7

THE EXTENT TO WHICH HIGHER EDUCATION IS CONCEIVED AS 'WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF THE POSSIBLE'

Martin Dyke

A major focus of higher education (HE) policy in the UK has been to widen participation and diversify the student population. The dominant perspective presents participation as desirable, highly valued and a social good to which individuals should aspire. Our research made no value judgement about people's decisions to participate or not in HE. The project acknowledged that individuals can live happy and worthwhile lives with or without the attainment of a degree. This chapter reinforces the critique in earlier chapters of narrow economic accounts of decision-making. It extends the analysis of social capital to locate decision-making within a framework of power relationships, where circumstances and individual agency combine to provide different capabilities for agency. As noted in Chapter 5, our evidence suggests that social networks produce varying levels and types of resources that create both barriers and enablement to action.

We have drawn upon the work of Giele and Elder (1998) to illustrate how educational opportunities are shaped by specifics of time and place: where and when someone experiences significant life events will profoundly influence their life chances. Similarly, C. Wright Mills (1959) observed that life events reflect both public issues and private troubles. The interaction of personal and public issues provides a landscape of decision-making that shapes the boundaries of what our participants consider possible, particularly in terms of our research participants' engagement with HE.

This chapter focuses on how people come to navigate their way through a differentiated terrain of enablement and barriers to work and education. Connections will be made with theories of power that acknowledge the context in which private concerns connect with public issues. Scholarship that derives from the analysis of power (Mills 1959; Lukes 2005) sheds some light on the processes discussed here. Government initiatives to widen and increase HE participation can easily slide from being a matter of public policy, to one that considers non-participation as some

form of shortcoming on the part of the individual rather than a consequence of the structural circumstances and institutional arrangements that influence their thinking and decision-making.

In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959) ruminated on the fast and worldwide scope of change and the challenge people faced in trying to keep pace with a world where 'the very shaping of history now outpaces the ability of men to orient themselves in accordance with cherished values' (Mills 1959: 10). In a time that predates accounts of globalization, computers and the internet, Mills talked of people being overwhelmed with information that was beyond their capacity to assimilate (1959: 11). He argued that these particular social circumstances required people to possess a sociological imagination:

> What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves.
>
> *(Mills 1959: 11)*

This sociological imagination chimes with more recent accounts of reflexivity by Giddens (1990, 1991b) and Archer (2000, 2007). Mills noted that people's actions shape history and that they are influenced by 'contemporary man's self-conscious view of himself' (1959: 14). For Wright Mills, this more reflexive or sociologically imaginative person developed when people's thinking transcended the boundaries of their direct experience. Mills provides an interesting framework for considering why participation becomes an issue at different points in time. He explored the intersection between what he termed 'private troubles and public issues' (1959: 14). Private troubles derive from an individual's character and their relationship with others immediately around them; they 'have to do with the self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware' (1959: 15). These personal experiences and immediate social relationships provide the milieu that can shape an individual's thinking and actions. For Mills, something becomes a private trouble when an aspect of an individual's way of life that they value becomes threatened.

Public issues concern those structural and contextual issues that may be beyond the scope and inner life experience of the individual. Public issues for Mills include the organization of social institutions, and wider social, political and economic events that transcend the local context and people's private concerns. The financial crash of 2008 is an example of a public issue where the causes and impact transcend local experiences. Consequent unemployment in turn becomes both a public issue and a private trouble. Yet the solution to the problem of economic recession is beyond the actions of any single individual trying to navigate their way through their experience of unemployment. This interplay of the macro- and the micro-structures provides a framework for analysis that is reproduced in the context of educational participation. Chapter 5 considered different forms of social capital (Halpern 2005),

with parallels to the perspective adopted here which uses Lukes' (2005) account of the first, second and third face of power as a framework for analysis.

There are a number of levels which influence how people participate, or not, in education. These include the individual's experience and immediate social relationships that produce Mills' private troubles or Archer's similar focus on 'human concerns' (2000). Educational policy presents public issues that can shape material, cultural and political barriers, and enablement to participation. These public and private concerns frame what people come to see as the 'boundaries of the possible' in educational participation. There is a need to understand participation both in terms of the personal situation – people's immediate social relations – as well as in terms of the macro-educational policy and structures that shape the availability of opportunities. Mills' concept of private troubles highlights the importance of the personal social relations and here-and-now experience in creating the environment in which people make or choose not to make decisions. This setting of the personal and local is significant for understanding how people make their way through the world, not just in terms of private troubles that derive from a disjuncture between cherished values and changes to life experience, but also in relation to aspects that contribute to their contentment and the wellbeing of their loved ones. Importantly, when people are content with their lives, preservation of the status quo becomes a powerful influence on their thinking about potential participation. Archer (2007) makes a similar point to Mills, separating the public and private in terms of structural factors and individual concerns and predispositions. These may not always present themselves solely as 'troubles', but extend to issues such as personal and social well-being, performance and achievement and feelings of self worth (Archer 2007: 199).

Public issues and private troubles also manifest themselves through the exercise of power and Lukes' (2005) framework will be used here as a metaphor for understanding participation. He identified three faces of power. The first face concerns decision-making and looks at the outcomes of decisions, in the context of whether individuals decide to participate or not. The second face of power is concerned with how certain options come to be on the agenda for decision-making. With this face of power, non-decision-making is critical, as power is held by those individuals or groups who set the agenda and can thereby prevent people from being able to consider all the options available to them. For example, governments and employers set the vocational education agenda, even if only by providing support and sponsorship. The third face of power for Lukes (2005) considers how the social-economic context frames decision-making and influences the attitudes, aspirations and capabilities of individuals and groups. These economic and cultural factors may limit the boundaries of what individuals consider possible for themselves in such a way that a decision is never taken, and the agenda need never be set. For many of the participants in our study who were either from working-class backgrounds or older generations, or both, university was simply not within the bounds of possibility, either culturally or economically.

Lukes (2005) makes use of Sen's work on capability to illustrate how social and economic circumstances influence capability. Sen (1999) illustrates two dimensions to the capability approach:

> The evaluative focus of this 'capability approach' can be either on the realized functionings (what a person is actually able to do) or the capability set of alternatives she has (her real opportunities). The two give different types of information – the former about the things a person does and the latter about the things a person is substantively free to do.
>
> *(Sen 1999: 75)*

Sen goes on to give a powerful illustration of the two types of information: 'Fasting is not the same thing as being forced to starve' (1999: 76). Non-participation in HE does not necessarily mean a person does not possess the capability to participate. This chapter will argue that a capability approach can shed more light on our understanding of participation and non-participation than simply focusing on whether individuals elect to participate.

Two of our 16 networks, the Hanley network and the Steers network, will be used to explore the extent to which HE is considered within the bounds of possibility. Both networks centred on working-class men who served craft apprenticeships in the marine industries and had Level 3 qualifications that made them potentially recruitable to HE. They were both aware that they could participate in HE, and they possessed the capability and social capital to do so. Both came from families with limited or no experience of HE.

The Hanley network

The Hanley network centred on John, a 34-year-old section leader and boatbuilder by trade (see Figure 7.1). John was married with two young children and had a close-knit network with limited experience of HE, though his sister had recently entered university as a mature student. He had a good quality of life and did not see a pressing need to engage in further education or training. With strong encouragement from his employer he reluctantly took a management diploma, one with a clear progression route to HE:

> I wasn't looking forward to it to start with because it's the sort of thing, the prospect of doing loads of assignments on a Saturday and Sunday night until three in the morning, you know, racking my brain for ideas . . . But when it actually came to doing them it all came naturally because all I had to do was take what I do in there and just transfer it to paper.
>
> *(John)*

John did not embark on educational participation in a self-directed way; he did not consider all the programmes available to him. He actively avoided making any decision to participate, but preferred to go with the flow of what was expected of him:

> You go to school, you know, you do your lessons, you get your homework and then you do your exams. It's all a process and I'm one of those people

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Mother-in-law Julie Renwick (age 57) Lives alone Location: isolated small town Part-time administrator Experience of HE: No	**Mother** Mary Hanley (age 57) Lives with partner Location: isolated smal town Part-time caretaker Experience of HE: No	**Aunt** Anne Miller (age 49) Lives with husband and child Location: isolated small town Part-time dental nurse Experience of HE: No

Wife
Cathy Hanley (age 35)
Lives with husband and children
Location: isolated small town
Part-time supermarket worker
Experience of HE: No

John Hanley
(age 34)
Lives with wife and children
Location: isolated small town
Boatbuilder
Highest qualification: CMI Diploma
Experience of HE: No

Sister
Jackie Hanley (age 29)
Lives alone
Location: urban
Part-time work and student
Experience of HE: Yes

Friend
George Harris (age 40)
Lives with wife and children
Location: isolated small town
Section leader and boat builder
Experience of HE: No

Friend
Graham Powell (age 34)
Lives alone
Location: isolated small town
Not in paid work
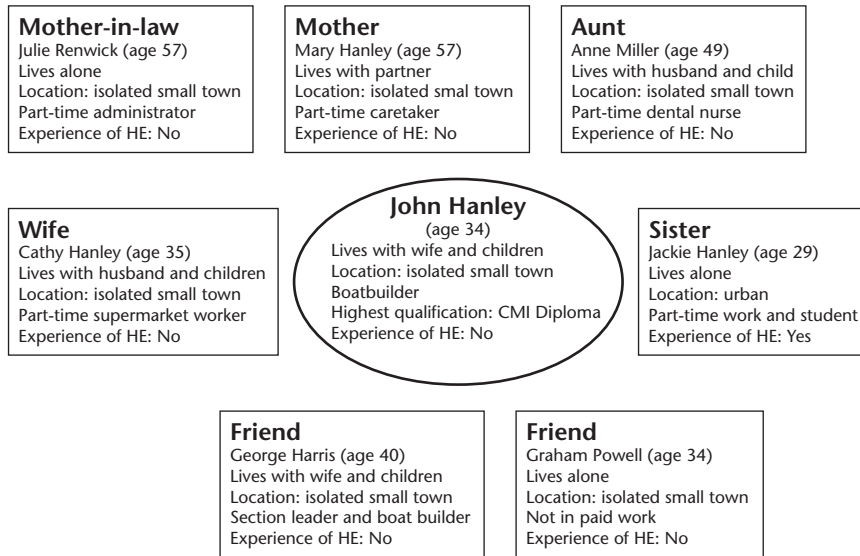Experience of HE: No

FIGURE 7.1   John Hanleyís network

> who can quite happily just sit on the bus and go along with it you know. . . .
> I just basically sat the apprenticeship and it was like a conveyor belt to where
> I am now really, it all just happened.
>
> *(John)*

John was adamant he would not progress his management studies into HE unless required to do so. This progression pathway opened up new possibilities, including an opportunity to engage in HE, but this was not something he wanted to do. Through the agenda set by his employer his 'boundary of possibilities', his capacity for HE participation, had been expanded beyond what his employer directly required and beyond what John intended to do. John Hanley was able to make an informed choice not to participate in HE. The opportunity was there; in Sen's (1999) terms he had the capability, but the cultural predisposition to participate was not evident.

The agenda–setting role of his employer and local education providers had been central to his participation in tertiary level programmes. The curriculum organi–zation of these programmes, with a clear progression pathway to HE, had altered John's perception of HE and his relationship to it. In this sense he had been empowered, his capacity increased by educational structures and the demands of his employers; these are aspects of Lukes' (2005) second dimension of power. However, despite the government's pressures to widen participation in HE, John was actively resisting such pressures. He would not jeopardize his quality of life by studying in his spare time unless it became an absolute necessary for him. His boundaries had been redrawn and his capacity increased, but at the time of the

research he did not want to enter HE as this might threaten his family's wellbeing and contentment. Perhaps a key issue was that participation represented a considerable opportunity cost to his family's wellbeing; this in itself impacted on his capacity to participate.

John's friend and work colleague, George, had a similar educational profile but had engaged in a wider range of tertiary level vocational qualifications. Only one of these programmes had a clear progression route into HE; his employer–sponsored management diploma. This progression provided George with options he would not have considered before. George, like John, was successful in his diploma though he remained more positively predisposed towards vocational and 'hands on' work. George explicitly recognized that HE had moved within the bounds of his possibilities and might, in the future, become a necessity. It was on his agenda as a possible project, yet George also had a good quality of life and preferred not to engage in further study. For those like John and George, HE is perceived as presenting a threat to their quality of life and family wellbeing. It seemed more likely to be pursued when there was some disjuncture in life, rather than contentment. However, George was much more concerned than John that the nature of his job might change and further study become essential. George had successfully steered his way through a volatile labour market to get to his current position and had not always managed to get satisfactory work. He was much more aware than John of how the economic climate and business imperatives might impact on his quality of life. He had become more aware of the public issues and how global markets impacted on his local labour market. As a consequence, he was more positively disposed to keeping his educational and work–related options open.

George's awareness of how his opportunities and capability had expanded existed alongside a real scepticism about the value of HE and an active resistance to following this pathway. He constantly asserted the value of quality of life over work, learning and status. Work–related HE was perceived as a threat to his quality of life, and non–work–related HE was not considered within his bounds of possibility. If we use Sen's (1999) definition, he could be said to have the capability to enter HE, but did not choose to act upon it. Private troubles for others in this network, however, produced a different response to participation in HE, as illustrated by the experiences of John's sister, Jackie.

Jackie left school after illness had curtailed her A level attainment. She left school determined to work and do no more study. She took the first job she could find and stayed for eight years working for a paternalistic employer who encouraged her to gain vocational qualifications through day release. These she achieved easily. The company changed ownership and became less friendly and satisfying to work for, creating 'private troubles' for Jackie. It was this disjuncture that prompted Jackie to rethink her educational aspirations. There was limited HE experience in her network, and Jackie was the first member of her family to attend university. An Open University advertisement broadcast on television after a documentary programme led her to engage in a short higher level programme. This programme improved her confidence and became a springboard for her entry into full-time HE.

Jackie's options had quickly become very narrowly focused, shaped more by chance than any careful weighing of options. Jackie selected a science degree and did everything in her power to secure a place on it. She telephoned the admissions tutor, who unceremoniously told her that her vocational qualifications and higher level credits were not sufficient to secure a place, and that she should return to college and take science A levels. Jackie would not accept this and approached the admissions tutor again. This time he advised her to take a new science foundation programme at the university. She then visited the university and secured a place on this programme. Jackie was confident; she insisted on an entitlement to HE and she forced the admissions tutor to find a pathway for her when other candidates would have given up. At the time of interview, however, she was uncertain whether she had made the right decision, as the programme of study was not as she had envisaged:

> If someone said shall I go, you know I'm thinking about going back to university at 26 I'd tell them to think about it very seriously because it won't be what they expect. They probably won't fit in very well because of different age groups. I wouldn't say don't do it, I'd just say think about it really hard just because I found it so hard and I'm still finding it hard now.
>
> *(Jackie, John's sister)*

A science degree had also challenged her personal values and beliefs as a vegetarian in a very direct way; she had not anticipated regular animal dissections as part of the course. However, she had recently discovered, again by chance, that her degree programme was unexpectedly a sound route for the environmental career she wanted, and future postgraduate study. In the absence of cultural (educational) capital, Jackie's educational pathway had been shaped by chance. It was high risk, based on poor information and difficult interactions with educational bureaucracies. In terms of HE information, guidance and advice she had been poorly served. However, the bonding capital provided by her network of family and friends was instrumental in supporting her through a difficult programme of study. There is an element in Jackie's story of success against the odds. There is also evidence of the mobilization of bridging and linking capital (discussed in Chapter 5) in the forceful and determined approach that enabled her to overcome substantial barriers to both getting on and staying with her programme of study.

Dissatisfaction with work had placed HE on the agenda, but only a limited range of options was considered. Educational provision aimed at widening participation opened up opportunities and provided Jackie with the capacity to participate. It was only in her third year that Jackie had discovered that she had accidentally taken the most appropriate degree for employment in her chosen field. Jackie's boundaries had expanded with new experiences and educational opportunities. The spark for her engagement originated in discontentment with work, yet the drive and determination reflected the work ethos of her social network and the values she shared with both her brother John and their single mother.

Jackie's family initially did not actively encourage participation; indeed, there is a suggestion that her mother was against her leaving the local area to study. Yet once on the programme her family did everything in their power to keep her there. Her immediate family – her mother and John – had been very supportive of her doing whatever she wanted to do. They never really directed her; the emphasis was on Jackie finding her own way, with their support and encouragement always in the background. However, values related to work, independence and perseverance were highly rated and discussed with reference to her immediate family and extended family of uncles and aunts. There was a clear expectation that, having embarked on the degree, she should not quit but finish it. These cultural values, which Halpern (2005) would describe as facets of bonding capital, helped sustain Jackie through the difficult times in her studies. The widening participation agenda and setting up of a foundation programme for access to HE shifted the cultural landscape and enabled Jackie to follow a pathway in to university. These educational interventions extended Jackie's boundaries and set the agenda for her, representing what Lukes (2005) would refer to as the second and third faces of power.

John and Jackie's mother, Mary, was in the top stream at school but left at the age of 15 to work. In these early years of work Mary completed some secretarial training. Since then her experiences of education or training had been limited. Mary had no aspirations to continue her education, and had spent a large part of her working life as a caretaker in a community centre, a job that she enjoyed for its variety and flexibility. Raising her children had been her priority and she continued actively to support them as adults. Mary was keen to stress that she provided unconditional support for her children in whatever decisions they made, but tried to instil a strong work ethic, one that is replicated in both John and Jackie's accounts:

> But I've tried to encourage them to . . . do what, you know what they want in that sense and they've always worked. I've always sort of tried to instil in them that you know you only get where you get by doing it yourself if you know what I mean?
>
> *(Mary, John's mother)*

Educational concerns were very much framed by the needs of family members rather than her own needs. There was a strong element of unconditional love and care that constitutes the micro-level of bonding capital (Halpern 2005: 19–22). Approaches to widening participation tend to focus on enabling the individual to work through rationally what is in their own best interests, yet what emerges from these case studies is that people often act in the interests of others, especially their loved ones. This is particularly evident with Mary, but is also evident with George and John, both of whom put family life first, over and above work or any work-related learning. They reflect an instrumental perspective towards work as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. Both men had sacrificed potential career opportunities such as promotion and transfer to preserve their quality of family life. Amongst this working-class network, then, there is a very strong ethos of being

independent, working hard and providing material and emotional support for family members. This overrides any aspirations towards self-advancement in the workplace or educational aspirations. Lukes' revised account of power emphasized that power is a capacity that may not necessarily be applied in terms of self-interest alone (Lukes 2005: 12), but exercised to serve the interests of others. The case studies provide many examples of people prioritizing the interests of others over their own, although examples that provide a critique of rational action or economic approaches are based on the assumption that people seek to exercise power in order to maximize their own self-interest. The trade union examples in the Steers network to which we now turn provide further evidence of such apparent altruism.

The Steers network

The Steers network (see Figure 7.2) had a strong learning ethos. Learning was highly valued and conferred prestige. There existed a cultural predisposition to learning that supported Lukes' (2005) third face of power and clearly placed informal learning high on the agenda for individuals' life decisions. Learning was a capacity that was exercised and respected, though this appetite for learning should not be confused with a desire to participate in formal education; it was a predisposition to *learn*, rather than enthusiasm for formal and institution-based education. For many members of the network who were lifelong learners, there was a certain disdain for formal education, even where opportunities to participate arose.

This network is centred on John Steers, a full-time elected trade union officer who worked in a traditional, unionized, male-dominated heavy industry. John had a working-class background and was clearly passionate about both formal and informal learning. At his secondary modern school, John did so well that he was given a chance to transfer to grammar school at the age of 13–14. This change of
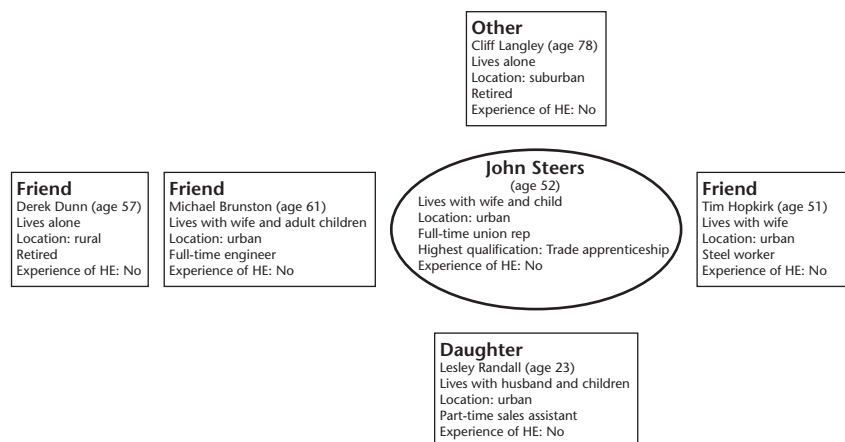

Other
Cliff Langley (age 78)
Lives alone
Location: suburban
Retired
Experience of HE: No

Friend
Derek Dunn (age 57)
Lives alone
Location: rural
Retired
Experience of HE: No

Friend
Michael Brunston (age 61)
Lives with wife and adult children
Location: urban
Full-time engineer
Experience of HE: No

John Steers
(age 52)
Lives with wife and child
Location: urban
Full-time union rep
Highest qualification: Trade apprenticeship
Experience of HE: No

Friend
Tim Hopkirk (age 51)
Lives with wife
Location: urban
Steel worker
Experience of HE: No

Daughter
Lesley Randall (age 23)
Lives with husband and children
Location: urban
Part-time sales assistant
Experience of HE: No

FIGURE 7.2 John Steers network

school disrupted his education, as he did not thrive in this new school. He spoke of struggling with nerves related to any high stakes examinations. In retrospect, it seems odd to imagine he could simply adjust to and catch up with a new grammar school curriculum, although it is clear that at the time those around him believed it to be in his best interests. Unusually, this poor experience of schooling did not dampen John's enthusiasm for learning:

> I don't think there's a day goes by when you don't learn something if you are a person that's curious . . .

> Well I think all learning, I think all the learning that a person is involved in, no matter what it be in. I enjoy reading. So therefore information that I learn when I am reading can be adapted to the work scenario . . . so I think you couldn't compartmentalise where you would put the learning, I think the learning is, I think the most, how can I put it, I think the most relevant term I've heard in recent years is lifelong learning.

> *(John)*

John had engaged in a wide range of both formal and informal learning throughout his life and was self-taught across a range of areas. This was also a feature of those around him, including his work colleagues. It was a predisposition that fitted well with his union role, where he met various technical and legal problems that he had to research himself. His union actively supported learning and training and regularly enabled him to attend courses. Being self-taught would appear to be a feature of this working environment and was something that carried status within his network. It reflected a Labour ethos in many traditional industries, epitomized in the achievements of people like Aneurin Bevan (Foot 1997). Many of the people interviewed across the networks had enormously rich hinterlands of learning, much of which was self-taught and often creative. Examples included designing, pro-ducing, building and repairing, tasks that demand highly specialized skills beyond those they needed in the workplace. This lifelong learning was often heavily gendered, with technology, classic cars, house building and dressmaking following predictable demarcations. Informal learning in particular was often seen as an end in itself, not necessarily as part of a progression pathway to higher awards, and John's distinction between formal and informal learning built on this:

> And it's also yeah I do, you know I think anybody would learn from doing a hobby as such, say like photography or you know . . .

> But you know, hobbies. But I always see formal education as being something of a means to an end you know or as a tool.

> *(John)*

John was talking here of tools for work, information he could use to support negotiations in the workplace or skills that could help him resolve a problem and

get a job done. This included everything from maths and English to law, technical engineering knowledge and craft skills. John had a strong personality with lots of ideas, opinions and confidence. He was comfortable solving problems and navigating through potential conflicts. His standing and respect from his colleagues, who had an opportunity to vote him out of office every year, was built upon his detailed knowledge and learning and his ability to apply this to new situations and solve problems with industrial disputes.

As an apprentice who worked in a manual trade, John appeared more com-fortable with the academic elements of his training:

> But also, while I wasn't the best apprentice but a few people did mention that I did show some potential whilst I was an apprentice with them. I always got through my City and Guilds. Always passed with credits and distinctions and that's when they based it on books.
>
> *(John)*

Through his own enthusiasm for learning and the opportunities he had through union-sponsored learning, John's boundaries were expanded and, with this, his capability (Sen 1999). He was positively predisposed towards engaging in HE and was very likely to participate in the future. He recognized that qualification pathways are opening up opportunities and expanding his boundaries.

John had built up a wide range of skills and qualifications throughout his working life. His workplace culture valued learning, and the organization of his working week had the consequence of creating space for outside interests and projects. His informal learning and work experience gave him the confidence to participate. In this sense the working culture supported the extension of his boundaries of possi-bilities. The union helped set the agenda, together with the existence of qualification pathways with clear progression routes. For both John Steers and John Hanley, work-related learning, within the context of a qualifications framework with clear progression pathways, opened up opportunities and increased their capability to participate in HE. However, this had not (yet) resulted in actual participation for these individuals. In John Steers' network, 'non-participation' reflected neither absence of capability nor lack of enthusiasm for learning.

Many of John Steers' values and orientations were also evident in the life experiences of Cliff, John's father-in-law. Cliff, aged 78, also had a poor experience of schooling, having to change schools after his home was bombed in World War Two. Cliff talked of bombs being dropped and swinging in the trees, and his sister being injured by flying glass; these were considerable distractions from schooling. War provides a most dramatic example of how Mills' (1959) public issues and private troubles can impact on the experiences of particular generations. Cliff also provides a powerful illustration of how generational experience is shaped by the particulars of time and place that alter the life course, a theme explored in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4. For Cliff, school was hard. All the teachers had canes and they used them, especially on him, yet he felt he was quite good at school, especially at

maths. The usual path for people like Cliff was to leave school at 14. University was not an option: you 'needed money to be doing that'. Cliff began an apprenticeship as an electrician and was then called up for National Service.

His immediate post-school education was fairly intense until he completed his apprenticeship. It included night classes, intensive theory lessons and examinations, including practical tests of competence. These training opportunities did not go beyond the specific needs of his trade apprenticeship. There was no notion of qualifications pathways and progression. Once a trade was gained, the learning tended to be on the job. In terms of educational participation for Cliff, his agenda was set and framed by a clear set of cultural expectations and by public policy that did not promote educational progression beyond apprenticeship.

Cliff was clearly a powerful figure at work as union convener and was proud of the fact that he got on well both with the 'lads' on the shop floor and with management. He had been a lifelong learner, changing trades with different jobs, learning a wide range of union-related skills, representing people in court and at tribunals, negotiating with managers, representing different occupations and doing union case work. He was self-taught from documents and books he acquired in his union role. In Cliff's day, the trade union did not really engage in training:

> No, no, no, they didn't really, no they didn't really, no you got lots of docu-ments and what have you, but er I picked it up quite well . . . well you used to pick up lots of books . . . No I didn't get any training at all, you just pick it up yourself.
>
> *(Cliff, John's father-in-law)*

Cliff gave many examples where he had worked hard on his research to support and further the interests of others, for example preparing for industrial tribunals. He was proud of the respect he had from both the shop floor and the management. He was clearly engaged in high levels of learning and negotiation, but not within a formal culture of education and training. Archer (2007) notes that working for the benefit of others is not something that is readily accounted for by theories of rational action. This is also acknowledged in Lukes' (2005) revised account of power. It had been a primary motivating factor for both John Steers and Cliff and had driven their engagement with lifelong learning, though for neither of these men had this included HE. Cliff's boundaries of possibilities had not included reference to formal education beyond his apprenticeship. It had not been an aspiration for his employer, his union or himself. This very much reflects the experience of education for men like him across his generation. However, as his biography demonstrates, and in common with his son-in-law, John, he had a rich and lifelong engagement with informal learning.

There were a number of people in the Steers network who were clearly very talented. They had taken the best skilled manual jobs available and represented the labour aristocracy of their time. There was no expectation or aspiration to engage in HE; it simply was not perceived as being for people like them. This applied

equally to John's generation, a difference perhaps being that, for John, HE had recently moved onto his agenda. For John and some of his peers there was also an explicit recognition that, if they had been part of more recent cohorts of school leavers, they would have been destined for university rather than the sought-after skilled manual apprenticeships provided by traditional industries in the local area.

John's work colleague, Tim, had attended a secondary modern school where there had been clear expectations that boys would end up doing manual jobs in local industries such as the shipyard. As with others in this network, Tim laid emphasis on learning new things and keeping his brain active. The opportunity to provide examples of things people had produced or taught themselves was highly valued in this network; it was very much learning associated with creativity and products of learning. The agenda for learning was generally self-directed and connected with core interests.

During the interview there was plenty of evidence of self-taught skills and learning, extending to Tim's smallholding, animal husbandry, renovation of cars and work on his house. Tim demonstrated a preference for working with his hands, being practical and working things out in his head. His parallel interest in creative writing emerged right at the end of the interview. This was clearly important to him and was highly valued in his family. Tim walked on local hills where he mulled things over in his head, and often wrote these thoughts down as stories, narratives or poems. These had been kept in folders full of loose paper. He was proud that he could recite them all from memory, which he regularly did on special family occasions.

His daughter studied drama at university and was active in a poetry society. She was convinced that her dad's work was good and that it should be published, and they were currently trying to organize all the papers in some kind of folio for presentation purposes. The influence of the daughter on the father illustrates how cultures shift over time and demonstrates the impact younger generations can have on older generations; in this case his daughter was extending Tim's boundaries of possibilities and potentially enhancing his capability and power to participate in formal education. Yet Tim was content with all his life decisions and career. He had no desire to participate in formal education or training, taking pride in the fact that he was self-taught and could solve most problems himself. He was proud of family members who had been to university, but had absolutely no aspiration to go himself. Indeed, he was quite resistant to the idea and keen to assert the value of the work and skills of those around him. Tim clearly had the capacity to participate in HE, as so many in his network and family already had done. However, it was not seen as within his boundary of possibilities:

> Higher education to me means . . . going to evening classes. And sitting in another classroom. Probably using a computer. Which is something I've avoided all these years. And I will continue to avoid. Not interested.
>
> *(Tim, John's colleague)*

The shipyard operated on the basis of four long working days that enabled employees to take Fridays off and have a long weekend. The working ethos of John

and his work colleagues flowed into the weekend, when they actively engaged in a range of projects, many of which involved learning and problem solving. These projects were shared with each other, and the products of these and skills associated with their endeavours were respected by peers and across the network. It was a small network with a strong learning ethos and high levels of bonding capital that supported these extra-curricular activities.

Many of the projects were quite individualized, with people working alone and only seeking advice when they needed to. In this sense it reflected a dimension of work in the shipyard where steel workers work fairly independently of each other on jobs of heroic proportions. Their skills and the products of their work were highly respected in the yard.

The Steers network was a lifelong learning network actively engaged in a diverse range of informal learning. The network had little experience of, or interest in, HE. There was some evidence that the experience of the younger generation was beginning to influence the parents' generation. This, together with the education agenda that had percolated through as work-related learning, had extended the boundaries of what network members regard as possible. The role of male working-class culture and trade union activity had been central in promoting lifelong learning across generations in ways that predate recent government agendas for lifelong learning and widening of participation. As with the Hanley network, formal education was very much viewed in a utilitarian way, as a means to an end, and there was evidence of some resistance to formal education that sat alongside a very rich and diverse informal engagement with lifelong learning.

Analysis and conclusions

As outlined in Chapter 3, a life course approach needs to acknowledge the power and influence of the specifics of time and place (Giele and Elder 1998). The networks described in this chapter reveal a dynamic relationship between individuals and changing circumstances around private concerns and public issues, including government agendas regarding educational participation. The interviews revealed a range of responses to changing circumstances including scepticism and resistance for some, engagement and openness for others. There was also evidence that people reviewed their perspectives in the light of new experiences, including the experiences of others. The HE experience of younger participants had a particularly powerful impact on altering the perception of older generations, and Heath *et al.* (2010) have explored this in relation to four other networks involved in our research. We need to theorize such relationships in a way that acknowledges the dynamic and changing situation, rather than providing an account of socio-cultural influences as something static: or, as Archer (2000: 273–6) terms it, we need to theorize for 'morphogenesis' rather than 'morphostatis'. In both of these networks we have traditional working-class cultures evolving and changing in response to personal experiences and, indirectly, to policy interventions that encourage lifelong

and work-related learning. There were changing dynamics in these networks and influences flowing both ways across generations.

The above examples demonstrate how variations in predisposition, self-identity, resources, social capital and life chances produce different levels of capability to participate or to elect not to participate. There are parallels here with the account of the Family Learning Centre in Chapter 5, where the boundaries of the possible were shaped by policy interventions that provide institutional resources for building capacity. That capability is further developed where it links to the social capital and interpersonal relations already existing within a community.

Participation in HE cannot simply be explained by theories of rational choice. There are differential levels of capability and inclination to participate. The evidence from our research suggests that people do not make their decisions solely in a perfect market of possibilities and on the basis of individualized judgements about personal economic gain; they are also keenly aware of how their decisions impact on others. This concern for others in their networks is a strong theme in the above accounts. People are constantly aware of how their actions impact on others and frequently put the needs of others before themselves. Participation, therefore, is not simply an issue of socio-economic priorities, but has an ethical dimension, one that chimes with the Kantian ethic celebrated by Bauman (1993) of putting others before oneself. Policies and interventions therefore need to take account of such ethical influences on capability and decision-making.

The above examples resonate with Lukes' (2005) work on power, which provides a useful metaphor for considering the boundaries of possibilities in relation to HE participation. Lukes' earlier work (1974) defined power more in terms of domination of one person or group over another. In his more recent work he acknowledges that this conceptualization is essentially contested (Lukes 2005: 110–24). After 30 years of commentary, Lukes accepts that his original conceptualization of power (Lukes 1974) was inadequate for, like Mills (1959), he confused the exercise of power and the impact of a decision or action with power as a capacity. Lukes now argues, 'Power is a capacity not the exercise of that capacity (it may never be and never need to be exercised); and you can be powerful by satisfying and advancing others' interests' (Lukes 2005: 12). The issue of power as a capacity is significant in discussions of HE participation. There is a need to understand the extent to which individuals see themselves as having the capacity to participate, whether participation is perceived as being materially or culturally within a person's bounds of possibility. Whether or not individuals elect to exercise that capacity and to participate is a different issue. In this respect Lukes' more recent arguments share similarities with Sen's (1999) conceptualization of capability.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, Lukes acknowledges three faces of power. The first concerns the decisions made: in participation terms this would simply be reflected by the number of people who participate. The second face of power concerns agenda setting; how it is that some options appear on the agenda as a possible project under consideration. This approach considers the decision-making process, as well as the non-decision-making process. When a government or

employer will only fund certain type of programmes, vocational for instance, it sets an agenda in an obvious and observable way. The analysis presented here has identi-fied the programmes of study which individuals have on their agenda as possible projects. These cover a much more limited range than the entire spectrum of possibilities, but still represent clear, observable considerations. It is useful to consider how such programmes arrive as projects on the individuals' agenda. More subtle forms of agenda setting within a social network of friends and family can influence how particular projects are selected as possibilities. For example, occupational traditions within a family can work both ways, whereby children follow or actively avoid the pathways of their parents. For Lukes, there is also a third dimension to power, influenced by the social and cultural situation of the person. This third dimension is represented here as that which is considered within the 'bounds of the possible' (in terms of educational courses, levels and pathways). This, for Lukes, presents power as 'a dispositional concept, comprising a conjunction of conditional or hypothetical statements specifying what would occur under a range of circum-stances if and when power is exercised' (Lukes 2005: 63). Here, dispositions are often bounded by structural and cultural factors that limit what people regard as possible. The third dimension is, for Lukes, focused on 'particular domains of experience and is never, except in fictional dystopias, more than partially effective' (Lukes 2005: 150). While this third dimension provides boundaries to what people consider possible, it is framed by experience and reflexivity. These boundaries are neither fixed nor deterministic, and people revise their positions and make reflexive judgements. Lukes quotes Susan Bordo to illustrate this point:

> People know the routes to success in this culture – they are advertised widely enough – and they are not dopes to pursue them. Often, given the sexism, racism, and narcissism of the culture, their personal happiness and economic security may depend on it.
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> *(Bordo, 1993: 30, quoted in Lukes 2005: 150–1)*

Predispositions and capabilities are not predetermined, but are shaped by con-text, and influenced by factors such as class, gender and generation, as well as the education and training environment that the person perceives as being available to them. In terms of participation this third dimension represents the boundaries of a person's thinking about participation. As the individual gains more direct or indirect experience of education and training, these boundaries may shift and new possi-bilities move into the frame of reference. Such experience may take the form of participation in tertiary level education or 'grapevine' knowledge (Ball and Vincent 1998) about educational opportunities. The boundaries can also be influenced by changes and activities in the field of education and training policy, such as lifelong learning and widening participation initiatives. The cases above have provided examples of ways in which the boundaries of possibilities were extended; these included via employer-sponsored training, trade union education, further education and the experience of younger generations in HE feeding back to older siblings,

parents and friends. These case studies illustrate how capability is framed by socio-cultural factors including a person's social network. They also demonstrate how different forms of agency and decision-making influence the agendas, or projects, with which people are engaged.

A consideration of the 'bounds of the possible' does appear to shed some light on the changing patterns of participation. These shifting boundaries are like a flexible membrane, able to expand and contract in different directions as people learn from their own life experience and that of those around them. The boundaries are influenced by structural elements and culture; they set the frame from within which people select their projects reflexively and in active communication with others. From these projects emerge practice, the individual agency of what people actually do in their education and training experiences. This social and situated educational experience in turn shapes new possibilities that frame emergent reflexive projects.

The case study examples also reveal very diverse predispositions towards partici-pation. 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 may extend a person's boundary of the possible and thereby their capacity to participate. The interviews demonstrate that many people elect not to exercise that capacity; they resist participation in formal education. Yet many of our participants have rich learning biographies and have engaged in a wide range of informal educational activity throughout their lives. Rather than simply focus 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 or capability), and how this capability in turn influences people's concerns and the life projects they consider. Participation considered as a capability, rather than an outcome, helps us to improve our under-standing of how participation in HE is embedded in social practice.