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## **Voices of resistance: young people and the subjects they study**

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### **Background**

This is the third of three papers conducted as part of the Understanding Participation rates in post-16 Mathematics And Physics (UPMAP) project.

The question 'How do young people make the subject choices they do?' is central to our project: Understanding Participation rates in post-16 Mathematics And Physics (UPMAP). In this paper, we make the claim that young people can and do resist expectations and make unexpected or even unwelcome subject choices at 16 or at 18 years of age.

### **Research Questions**

The paper is organised around analysis of interview data from two strands of the UPMAP project: from Strand 2, where academically successful 14-16 year-olds are asked about their intentions for their subject choice post-16, and from Strand 3 where 18-20 year-old undergraduates are invited to talk about their reasons for their choice of course of study at university.

### **Methods**

For this paper, we have located in our interview database examples of young people's interviews where we can discern evidence of 'resistance'. By 'resistance' we mean making unusual or unwelcome decisions, relative to school, family or wider community's expectations. We explain below how we make judgements as to whether the young person's talk indicates resistance.

### **Frame**

We are interested in resistance because we recognise that young people are brought up within communities where culturally-relative activities and practices are influential. For many young people, their adult 'choices' can be apparent early in their lives: typically, musical families organise for their children to learn to play musical instruments, professional-class families exemplify professional lifestyles to their offspring and sports supporters and players take their children to the see their particular game as well as play it with them. These orientations 'music, professionalism, sport' are examples of that which is reinforced through family and community activities, discussions and support. Despite the rhetoric that students have choice of their subjects of study, family, culture and community have major influences on young people's, actual decisions.

Yet, with our STEM focus, it is notable that the offspring of scientists and/or those of mathematics backgrounds do not always choose science and/or mathematics. In addition, we note that some young people who choose to study science and/or mathematics do not have family or close community role models. What have these young people resisted and why that enables them to forge unexpected or even unwelcome paths? Answering this question will enable educational provision that does more than 'sell' STEM courses but sustains and/or supports outsiders to STEM cultures through their studies and into a career that benefits the individual students as well as the wider community.

The examples we analyse and present here are from Elizabeth and Emira (both aged 15 at the time of their first interviews) and Nasrine and Luc (both aged 19 at the time of their interviews). Elizabeth was chosen after her Year 10 interview as her parents are non-professional and she is resisting going the science route or the arts route. Emira was chosen as she openly resists expectations from her parents, who are Kosovan refugees from professional backgrounds, for her to pursue a career in the sciences. Nasrine was chosen as she is reading physics which was not her family or community's

preferred career path for her. Luc was chosen as he had a place at university to read physics but at the last moment switched to social sciences with languages.

### **Research findings**

From these young people's interviews, it is not the case that all perceived pressures from the family, educational or community influences are resisted, yet there is a locatable thread in these narratives that is out of alignment with family, education or community in a way we evidence through quotations from their interviews in the body of the paper.

The analysis of this paper compares the resistance in the 15 year-olds' narratives of intention with that in the 19 year-olds' narratives of decision as follows. As a preliminary, the differences in the interviewing approaches between the undergraduates' interviews and the school students' interviews is explained and brief pen portraits of the four interviewees are given. Then we pick out, compare and discuss quotations from their interviews that illustrate resistance according to themes we have discerned from previous analyses. Examples of themes are: relationships – with the subjects (mathematics, physics, etc) or with teachers or other people strongly associated with these subjects; identity – which includes family, projected self-image and personality; career – whether these subjects were important stepping stones for a desired job; capability – whether the interviewee communicated they had skill for the subject. Following this, we discuss the viability of evidence of subconscious resistance: this issue arises from analysis of the undergraduates' interviews which were conducted in a narrative style and analysed with the theoretical lens of Melanie Klein's notion of the defended subject. We have good examples of Nasrine defending herself in her interview that can be interpreted, in some sense, as exemplification of unconscious resistance; we are more cautious in attributing examples of unconscious resistance from the other interviews though we offer possible examples. Nevertheless, despite the difficulty in locating words from interviews that express unconscious resistance, we do hypothesise that, consonant with psychotherapeutic practice and analytical theorisation, unconscious resistances do influence choices.

As the project proceeds, Elizabeth and Emira will be interviewed again and we will be able to test out the predictions theorised in this paper: Emira, who is aware of her resistance to her parents' ambitions for her, will take mostly sciences at A level though English as well; Elizabeth, who seems less aware of the contradictions she is experiencing, will go either all arts or all sciences at A level.