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How do adults construct their boundaries of the possible in navigating education and career pathways?

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Background

The research reported here[1] attempts to make no value judgement about people's decision to participate or not participate in higher education and recognises that they can live happy and worthwhile lives with or without the attainment of a degree. What is of interest is how people come to navigate their way through a terrain of differential enablements and barriers to work and education. The paper draws on data collected in the UK for an ESRC TLRP project 'Non-Participation in Higher Education: 'Decision-making as an embedded social practice'. The framework of analysis draws on Archer (2001, 2008) and also the work of Wright Mills (1959) and Lukes (2005) it considers the way in which adults' social circumstances influence, but do not determine, their predisposition, orientations, concerns and capacity to participate in higher education. The data was collected through interviews with people who were qualified to enter in higher education (HE) but who at the time of interview had not participated in HE. These interviewees also nominated friends and family from their network of intimacy who were also interviewed about their experiences and perspectives on work and education.

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Research Questions

Archer (2000) looked at the issue of human agency and argues against a view that we 'are nothing beyond what society makes us' (2001:4) and for a perspective that acknowledges the significance of individual reflexivity and the dynamic relationship between individuals and the natural, social and practical orders of reality. It is argued here that socio-economic and cultural factors frame decision making at a meta-level, for example, by placing higher education within, or outside, what an individual considers 'the bounds of the possible'. It follows that individuals identify what Archer calls 'life projects' in relation to what they perceive to be within the bounds of the possible (Archer 2008:89). Decisions related to participation or non-participation in higher education are filtered by firstly whether it is considered as a possibility, secondly whether it becomes part of an agenda for action, and finally the more detailed processes required actually to participate.

Methods

Hampshire and the Isle of Wight provided the geographical focus of the research, containing areas of socio-economic and educational deprivation and disadvantage as well as advantage. The empirical involved the following elements:

- a) an initial sample of 17 interviews with individuals potentially recruitable to HE and who acted as potential entry points/gatekeepers to the case study phase of the research;
- b) 12 case studies, each focusing on the network of intimacy of one of the individuals interviewed in stage a), and consisting of 5 or 6 interviews per case.

In-depth interviews were conducted with each individual and commenced with an open-ended question to prompt respondents to offer a narrative account of their own educational and employment trajectories. Interviews with all respondents included an exploration of the financial, social and cultural

resources available to members of each network. The data reported here refers to two of these networks.

Frame

The life stories of two of our sixteen networks, the Hanley Network and the Steers Network will be used to illustrate how members of the network are making their way along educational and career pathways. The paper will tease out how adults' concerns influence what they regard as within the bounds of the possible in relation to their education and work trajectories and which in turn shape their projects (Archer 2008) and courses of actions they follow.

Archer provides an account of a three stage process where an individual's concerns are shaped by their social and cultural circumstance. In terms of this study of participation in HE a key measure of this is taken to be whether or not an individual considers participation as within their bounds of the possible; something they have the capability to do. Such cultural features impact on the projects a person defines for themselves as realistic or possible options from which they make decisions. The work of Lukes (2005) on power will also be used to as a metaphor to explore whether individuals have the capacity to participate in higher education and how capacity exercised. The decision to participate or not participate is one level analysis, a second level is the concerns or agenda that individuals actively consider and a third level is the boundary of possibilities available to them that frames the agenda and represents capacity to participate.

Research findings

The case-study examples reveal very diverse predispositions towards participation; there are differences in what individuals consider as within their bounds of the possible. A key finding here is that these 'boundaries of the possible' are not fixed. They are transformed by people's shared life experience, influenced by the HE experience of people in their networks as well as by the local education and training interventions. Circumstances change, for some more than others, but they are not static or simply flowing in one direction; the experience of younger generations influence the thinking of older generations as well as vice versa. Educational interventions can extend a person's boundary of the possible; their capacity to participate. The examples here demonstrate that many people elect not to exercise that capacity; they resist participation in formal education. Higher Education may have emerged as being within their boundary of the possibilities but it is simply not on their agenda for action. Yet many of these same participants have rich learning biographies and have engaged in a wide range of informal educational activity throughout their lives. Rather than simply focus in upon whether or not people participate in HE perhaps we should pull back the lens a little; consider more carefully whether participation is within a person's power (a real meaningful opportunity a capacity) and how this capacity in turn influences people's concerns and the life projects they consider. HE participation needs to be located as an embedded social practice.