

**DECISION-MAKING ABOUT EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION
PATHWAYS AS AN EMBEDDED SOCIAL PRACTICE:
METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES**

Sue Heath and Brenda Johnston

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DECISION-MAKING ABOUT EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION PATHWAYS AS AN EMBEDDED SOCIAL PRACTICE: METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Sue Heath¹ and Brenda Johnston²
University of Southampton

Introduction

This paper explores some of the methodological challenges we are currently facing in operationalising the research design for our ESRC/TLRP-funded project, *Non-participation in higher education: Decision-making as an embedded social practice*³. Our research is concerned with exploring how and in what ways (non) decision-making about higher education might be embedded within networks consisting of family members, friends and peers, and to what extent future participation in HE might be conceived as within the bounds of the possible. The study hypothesises that such networks - linked as they are to varying forms of social, cultural and economic capital - provide a critical context within which individuals' thinking about HE is embedded and co-constructed. Our focus is on the experiences of individuals who are 'potentially recruitable' to higher education - defined for the purposes of our research as those whose highest level of qualification is at Level 3 or equivalent and who have subsequently neither participated in HE nor are currently applying to do so. Our interest is in non-participation across the life course, so we are prioritising life stage rather than age *per se* within our sampling strategy.

To date, various members of the project team have been engaged in the drafting of a series of literature reviews, in the development of a macro-level account of (non-) participation in the general population based on secondary analysis of data from the Labour Force Survey and the Youth Cohort Study, and in the conduct of thirty interviews with key informants working in the widening participation arena largely in the Hampshire and Isle of Wight region (the geographical focus of our research, and one which includes high levels of non-participation in HE). We are now about to commence on the main phase of the project: case studies of sixteen networks of intimacy. Each case study will involve two interviews with a 'potentially recruitable' individual, followed by semi-structured interviews with up to five members of that person's 'network of intimacy'.

¹ Professor Sue Heath, School of Social Sciences, University of Southampton: Sue.Heath@soton.ac.uk

² Dr Brenda Johnston, School of Education, University of Southampton: B.M.H.Johnston@soton.ac.uk

³ Professor Alison Fuller is the project PI, with Professors Fuller and Heath acting as co-directors of the project. Dr Johnston is the Senior Research Fellow on the project. Full details of the twelve-person team can be found on the project website: <http://www.education.soton.ac.uk/nphe>

In this paper we consider three methodological challenges which we currently face in relation to the main phase of the research. These are: (i) defining our sample and subsequently accessing what is effectively a hidden population; (ii) investigating decision-making as a collective process within and across networks of intimacy; and (iii) investigating decision-making within an intergenerational context. Broader ontological and epistemological concerns provide the backdrop to these challenges. These are especially prominent in this research because of the need to interpret multiple accounts within any one network of intimacy, accounts which may be potentially conflicting or at least told from different perspectives; the need for the interviewers to interview and interact with many individuals in one network who will themselves be responding to what they might perceive the story to have been presented by other members of the network; and the difficulty of investigating a complex decision making process, ongoing probably over many years.

1. Defining and accessing our sample

To date, much of the literature on widening participation (WP) has focused on the experiences of individuals who are, or who have been, *participants* in higher education. This obviously makes sense in terms of investigating the experiences of current or past students, or in terms of considering, where relevant, how individuals have *overcome* potential barriers. However, a focus on those who succeed in getting into HE tells us very little, if anything, about the experiences of *non-participants*, including not only those who *fail* to overcome barriers, but those who have no desire to participate in HE in the first place. We agree with the point made by Gorard et al (2006) in their recent review of research on barriers to participation in HE that this use of *participants* in effect as proxies for *non-participants* is a major flaw in much contemporary WP research. Gorard et al refer to this as the problem of *missing comparators*, possibly arising as a consequence of 'the difficulty of identifying and then including students who choose not to participate in post-compulsory education' (p.146).

The difficulties of specifically researching the experiences of non-participants are made all the more challenging by virtue of the 'slipperiness' of the concepts of HE participation and non-participation. Consider, for example, the category of 'HE participant'. At a minimum, this category should presumably include current students and graduates, but should it also include students who subsequently withdraw from their studies? Are students who drop out best categorised as participants or non-participants? If we define participation in terms of having at some point been a

student in HE, then those who drop out should of course be categorised as participants, yet it is suggested by Harrison (2006), for example, that certain students who drop out of their studies share many of the characteristics of members of groups who are under-represented in HE. And as we cannot predict whether or not a current student will withdraw, should the category of 'true' participant only be applied to those who have already *completed* their studies?

The category of 'HE non-participant' is even more complex, given that a non-participant almost always has the *potential* to become a participant at some future point. We might make educated guesses about those who are more or less likely to participate in the future, but we cannot know this for sure; indeed, one might want to argue that we can only categorise someone as a genuine non-participant upon their demise! And are those who are currently thinking about or even in the process of applying to study in HE best categorised as participants or non-participants, given that they may or may not follow through on their intentions? Realistically, then, we can only really talk in terms of those who have *not yet* participated – some of whom may well go on to become participants at a later point, but many of whom will not. The point is, *we do not know*.

For the purposes of our own research, then, we eventually decided to focus our sampling strategy on identifying individuals who fall into the 'have not (yet) participated in HE' category. As acknowledged above, alongside those who will indeed never participate in HE, this category will also include individuals who might better be characterised in terms of 'have not yet participated but will do so eventually', and this group might have very different characteristics to those who turn out to be 'genuine' non-participants. This ambiguity of status, however, is integral to our research design, as we are interested in the factors which might trigger a shift from non-participation to participation, as well as in the factors which might make future participation extremely unlikely. It is interesting to note, then, that the term we originally came up with to define this group was 'potentially recruitable', which captures something of this ambiguity.

This left us with the challenge of operationalising the term 'potentially recruitable'. Possession of level 3 qualifications is perhaps the most obvious means by which an individual might be deemed 'potentially recruitable'. Nonetheless, we had originally conceptualised this category as also being inclusive of those who were in possession of level 2 qualifications as their highest qualification, on the assumption that such

individuals might subsequently obtain level 3 qualifications and hence be in a position to apply for HE-entry, or might consider gaining access to university via accreditation of prior experiential learning. However, those currently holding level 2 qualifications as their highest qualification may face very specific barriers to participation at level 3, let alone potential participation at level 4, which would add additional complexity to what was already becoming a complex research design. We felt that their inclusion alongside those with level 3 qualifications raised a rather different set of issues concerning the WP agenda than those which we wished to foreground in our own research. Moreover, this group has already been the focus of a fair amount of research in the WP arena in contrast with the latter group (eg Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Watts and Bridges, 2006).

We have decided, then, to focus our initial sampling strategy on individuals from Hampshire and the Isle of Wight who have level three qualifications or equivalent (to include Access and 'return-to-study'-type courses) as their current highest level of qualification and who, despite having the necessary qualifications in their possession, have subsequently neither participated in HE nor have applied to do so. We have defined the scope of participation in HE in terms of any period of study, regardless of completion, which has been undertaken towards a qualification which is part of the HE Qualifications Framework, and including HE-level provision within the FE sector. Given the focus of much existing work on standard age (potential) entrants, we have decided to focus on those aged 21-plus. Moreover, we will be foregrounding life stage rather than age per se within our research, given that non-participants are more likely than participants to follow traditional pathways into 'early adulthood' and to have existing family commitments which affect potential participation (Heath and Cleaver, 2003). We are also keen to recruit a sample which includes individuals with a diverse range of level 3 qualifications, with a good urban-rural spread, and with a variety of different forms of economic activity and inactivity represented.

We are now faced with the challenge of locating members of our target group. In-house analysis of the Labour Force Survey suggests that around 13 per cent of the UK labour force is currently in possession of level 3 qualifications as their highest qualification (equivalent to 4.8 million individuals). Nonetheless, our target population is not an easily identifiable group for research purposes. The people we are interested in come from many different backgrounds and socio-economic groups, and encompass a variety of different educational backgrounds, ages, life stages, geographical locations and employment histories. They do not belong to any one

organization, neither are they marked out in any lists or databases to which we can have access. The hidden nature of this population would be a serious problem if we were seeking a representative sample. However, as we are pursuing an approach informed by theoretical sampling this is far less of a concern, although we do still have to be aware of the fuzzy nature of our population, and to be aware of how the characteristics of our own sample might relate to the characteristics of this group at a national level.

In order to access our target population, we are adopting two main strategies. The first will provide access to individuals who have completed level 3 qualifications relatively recently, and the second will provide access to a rather broader group who may have obtained level 3 qualifications at various other points in the past. The point at which a level 3 qualification has been obtained is of critical importance. One might reasonably surmise that the further away in time from the point at which a level 3 qualification was achieved, the less likely it is that an individual is likely to become a future participant. By ensuring a balance between recent and less recent completers, we hope that we will be generating a rather more balanced sample of non-participants. However, the timing of the attainment of a qualification is also of critical importance given the dynamic nature of education policy and of socio-economic conditions more generally. Any decision to participate or not participate in HE is inevitably critically shaped by those conditions and needs to be factored into our analytical framework, a point which we revisit in part three of this paper.

Our first strategy builds upon the contacts we have already made in conducting interviews with key informants and stakeholders working in the local WP arena. Many of our key informants work for local training providers or FE colleges, and they have agreed to help us locate individuals who have recently completed level 3 qualifications but who have not proceeded to HE, for example by forwarding to individuals who fit our criteria an invitation to participate in our research. The second strategy involves building upon existing as well as new contacts with employers and community groups in the region to seek their assistance in accessing members of our target group who might be linked to their organisation, again possibly through forwarding letters on our behalf to suitable individuals or by advertising the project though whatever means they consider to be most effective (eg organisational newsletters and/or notice boards). Individuals who express an interest in participating will be asked a small number of filter questions to ensure they fit our criteria. Thirty two individuals will then be invited to take part in an initial round of interviewing,

ahead of our selection of sixteen individuals whose networks will form the basis of the main phase of the research.

We are currently piloting various research instruments relating to our sampling process. This has confirmed our suspicions that our focus on Level 3 qualifications is by no means straightforward. Level 3 qualifications consist of a wide range of general, vocational and occupational qualifications, often specialised and unfamiliar to the general population and, in some cases, to us as a research team. Many of these qualifications have changed names over the years, whilst many predate the creation of the National Qualifications Framework. Moreover, many people will be unaware of the NQF and the level at which their qualifications sit within it, whilst many will have multiple qualifications and not actually know which is the one at the highest level. For example, one person involved in the piloting did not know that a course she had recently undertaken was actually a level four qualification which formed part of the HE qualifications framework. These are all significant complicating factors for us as we seek to generate our initial sample.

2. Researching networks

The methodological and conceptual challenges of defining and accessing our sample are current and ongoing. We are, however, acutely aware of some major challenges with which we are yet to grapple, relating to the specific unit of analysis which forms the major focus of our research: the 'network of intimacy', rather than the individual *per se*. The term 'network of intimacy' was used by one of us in previous research on young people's intimate relationships: 'Such relationships include those with parents and siblings, with friends and with partners, and we use the phrase 'networks of intimacy' to refer to the full range of intimate relationships embraced by any one person' (Heath and Cleaver, 2003, p47). We plan, then, to conduct in-depth qualitative interviews with sixteen case study 'networks of intimacy', each case to cascade out from one of our sixteen entry point individuals and to include up to five of their closest friends and relatives. We hope to include both 'rich' supportive networks and 'thin' unsupportive networks.

Any study of networks has to conceptualise and examine at least three levels of activity and interaction: the micro practice of individuals as they interact with their network context; a meso level of analysis; and the broader societal, educational and policy context, operating at the macro level of analysis. Sociologists have complex and overlapping conceptions of the relationship between structure and individual

agency (see e.g. Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Drawing on these, we argue that any educational and career decisions will take place in a macro and meso level context which will consist of social, educational, emotional, financial and political elements which will themselves be in dynamic interaction with and which will be mediated and (re-)created by the choices of individuals. Analysis of such complexities will inevitably be challenging and, as we noted in the introduction, will in particular raise important ontological and epistemological questions relating to the need to interpret multiple and potentially conflicting accounts within any one network of intimacy, the need for interviewers to interact with several individuals across each network, and the difficulty of investigating a complex decision making process, ongoing probably over many years. Indeed, we are setting ourselves the task of simultaneously investigating both past and current influences on educational and career decision-making, involving network members who may or may not have exerted influence in the past, and who may or may not currently exert influence.

In the remaining two sections we outline some of the specific challenges we face in trying to achieve our goal of conducting research across networks of intimacy. The network approach can be usefully conceptualised in terms of a horizontal and a vertical dimension, the former capturing the breadth of a given network across a range of diverse social relations, the latter capturing the intergenerational aspects of those relations. We start with a focus on some of the challenges related to the horizontal dimension, in particular the challenges of exploring decision-making as a collective process across the network, and then go onto consider some of the challenges linked to the vertical dimension, in terms of capturing the intergenerational dynamics of decision-making.

(i) The horizontal dimension: investigating decision-making as a collective process

Writing in the context of domestic transitions, one of us has previously pointed to the degree to which an individual's decision-making is often contingent on the prior decisions and actions of members of that person's network and that, rather than adulthood being characterised by *independence* from friends and family, it might best be characterised as a shift towards new forms of multi-directional *interdependency*, including across generations (Heath, 2002). Moreover, as individuals form households and families of their own at various points across the life course, then these interdependencies become even more embedded. Ahier and Moore (1999)

have similarly emphasised the importance of understanding networks of relationships within the field of youth transitions and post-16 education more generally:

We would argue that precisely because the move is towards 'management through negotiation', youth transition must be located and understood in terms of *networks* of relationships (mainly intergenerational) which provide the resources through which young people might actualise whatever options they may aspire to. Hence the key question both theoretically and methodologically is: *where, with whom and how* do these 'negotiations' take place and how might they become the subject of sociological theory and investigation? (Ahier and Moore, 1999, p.517).

These are precisely the sorts of questions we are seeking to explore in our own research, albeit with a more age-diverse sample. Indeed, Ahier and Moore identify various conceptual and practical issues which, in focusing on networks of relationships, interdependencies and the transmission of resources and forms of capital, affect people at *all* different life stages and which are therefore of relevance to our own research. These include the importance of *inter-generational* transfers of various kinds (a point which we specifically address in the following section); public inter-cohort transfers of resources, for example the financing of the pension system by those currently in employment; and various forms of dependency amongst network members across the life course. Ahier and Moore argue that all too often explorations of intergenerational transfers have focused too narrowly on *parents* at the neglect of broader kin (and, we would argue, non-familial) networks, and too bluntly on *values* rather than 'the management of negotiation' through which assets are transferred. They argue that it is necessary to find ways of conceptualising and mapping the *matrix* of (intergenerational) relationships within which the dynamics of transition are embedded; of identifying *what* it is that is being transferred or mobilised within and by these dynamics; and the *principles* and *processes* through which transfers are mobilised (Ahier and Moore, 1999, p.526).

Studies which set out to explore the transfer of resources and forms of capital between generations are by no means unusual within educational research. Nonetheless, rarely do they focus on more than two generations and even more rarely do they extend beyond the parent-child relationship (see the following section for a more detailed discussion of the implications of an intergenerational focus). Our study is, then, relatively unusual in seeking to explore the influence exerted on decision-making by a diverse range of personal contacts - whether parents, children, grandparents, siblings, partners, friends or workmates - and in particular in seeking to foreground the network itself as an important unit of analysis. Our data should allow

us to analyse individual accounts of decision-making (as is more often the case within research of this kind), alongside relationship-based accounts (the specific interaction between the decision-making of an entry point person and that of their mother, for example, or their best friend, or their partner), alongside network-based accounts, which may be embedded across the network as a whole or within specific parts of the network. We might find, for example, that an entry point individual might come from a family with a strong tradition of engagement in HE, yet their closest friends might all be non-participants, who appear to have exerted a greater influence on their decision-making processes than their own family.

This ‘multi-level’ approach to analysis represents a huge analytical challenge. In particular, we are currently considering how best to explore this in our interviews with members of each network, a challenge which raises a series of important questions relating to the ontological status we attach to interview data and, in particular, what analytical sense we will make of multiple and quite possibly conflicting accounts and perspectives. We are certainly not seeking to solicit accounts of career and educational decision-making from our entry point individuals in order to then somehow seek to confirm their validity (or otherwise) through the triangulation of accounts across the network as a whole. Ontologically, we are sceptical of a realistic position that would regard interview data as corresponding to some notion of objective truth; rather, albeit to varying degrees across the research team, we regard these accounts as narrative constructions. As such, we will certainly seek to generate a series of narratives from each of the network members in relation to their *own* decision-making in these spheres, and to then sit them alongside each other within each network. We are currently discussing the extent to which we might want to ask *direct* questions about influence and about the narrative accounts of others within the network, although we do have some concerns regarding the manner in which we should do this. We are, for instance, concerned with the need to ensure confidentiality within the research process and also to maximise the possibility that our various contacts will be prepared to participate in the research in the first place: some of the individuals with whom we have so far piloted materials have expressed some anxiety about involving family and friends in our research.

(ii) The vertical dimension: investigating decision-making across generations

The selection of network members for possible involvement in our research will be in the hands of each of the sixteen entry point individuals. At this stage we do not know the range of relationships which will be represented in each network, but we might

safely predict that at least some of these relationships, including friendships, will be intergenerational in nature. Thus our network approach includes a vertical dimension, based on an analysis of the significance of time and age, as well as of generational and cohort positioning. Miller (2000) distinguishes between *family* generations on the one hand and *cohort* generations on the other. The former refers to generations in terms of family positioning, i.e. grandparent/parent/child, whilst the latter refers to generations in terms of membership of a particular cohort, for example the generation raised during the Second World War, or the 1960s generation.

In terms of family generation, a number of recent studies of educational choice have generated data from young adults and their parents (see, for example, Reay et al, 2005, and Ball et al, 2000), whilst Wilk (1999) argues that studies of grandparents and grandchildren are becoming increasingly common, although these studies are predominantly located within the field of childhood studies and tend therefore to focus on young children rather than adult children and their grandparents. Studies which involve more than two generations within the same research design remain, however, relatively unusual. Two recent exceptions are Brannen et al's (2004) intergenerational study of employment and care based on interviews with members of twelve different four-generation families (although only first, second and third generation family members were interviewed as the fourth generation in each case consisted of an under-five year old), and Hockey et al's (2002) cross-generational investigation of 'the making of heterosexual relationships', which involved interviews with members from each of three generations in twenty two different families, the members of the youngest generation for the most part being in their teens and early twenties. Both of these studies owe a great deal to earlier work by Finch and Mason (1993) on the negotiation of family responsibilities within contemporary family life, which included interviews with between three and eight members of 31 different kinship groups. Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) note that generational positions within families provide a particularly valuable way of approaching the analysis of data generated across generations, allowing for example the analysis of children's accounts as opposed to mothers' or fathers' accounts or grandparents' accounts.

Nonetheless, the nature of these positions based on *family* generation will also be influenced by the specific *cohort* generation to which an individual belongs. A researcher can look at a particular time period and set of events and see how they have shaped the life chances, understandings and motivations of individuals living through those events:

A generation consists of a group of people born during the same time period and who are united by similar life experiences and a temporarily coherent cultural background. People belonging to the same generation have the same location in the historical dimension of the social process. They share a group of events that have influenced, first, the ways in which they experience a thing and, second, historically relevant ways of action (Mannheim, 1959, pp.191 and 292; Puoronen, 1988, p.4) (cited in Antikainen, 1996, pp.34-35).

This is a particular challenge within our own research as it will be necessary to take account of the specific policy era within which each of our respondents will have experienced key education and/or employment transitions, particularly at 16 and at 18. Indeed, it is useful in this context to be mindful of the distinction that is typically drawn between historical trends and period effects (see Miller, 2000). Historical trends refer to influential events which are central to developing an understanding of social change across time and within specific generations, for example the gradual opening up of educational opportunities to women over the past 150 years. In the case of historical trends, the direction of change is constant and not just a generational blip. In contrast, period effects 'raise important issues of the interplay of historical events and social change' (*ibid*, p.ix) and are caused by the particular conditions pertaining at the time of a study, for example specific policies on widening participation, or specific conditions within the labour market. As Brannen (2003) has argued,

there is a creative tension between change and continuity, between processes of reproduction and innovation. In intergenerational families, values and practices are transmitted, while each generation may also develop or subscribe to its own (para 3.1).

These tensions and disjunctions will form the backdrop to our study, and we look forward to making analytical sense of them.

Conclusion

In discussing the complexities associated with analysing data from multiple perspectives and standpoints within families, Ribbens McCarthy et al (2003) make some important points which are particularly salient to our own unfolding research design:

... analytic choices yield different forms of knowledge and lead us to 'see' varying patterns and themes according to the focus we take, whether we reveal the possibility of 'family cultures', the relevance of standpoint differences around gender and generation, or wider structural issues of class and ethnicity. Within individual accounts we can see how these different aspects are interwoven in particular histories. *How we represent such complexities and*

tensions between related accounts is a further choice, which may depend upon the audience and purposes involved. Even where we choose to weave the threads into one apparently coherent overall story, we argue for openness and reflexivity concerning the difficult analytic choices that underlie such a production (p.1, emphasis added).

In this paper we have sought to make transparent some of the difficult choices that underpin our own research design. We are not suggesting that the approach we have adopted is necessarily the best or only way to explore our research questions, and we are aware that other routes would undoubtedly yield equally valid accounts of educational and employment decision-making and the place (or otherwise) of HE within those accounts. Nonetheless, our hope is that it contributes to ongoing debates concerning the broader methodological challenges of researching *non-participation* within a field dominated by studies which often end up focusing on participation as a flawed proxy for non-participation.

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NON-PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: Decision-making as an embedded social practice

A team from the Schools of Education and Social Science at the University of Southampton has been awarded research funding as part of the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme's focus on widening participation in higher education (HE). The two year study (April 2006-March 2008) will examine the extent to which HE is conceived as 'within the bounds of the possible' for non-participants and will explore how attitudes to HE and decisions about non-participation are embedded within 'networks of intimacy', consisting of family members and close friends. It hypothesises that such networks provide a critical context within which individuals' thinking about participation is embedded.

The research involves two overlapping parts: stage one will draw on existing large-scale survey data to develop a macro-level account of (non-) participation in the general population and a critique of the extant literature on educational decision-making. The implications of the emerging issues will be explored in the qualitative study (stage two). This will involve case studies of sixteen networks of intimacy. We will identify non-participating adults at different stages in the life-course and who may, or may not be economically active, to provide 'entry points' to each network. Each case study will involve an initial structured interview with each 'entry point' individual to determine educational and employment histories, household and family composition, and details of their self-defined network of intimacy, followed by semi-structured interviews with each of these individuals plus five 'network members' who are identified as sources of influence in the decision-making process. The focus at the macro and micro levels on non-participants and on adults at various stages in the life-course make this research distinctive, as existing widening participation research has tended to focus on non-traditional applicants and students, and particularly on adults below the age of 30.

The geographical focus of this study will be the Southampton and Hampshire area, which offers a mixed picture in terms of HE participation. Southampton has one of the lowest rates in the country; only 1 in 10, 18 year olds entering full-time undergraduate courses, whereas in parts of Hampshire the rate is much higher. The research will provide opportunities for representatives of local, regional and national organisations with a direct interest in participation issues to be involved in the development of the research through involvement in the project's advisory panel. To maximise impact, the study's findings and recommendations will be communicated through a series of targeted events for policy makers and widening participation practitioners.

Project Team

Alison Fuller (co-director), Sue Heath (co-director), Martin Dyke, Ros Foskett, Nick Foskett, Brenda Johnston, Felix Maringe, Karen Paton, Patricia Rice, Laura Staetsky, John Taylor, and Marie Kenny (project administrator)

For more details, please contact:
Alison Fuller, email: a.fuller@soton.ac.uk

NON PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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