my sister and me and we are both avid readers now'. The support from her mother was clearly vital to her belief in herself and her ability to deal with her father's negativity. Yet it was her friends who practically enabled her to move on to HE. They guided her through the application process and told her she would not have to pay fees: 'I really didn't know anything about it [getting into university] but my friends said it was easy and that I shouldn't have to pay, their parents had told them' (Alex).

At university Alex talks about clear learning strategies:

serious organisation, lists of things to do, planning ahead. Studying = lots of practice essays and timed essays for exams is the best thing to do and revising from summarised notes as well. (Alex)

Her social life is equally important to her:

I didn't realise how important the social life would be to me. I said I would come to University with the aim of studying and socialising didn't matter but actually I have a great time and I go out all the time, probably more than some students who seem to do less work than me! (Alex)

She is actively involved in the ski and snowboarding clubs and goes on trips away with these groups:

I am a hard working student but I also go mad and drink a lot, I burn the candle to an extreme extent, at both ends. I love studying though and the reason I can go out as much is because I am so organised and forward thinking (Alex).

University has more than lived up to her expectations and her friendships and her social life have been 'a real added bonus' (Alex). Alex classically has used her friendship group to support her academic development. She has used these networks to gain access to vital information as well as to support her academic aspirations. She sees herself as hard-working and determined but recognises that she has gained much from her friends. The social capital in her friendship group has enabled her to bridge the gap between her family's experience and the world that she has entered.

The final section draws some conclusions from the research to inform future practice.

Implications

In examining life histories the multi-factorial nature of decision making comes into sharp focus. It is always difficult to suggest from detailed qualitative research what might work in other conditions because of the subtlety and complexity of individual lives. However, there are some clear messages from this work which would often be hidden in larger quantitative research. Working with students' own explanations and reflections of their decisions and their experience provides rich and useful data for practice and the following offers an agenda for widening participation in HE.

The students' accounts indicate that they did, and do, see HE as a chance to better themselves. However, many respondents did reflect on those who did not choose to take on further study and lost interest in school. The respondents often recognised that those who 'gave up' had working-class backgrounds. Alex's insightful comments on her working-class peers starkly points to the class issues that need addressing. These insights are borne out by other research from Forsyth and Furlong (2003), Willis (2003) and Wyn and White (1997):

Although education is potentially liberating, the evidence is clear that schooling plays a significant role in the systematic marginalisation of young people who are poor... (Wyn and White, 1997, p 149)

Institutions need to challenge the social hierarchies among young people rather than sustaining and at times even tacitly accepting them. As Willis argues, schools are increasingly complex places where young people are developing identities in relation to each other. It is a risky business where one's position is at stake:

The contemporary school has been turned into a strange kind of hybrid, incorporating under the same roof, the very different past and likely future trajectories of their very different students... [For example] Popular boys are likely to be tough, opposed to school and be seen as stylish in their music and clothing tastes. (2003, p 409)

Their identities and position in their groups will not encourage students to develop their academic abilities; they will run counter to them, as in George's case. Education studies have tended to focus on issues of learning and teaching and institutional environment and while these are obviously important, this research suggests that more attention needs to be paid to friendship groups as forms of social capital rather than just focusing on learning itself.

The role of friendship has emerged as a significant factor in creating success for first generation students, particularly where students cannot access other forms of cultural or economic power. Friendship groups can also operate to confirm students' perceptions of learning and can drive students away from study but they can equally offer a bridge for students who do not have other resources to support their aspirations in education. With the importance placed on friendships in this study, schools and universities need to provide support for social networking that encourages learning. Thomas (2002) highlights this when she argues:

If a student feels they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early. (p 431)

Alex's account of her choice of friendship group is a salutary lesson for those who work in education. Alex effectively made a decision to become friends with more middle class peers to enable her to continue successfully in her studies. This is obviously not a 'cold hearted' decision, but it is one that changed the social capital available to her (Field, 2005). She was able to use her friends and their families to gain access to vital information to help her enter HE.

The widening participation debate has been too focused on classroom activity and more informal learning such as social learning has not been sufficiently investigated. As Thomas states:

The institutional habitus should not restrict itself to influencing only the academic, but it should link together the academic and social spheres within the field of HE. (2002, p 438).

Drawing on this research, it is possible that practical interventions such as mentors, where HE students form informal relationships with school-age children, may alleviate some of the negative effects of the lack of middle-class economic power and social capital. Alex was able to find new friends who could help her, for those who do not, the mentoring process may offer other opportunities to break into the middle-class world of education. However, mentors are usually trained to be instrumental in their approach, focusing on examination results rather than on the whole person and from the evidence

presented here, unless more attention is paid to the informal, such initiatives will not achieve their aim.

Unless a whole social response rather than one that is based solely on education and formal learning is developed, we are unlikely to make significant changes to the profile of HE students. The biographies reveal that enabling widening participation is less about structure, teaching and learning, the curriculum or teachers, but more about intangible things such as belonging, developing determination, imagination and self worth. Many of these qualities are developed, or crushed, in the playground or in the social spaces at university. It is perhaps because of this point that the research also reveals that working-class students are still significantly under-represented in HE and the majority of these students are still disengaging from learning at an early age.

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