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**Widening Participation - Biographies Of Student Transitions To Higher Education**

by

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# ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF SOCIAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES

Education

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Education

## WIDENING PARTICIPATION - BIOGRAPHIES OF STUDENT TRANSITIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Lynsey Plockyn

This study has explored the lived experiences of students designated as widening participation who make the decision to enter higher education. The aim of the study was to discover what influenced their choice about going to university. It has employed the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's (1986) notions of capital and Archer's (2003; 2012) ideas on structure and agency as well as reflexivity. The study also analyses the impact and rhetoric of government widening participation initiatives. In doing so it has considered the influences on the students' choices and decision making including family and social networks, previous educational career path and particular turning points, or epiphanies in their lives. What is evident from the life stories is that even though each person entered university under the umbrella term of widening participation, their narratives were highly individual and nuanced. So differences, rather than simply similarities of each person's story emerge from this study.

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# DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

Lynsey Plockyn

I, .....[please print name]

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

[title of thesis]

Widening Participation - Biographies of Student Transitions to Higher Education

.....

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
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3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
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6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission:

Signed:.....

Date:.....Friday 8 May 2015.....

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Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my participants for sharing their stories.

# Definitions and Abbreviations

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

A Levels - Advanced General Certificate of Education. (Graded from A*, A to E with U being an "unclassified" fail grade).

AS Level - Advanced Subsidiary (a qualification in its own right and the first fifty per cent of A Level study).

A2 - Advanced Level Part 2 (not a qualification but the second fifty per cent of A Level study).

BTEC – British Technical Education Council.

DfEE – Department for Education and Employment 1995-2001.

DfES - Department for Education and Skills 2001-2007.

DfE – Department for Education 1992-1995.

FE – Further Education.

FEFC - Further Education Funding Council.

GCE – General Certificate of Education.

GNVQ – General National Vocational Qualification.

HE - Higher Education.

HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England.

HEI – Higher Education Institution.

HESA – Higher Education Statistics Agency.

ICOF - Independent Commission on Fees.

NAO - National Audit Office.

NCIHE - National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education.

NCVQ – National Council for Vocational Qualifications.

NVQ – National Vocational Qualification.

## Definitions and Abbreviations (continued…)

OFFA – Office for Fair Access.

POLAR CLASSIFICATION – Participation of Local Areas a series of maps showing the participation of young people in higher education (HE) for geographical areas ranging from regions to wards.

POST-1992 – the universities that were formally known as polytechnics and colleges of higher education prior to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act.

PRE-1992 – All other institutions classified as “universities” in the HE sector that are not Russell Group or post-1992.

RUSSELL GROUP – the leading 24 research intensive universities in the United Kingdom.

SMCPC - Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission.

STEM subjects – Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths.

UCAS – Universities and Colleges Admissions Service UK – United Kingdom.

UCU - University and College Union.

# Chapter 1:

## 1.1 Introduction

Personal stories are important because they reflect the way in which a changing society is experienced and reflected in individual lives. This is not a simple transmission; people understand and react to their circumstances in very different ways based on a number of influencing and diverse factors such as family background, class and prior experience (Bertaux, 1981; Josselson and Lieblich, 1999; Plummer, 1983; Roberts, 2002; Skeggs, 2004). Understanding the complexity of the relationships, tensions and interplay between these factors is possible when exploring the formation of individual, active and imaginative identity in the context of these constraining and shaping structural influences. The ways in which, for example, family, school and culture contribute to individual subjectivity reveals much of the general in the particular. So in studying lives we will also discover a considerable amount about society (Erben, 1998).

Examining the lived experiences of the young men in this study who are designated as widening participation therefore requires a consideration of aspects of class, agency and structure as they, for example, affect their individual lives and educational identity. However some of the meta-theories related to the subject of class, agency and structure have been critiqued for their lack of empirical work and analysis (Atkinson, 2010). Whilst (Brockmann, 2012) notes that many studies have tended to neglect the rich biographical experiences of young people, and hence the complex nature of identity construction at moments of transition, such as entering higher education.

In the United Kingdom there have been a number of changes to the higher education sector as a result of policy shifts by successive governments. This has resulted in the restructuring of the tertiary education system due to the retreat from neoliberal ideology of the 1980s, to an increasing marketisation of higher education (Torres, 2002). Issues of access and participation have been at the forefront of government ideology for a similar period of time (Burke, 2012). Since 2000, higher education policy has been characterised by its widespread efforts to both increase and widen participation. The level of government intervention however has not necessarily had the desired effect (Fuller et al., 2011). The degree of complexity in educational decision making with respect to accessing

higher education, that includes an exploration of individual life stories, has not been fully explored (Bathmaker, 2010; Burke, 2012; Fuller et al., 2011).

## 1.2 Aims and purpose of the study

This study explores the lived experiences of students designated as widening participation who make the decision to enter higher education with the aim of discovering what influences their choice about going to university. In doing so the study also aims to gain a better understanding of the decision making processes about entering higher education more generally of this frequently homogenised group.

My interest in finding out how students who have been classified as widening participation (based on the POLAR classification) (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2015) make the transition to university is both personal and professional. Interest in researching the lives of individuals who are designated as under-represented in higher education arose from my own experience as a working class child being the first in my family to go to university. More latterly my observations and practice as an academic at the post-1992 university, where I also studied (as both a young undergraduate and mature student) have developed my research and pedagogic interest in widening participation.

This study illustrates how five students designated as widening participation have negotiated and made meaning of the structural and agentic influences on their lives in determining their decision to go to university. Therefore an essential aspect of this study was to investigate these students' life stories by examining their earlier family, cultural and educational experiences, with a view to discovering how these influences shaped their decision-making about higher education. In order to consider the transition process it was also important to explore the experience of these students during their first year at university. Therefore some of the complexities about higher education choices mentioned previously in this chapter are addressed through an examination of these specific narratives.

## 1.3 Structure of the thesis

Chapter Two of this study considers the policy background for widening participation strategies. Historical contextualisation of governmental attitudes to

widening participation shows a variety of approaches and discourses. These have seen different definitions of what constitutes widening participation and conflicting views about the relative success of widening participation strategies. At various times, agendas for extending participation have been linked to economic renewal, social cohesion and the levels of social capital in a society. How these agendas may have affected the individual experiences of the participants in this study is considered in the discussion of the findings.

Chapter Three analyses existing literature in order to understand the research already undertaken and the theoretical underpinnings of the study. Some of the major debates that have arisen with respect to agency, capital, class and structure are discussed (Archer, 2003; 2007; 2012; Atkinson, 2010; Bourdieu, 1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986; Dika and Singh, 2002; Skeggs, 2004). The focus of this chapter is to address some of the contentions that have been made, particularly by Giddens (1990; 1991) and Beck (1992) about the fluidity of identity formation in the post-modern era. The notion that individuals have the potential to create their own biographies is one that is juxtaposed against those theorists that consider societal constraints to be real and experienced in everyday life. Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) has developed a more nuanced view of agency that is useful in considering how certain individuals use particular reflexive adaptations to cross social boundaries or remain in their existing world.

The methodology of the study is explained in Chapter Four including how, and why, the participants were recruited and interviewed. The practical considerations of in-depth interviewing are discussed and the methodology is linked to the underlying research paradigm of interpretive biography. This includes examining the main intellectual tradition of life stories (Denzin, 1989) and the way in which this guides the ethical stance of the study. The approach taken for data analysis is discussed. It is part of the grounded theory tradition, but the work of Charmaz (2006) within this tradition is seen as the most useful approach to adopt because she emphasises that data is a co-construction between the participants and researcher and acknowledges that their analysis is one amongst a number of possible interpretations.

The findings of the interview analysis are detailed in Chapter Five. Short biographies of the participants' lives are used to detail the chronologies and key moments reflected in the interviews. Lives are only able to be discussed through narrative (Ricoeur, 1988) and so, a reconstruction of all the individual lives as discussed in the first instance, allows a context for better understanding of the

themes that emerge from the data. The vignettes of individual lives in this chapter bear no relationship to those used in some accounts of modern selfhood which are hypothetical. They are firmly grounded in a close reading of interview transcripts, but start to reveal some of the broader features of the participants' history. In Chapter Six the themes are examined using theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review to allow for an interpretation of the findings which contributes to a broader understanding of how and why non-traditional students enter higher education.

## 1.4 Summary

People construct stories that are context, time and memory dependent self-representations of their lives. In doing so they offer us important information about how people use cultural concepts to organise their social world (Erben, 1998; Plummer, 2001; Ricoeur, 1985). These self-representations are not fixed but evolve in the telling of the life story, making autobiographies a precious record of the process of identity formation (Josselson and Lieblich, 1999). This study examines the narratives of five students designated as widening participation to explore how and why they made the transition to university and how, by uncovering the interplay between structure, culture and agency in the specific, it illuminates the general.

As Plummer (2001: 242) writes "what matters to people keeps getting told in their stories of their life". Life stories are not only about what matters to participants but they have the potential to be what matters to society as well.

# Chapter 2: Widening Participation – The National & Local Context

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the policy context for widening participation. As part of this review, the historical antecedents for increasing participation will be explored as well as the government's position at the time of writing, and implications for the future. This macro-scale analysis will provide a useful context for the meso-scale of widening participation practice at the university where the students are studying and for the micro-scale of their biographies which are discussed in Chapters Five and Six.

In addition to providing the national context, the aim of this chapter will be to analyse the values and discourse shaping policy in order to provide a critical understanding of these. The relationship between the self and society has long been a focus of sociology and in the next chapter some of the relevant literature will be discussed with respect to this study. One of the key concerns of this research is the relationship between structure, class and agency in the formulation of educational experience and identity. Therefore the particular focus on class and educational outcome in policy research will be an important component of this chapter. The structures and processes of educational policy in relation to widening participation will be elaborated, with the purpose of understanding how, and why, individuals in this study made the transition to higher education at one particular institution. Tomlinson (2013) points out that the experience of education is dynamic and on-going, but takes place where individual interaction and relationship with structures and institutions are constitutive of how people make sense of the world. This is because identity formation is dependent on social and cultural contexts and rarely occurs outside this framework.

The intersection between policy and the individual can be seen in their interaction with institutions, social processes and structures. In this study what is of interest is individual understanding of entitlement to higher education, and how agency and structure may have shaped ability to access higher education for those designated as widening participation students. The higher education system has

undergone considerable change, under successive governments, particularly with respect to widening participation policy. The newer universities that were formed post 1992 have experienced significant adjustments as their remit has been focused on increasing and widening participation.

Expanded systems of higher education in the United Kingdom are generally differentiated because of the functions, institutions, programmes and populations that they serve (Brennan and Osborne, 2008). Bernstein (1999) considered that a dichotomy existed between vertical and horizontal discourses of knowledge. Horizontal discourses are competence-based, context dependent and segmented. While vertical knowledge is of a traditional subject base with coherent bodies of knowledge. Teichler (2004) has proposed a similar typology of higher education institutions as horizontal or vertical. The classification being that horizontal organisations emphasise functional differences like programme types, subjects covered, links with industry. Vertical institutions focus on reputational and prestige differences such as top-ranking and world class. Overall Teichler (2004) perceives the United Kingdom higher education sector as vertical and therefore hierarchical.

The university, at which the students in this study are undergraduates, is classed as a modern one. It gained university status post 1992 from being a former polytechnic. As such, using Teichler's (2004) definition, it is a horizontal institution where the emphasis is on accredited programmes for vocational education and employment. Traditionally many such universities have recruited students from non-traditional backgrounds and students who have been designated widening participation. A significant effect on individuals' experience of higher education and employers' perception of that experience, can depend on which university is attended, the course undertaken and qualification obtained, which may be relevant to this study. Bathmaker (2008) points to the difficulties inherent in expansion, diversification and stratification in higher education because where growth occurred through hierarchical differentiation less selective and lower-tier institutions absorbed much of the new demand for places in higher education. As a consequence there is a debate about whether the expansion should be viewed as a process of democratisation (bringing new populations into higher education) or diversion (steering new populations away from elite institutions and opportunities).

Despite years of widening participation policy there is evidence to show that some elite universities have become more, and not less, socially unrepresentative

over time. For example the *State of the Nation 2013* report (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission [SMCPC], 2013) stated that the proportion of students at some of the leading universities from state schools and from disadvantaged backgrounds is lower that it was a decade ago. Furthermore in 2010 young people living in the most advantaged areas are seven times more likely to attend leading universities compared to those living in the most disadvantaged areas (Office for Fair Access [OFFA], 2010). It is this complicated relationship between the intention behind government policy to widen access since the 1963 Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education [CHE], 1963) and during New Labour, and the outcomes of this policy that will be discussed further in this chapter.

## 2.2 Definitions of Widening Participation

Before considering the policy context it is important to explore the definition of widening participation, one that is subject to change as its exact interpretation is dependent on different approaches by different governments. The shifting picture has frequently reflected government agendas such as increasing marketisation of higher education and harnessing of widening participation to concerns about reducing youth unemployment and the centrality of universities for the production of a knowledge economy.

Given this on-going, changing relationship the definition of widening participation that will be used in this chapter, and throughout the thesis is the one that first appeared as a distinctive term and concept in political discourse in the mid-1990s. Foskett (2011: 123) has labelled this the “new widening participation”. The elements of this definition can primarily be found in *Learning Works* the so-called Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997) as a result of the committee reporting about educational access to the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The stated definition of widening participation in the Kennedy Report was firmly embedded in the notion of equity as follows:

> Widening participation means increasing access to learning and providing opportunities for success and progression to a much wider cross-section of the population than now (Kennedy, 1997: 15).

Here the aim was to promote access to education for those who were not in education or training. The review focussed on the potential for further education to widen access, but also recommended that higher education institutions open their doors to a much wider cross-section of the population. New widening

participation as a term can also be linked to the findings of the Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], 1997). This report will be discussed in more detail in section 2.5.

Agendas for change in the Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997) included seeing further education as a vital engine of economic renewal and social cohesion. The goal of social cohesion is explicitly linked to the economy as the report's authors make a connection between the nations' social well being and ability to compete globally, with the level of social capital inherent in society. The idealism which drives this agenda can be applauded; however it places a burden of expectation on education that is frankly unrealistic. This can be seen more fully when the rhetoric in the report is considered:

> Education has always been a source of social vitality and the more people we can include in the community of learning, the greater the benefits to us all. The very process involves interaction between people; it is the means by which the values and wisdom of a society are shared and transmitted across the generations. Education strengthens the ties which bind people, takes the fear out of difference and encourages tolerance. It helps people to see what makes the world tick and the ways in which they individually, and together, can make a difference. It is the likeliest means of creating a modern well-skilled workforce, reducing levels of crime, and creating participating citizens (Kennedy, 1997: 6-7).

The rationale for using the definition of widening participation in the Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997) is that it is one that was present during the Blair and Brown premierships, the timeframe within which this study's participants were at school and college.

Additionally the university at which the study took place seems to embrace a definition of widening participation that emphasises the spirit of the Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997). The access agreement in place at the start of this study discusses having a track record of recruiting at or above the benchmarked proportion of state school pupils, from social classes four to seven (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2010). The agreement also mentions recruiting young and mature entrants from low participation neighbourhoods, like the students in this study. There is an acknowledgement that students from low income families are "core business" for the university in the access agreement. These factors highlight a difference between those universities that were classed as selective (or

vertical) and those that have to recruit to meet targets for student recruitment (horizontal).

The idea that the acquisition of social capital, as mentioned in the Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997) is something that can be driven by education is something to be questioned. For example, Brennan and Osborne (2008) point to the diversity of the student population resulting in very different university experiences. From their research the authors argue that students bring to higher education both imported differences, arising from their social and educational backgrounds, and have different experiences whilst at university. Additionally external drivers such as where to live, domestic commitments, the need to take a part-time job can result in very unequal learning experiences for students. This means that for many young people life may dictate that being a student is a part-time experience that has to be fitted in alongside their busy lives. An additional form of diversity is generated by the individuality of the students themselves dictating whether or not they join student societies or are friendly with other students on the course.

Brennan and Osborne (2008) conclude that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to attend their local university, to live at home, to have a part-time job and be older than other groups of students. They are less likely to be able to spend time on a wide range of university activities beyond the immediate requirements of their course. These may be considerations that have affected students in this study.

In the sections that follow various drivers to government policy about widening participation will be considered in an historical context and commented on as they have impacted on the university where the participants in this study are undergraduates. Foskett (2011: 121) warns that a complicated relationship connects policy and practice as policy implementation is not a simple linear process with “predictable changes and impacts”. Instead the process is heuristic because political ideals are translated into policy documents which are interpreted through the practice of implementation at every stage, from “government to grassroots”.

## 2.3 Background to Widening Participation

Maringe and Fuller (2006) make an important distinction between the concept of widening participation and that of expanding participation. In fact this distinction

was one that was made in the Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997) where it was acknowledged that marketisation of education had led to competition amongst further education colleges with many performing as if they were businesses and, as a consequence, searching for students who were most likely to succeed and produce good results. In the rush to grow, the Kennedy Report (Kennedy, 1997) stated that colleges had not recruited students from a sufficiently wide cross-section of the community; this cross-section was defined as children from working class backgrounds, women and members of some ethnic minority groups. The committee saw an increasing role for further education in both the provision of life-long learning (which would inspire people to set up their own business and contribute to economic diversity) and as providers of degree pathways.

## 2.4 The Robbins Report 1963

The idea that higher education policy should have a dimension of social justice originates in the Robbins Committee Report (CHE, 1963). Foskett (2011) notes it was Robbins that set higher education on a pathway of expansion, primarily with the intention of making a substantial contribution to the British economy, but also with a view that growth in higher education would make this sector accessible to wider groups within society.

Although the Robbins Report (CHE, 1963) is often given as the cause of university expansion, Perkin (1972: 112) points out that the Robbins Report was not published until October 1963 when all key decisions about university expansion had already been undertaken, for example the report recommended that seven new universities be founded. However these were an addition to the seven already scheduled (three of which were open already). Rather the expansion was a response to the trends of growth in age cohorts, rising expectations of better qualified school leavers who had stayed in school longer and belief in expenditure upon higher education as a means of procuring national prosperity (Perkin, 1972).

Burke (2012) sees this expansion as being supported by human capital arguments (such as, for a better educated workforce) put forward by economists to legitimise the expansion of higher education. While this is one view, the reality was more complex. A key aim of this report was to raise the percentage of those qualified for higher education from about eight percent to seventeen percent by 1980. The drivers given in the report are seen as two-fold, there was an

acknowledgement that a growing number of young people wanted to go to university and that the country's growth depended on having a more educated workforce.

The formation of the new universities in the 1960s enlarged the higher education sector and this was further extended when thirty polytechnics were established from colleges of technology in the 1970s. David (2010) describes how the thirty polytechnics were created out of the system of technical colleges, largely based in metropolitan areas, whereas the new universities (i.e. Aston, Bath, Bradford, Brunel, City, Salford) were a mix of the elite colleges of advanced technology or new campus developments on green field sites (e.g. East Anglia, Kent, Sussex, Warwick and York). The policy for higher education at this time built on what David (2010) sees as a system of structured higher educational opportunities, around types of academic or technological courses. The result being socio-economic status was embedded within United Kingdom policies and practices for expanding higher education from their inception.

The government agreed to fund an expansion of up to 22,000 places in universities between 1971 and 1972. Foskett (2011) describes this as more significant in terms of widening participation because this produced a binary system. Universities were relied on to provide traditional academic programmes, while polytechnics focussed on technical and vocational higher education.

Foskett (2011) links the policy of widening participation to this change because the system was explicit in providing different pathways for students other than those from selective schools with traditional A Level passes. Although Foskett (2011: 122) qualifies it by explaining that "issues of equity and fair access were not foregrounded by the then government". However the tensions between "expectations for expansion and concerns to contain public funding came into full play in the 1970s" (Burke, 2012: 13). At the time the Government reduced overall numbers by 20,000 through decreasing the number of postgraduate places, so as to preserve the number of "politically sensitive" undergraduate spaces.

Two other factors were important in influencing the increase in the student population from the late 1980s. Firstly the principle established by the then Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker (1986-1989) that university funding would follow students. This resulted in universities enrolling more students as a way of increasing their income (Maringe and Fuller, 2006). Secondly the 1991 White Paper, Higher Education: A New Framework (DfE, 1991) proposed

the end of a binary higher education system by suggesting similar funding arrangements for the former polytechnics who elected to become new universities. One of the main drivers for this was the importance of raising both skill and education levels to sustain the United Kingdom's economic strength in an increasingly globalised world (DES, 1991). Greenbank (2006) has also argued that economic forces are the prime motivator for widening participation. Foskett (2011: 122) concurs and highlights this when he states that the removal of the binary divide was a mechanism to efficiently stimulate economic growth by marketisation of the sector, and this meant that in a competitive field "polytechnics were given the same autonomy, governance and financial arrangements as universities". They therefore had the same financial opportunity in order to expand to accommodate increased demand for places.

## 2.5 The Dearing Review 1997

As previously stated it can be argued that widening participation as a concept that is distinct from increasing or expanding participation, occurred following the Dearing Review of higher education in 1997 (Maringe and Fuller, 2006). There were earlier precedents for widening participation in education, both in the United Kingdom and Europe, and it can be seen from the discussion in earlier sections of this chapter that the aims of increasing educational opportunity has a long and enduring history and is a recurring theme. Burke (2012) for example, points to the attempts in the 1980s to increase opportunities of mature and female students, whilst Stuart (2000) notes that ideas about how to make educational opportunities more equal were linked to lifelong learning and adult education from the 1960s. As has been previously noted Foskett (2011) therefore suggests that the term new widening participation be applied following the Dearing Report and the Kennedy Report.

The Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], 1997) was published in the same year that Tony Blair came to power and put "education, education and education" on the national agenda. It was commissioned by the previous Conservative Government to provide the first comprehensive review of higher education in the United Kingdom since the Robbins Report (CHE, 1963). Following the election of the Labour Government in 1997, there was broad acceptance of many of the proposals and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) was tasked with developing, funding and monitoring many of the activities in this area.

The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) placed the expansion of higher education as a central tenet of education policy, but also argued that students should pay part of the cost. The Labour Government announced the introduction of £1000 per year tuition fees from 1998, which were to be means tested and repaid once the graduate was earning above a certain amount (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1998a).

Widening participation was addressed in the report when Lord Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) noted that despite the increase in the overall student population, there remained groups who were under-represented in higher education notably socio-economic groups three to five, people with disabilities and specific ethnic minority groups. One of the significant changes that Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) introduced was to fund expansion of higher education based on an institutional demonstration of commitment to widening participation in the recent past and for those who had a robust strategy for doing so in the future. This meant having in place a participation strategy, a mechanism for monitoring progress and review of the success of that provision by the governing body of the institution. An important tenet of the report was the recognition that many of the causes for lack of participation by certain groups lay outside higher education itself, but that higher education could contribute to improving the situation.

Detailed recommendations were therefore made in specific areas to achieve these improvements through higher education policy. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) allocated money to institutions to develop strategies for addressing low educational aspirations, raise achievement, and promote progression to higher education and encourage lifelong learning. Additional funds were allocated to institutions to support young people from families without a history of participation in higher education by developing links with schools in disadvantaged areas. The need for strategic planning was endorsed by the new Labour government and HEFCE. All higher education institutions (HEIs) were required to submit institutional widening participation statements including strategies and action plans which included periodical targets (NCIHE, 1997: 6).

Parry (2010) explained that for Dearing, the assumption was that growth in higher education opened that sector to a wider range of students. However whilst growth since the Robbins Report (CHE, 1963) was remarkable in certain sectors like the increased representation of women, and of those students with new kinds of entry level qualifications; “what had not changed significantly was the ratio of participation between social classes” (Parry, 2010: 32). The introduction of fees

following the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) led Dearden et al. (2011: 2) to conclude there was robust evidence that "for each £1,000 increase in fees there was a 3.9 percentage point decrease in university participation between 1992 and 2007".

Under three successive Labour Governments, and into the administration of Gordon Brown the attempt following the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) to break down the traditional patterns of participation reflecting socio-economic background saw widening participation emerging as a "major policy enterprise and a regular source of political controversy" (Parry, 2010: 32).

## 2.6 Post Dearing

Burke (2012: 20) has highlighted that lifelong learning featured heavily in New Labour policy following Dearing which she sees as connected with neoliberal concerns about global economic competitiveness. As a result there was a pressure for a "flexible workforce in a continually changing market faced with the impact of the knowledge society".

The Green Paper *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998b) set out the Government's concern with these issues through the articulation of a number of policies. Access to lifelong learning and expansion was expressed with a target of increasing students in further and higher education by an additional 500,000 by 2002. Proposals to facilitate this included increasing the number of young people studying beyond 16, with the help of government aid, and simplifying the post-compulsory qualification system with the aim of giving equal value to both academic and vocational learning.

Maringe and Fuller (2006: 12) point to another key influence on the widening participation strategy at this time; when Brian Ramsden, the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) argued that the definition of participation should go beyond that of simply enrolling on a course. His approach was to understand the total participation of minority groups in higher education by studying "their achievements, their outcomes and their involvement in the higher education experience as a whole" (Ramsden, 1997: 9).

This led the way to the development of HEFCE's Student Life Cycle model where widening participation is addressed before, during and after higher education and not just in relation to pre-entry or admission requirements. These key stages

were identified as "aspiration raising, pre-entry activities, admission, first term or semester, moving through the course, and employment" (HEFCE, 2001: 2).

There were a number of projects funded by HEFCE, post Dearing in order to help higher education institutions develop their widening participation activity. This included the *Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge* introduced in September 2001. The Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced funding for the initiative of an extra £150 million (over three years) to be spent on improving access to higher education for those who had the necessary qualifications, but may have lacked aspiration. The Aimhigher Partnerships for Progression Scheme (introduced in 2003) was set up to improve and build on the regional and local pattern of relationships between further and higher education institutions (Burke, 2012). Both initiatives were integrated in 2004 but funding was discontinued by the Coalition Government in 2011.

Aim Higher has been seen as an important part of New Labour's initiatives to tackle widening participation. In an evaluation of its impact Doyle and Griffin (2012) reflect that the rationale for widening participation has been diverse and reflective of differing ideological positions. Some of these approaches have been discussed in previous sections. This has created a degree of confusion in evaluating widening participation as a policy intervention. The method Doyle and Griffin (2012) used was to draw together the common themes and perspectives identified in the analysis of a body of research produced by Aimhigher, and in Aimhigher related reports and research papers. The evidence showed the difficulty of evaluating impact nationally across a diverse terrain. Over the period of Aimhigher's existence participation and progression increased but the difficulty lies as Doyle and Griffin (2012) report, in proving that Aimhigher contributed to those developments. Doyle and Griffin (2012) highlight the multiple interventions at local level that resulted in a blurring of participation and recruitment imperatives.

Parry (2010: 37) points to the slow rate of growth in higher education since 1997, as the reason for the second evolution of national policy for widening participation. He describes how in an effort to stimulate demand the government announced an ambitious target for participation in higher education and launched a new short cycle undergraduate qualification, the Foundation Degree. The Foundation Degree was launched by David Blunkett (2000) in his *Modernising Higher Education – facing the global challenge speech*. Underpinning the argument were the twin drivers of widening participation for social inclusion, and

increasing participation for economic competitiveness (Wagner, 2004). However as has been previously outlined these rationales had already been cited in earlier initiatives by successive governments.

## 2.7 The Future of Higher Education 2003, and beyond

The White Paper, The Future of Higher Education (DfES, 2003a) set out the government's plans for reform and investment in universities and colleges. The key change was that universities were allowed to charge variable tuition fees (up to a maximum level) for full time undergraduate courses. To attempt and try to make sure that the new fee regime did not have a detrimental effect on widening participation, an access regulator had to approve access agreements before any institution could charge higher variable fees. These agreements set out the milestones regarding how institutions would safeguard and promote fair access; in particular for low income groups, through bursary, other financial support and other outreach work (Parry, 2010).

In November 2009 Lord Browne was appointed to review the top-up fee system. The Browne Review of higher education funding was published in March 2010. Parry (2010) describes how prior to the Browne Review the (perceived) lack of progress with respect to widening participation coincided with the continued application of existing strategies and little real innovation in policy. A key conclusion from the report was that top-up fees have not made higher education any less reliant on public funds. Also although there had been some progress in widening participation, over the past five years this had been less marked at the most selective universities.

There is a paradox here in that widening participation has opened up previously limited opportunities for students like those in this study, whilst replicating a stratified system of education where degrees as currency from institutions are differentially perceived in the employment market (Goodlad and Thompson, 2007). Furthermore students are expected to incur a large debt in order acquire such degrees. So it can be argued that attempts to widen access have had very little impact other than to reinforce the existing status quo.

Foskett (2011: 125) writes that the combination of a lack of understanding of which new approaches might enhance impact combined with wider financial pressures:

> ... meant that not only has new investment in widening participation not materialised, but that retrenchment on existing funding is a likely policy outcome.

Arguably as Burke (2012) says this could be the end of the widening participation agenda as the government makes cuts to public spending. Burke (2012) also points out that whilst government rhetoric argues for a commitment to widening participation, overall £940 million has been cut across teaching, research and buildings for the academic year 2011-12. The impact of this is most likely to be felt by those universities who recruit the highest number of students from working class backgrounds (UCU, 2010).

## 2.8 Widening Participation at Institutional Level

The university at which this study was conducted has been part of the higher education landscape for a number of years having been founded as a school for science and the arts and became a Polytechnic during the expansion of the 1960s. Following the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, the polytechnic was granted university status. The national policy for widening participation, which has been discussed in previous sections, has influenced the context and implementation of widening participation strategies at institutional level. In arguing for a nuanced view of the relationship between policy and practice, Greenback (2006) discusses how analysis of institutional responses to widening participation needs to offer a complex explanatory framework. This framework should take into account the economic forces and political factors that have been previously been outlined in this chapter and the mediating influence of organisational culture.

The students that participated in this research started their studies in September 2011, when the fee cap at their particular institution was £3290 per annum. They might be considered as being subject to the effects of some years of governmental widening participation policy. The personal impact of these structural factors and their first perceptions of the university at which they study will be analysed in Chapters Five and Six. This section discusses the approach taken at institutional level with respect to the widening participation agenda.

In a study of widening participation policy and practice Burke (2012) found that new professional identities emerged at universities around the expanding widening participation market. Although Burke (2012: 153) also points to the

dearth of data to understand the composition and number of people working in this area, in her research she found that widening participation practitioners tended to work on the periphery of universities in "separate centres and outside academic faculties and departments". In contrast those who are responsible for widening participation at the university in this study are part of a central marketing function (therefore linking widening participation to a recruitment role) and have non-academic posts. They run an outreach programme with local schools as part of the universities commitment to meet their access agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).

Burke (2012) argues that complex power relationships exist at universities which have the potential for widening participation professionals to shape strategic direction and allocate resources. This could result in a mismatch between how widening participation is related to academic discourse, impacting on student identity at the individual level. This is because the work of such professionals is outside the main work of academic staff, therefore profoundly limiting the impact of widening participation policies and practices.

One approach of the institution in this study to recruiting more students from diverse backgrounds has been to develop additional centralised support helping with generic academic study skills. Although well intentioned this further divorces the awareness about and responsibility for widening participation students away from academic staff and could minimise the ability to foster and develop student centric pedagogic practice. For example if the discourse about widening participation is considered at the university in question, the 2012 wording of the access agreement reflects the commitment to widening participation and the use of contextual data for applicants with strong staff support and understanding for this approach. In actuality the contextual data used to recruit participants for this study was supplied by the local admissions team and is not usually available to academics. This is not to imply that academic staff would not be supportive of widening participation, but rather to point out that what is lacking is awareness, at the school and individual, level of the values and practices of widening participation policy, and of the number of students recruited and designated widening participation.

Greenbank (2006) also conducted a study into the factors that influenced institutional implementation of widening participation policy and found that the relationship is not a straightforward one. He analysed the documents about widening participation produced by sixteen higher education institutions and

then conducted interviews with key policy makers in three of these institutions. One of his conclusions was that linking the nature of policy to the old versus the new university divide is too reductionist. In his study Greenbank (2006) comments that one of the difficulties of implementing widening participation policy at the institutional level was a reactive approach adopted by institutions as they attempted to second guess government priorities or hedge their bets by pursuing a number of policies in different areas rather than adopting strategies compatible with their underlying values with respect to widening participation.

Some of the responses adopted at the institution under discussion have been outlined above and the potential for a mismatch between the discourse of raising aspiration and the institutional academic culture in this study has been highlighted. To further understand the way in which a different approach could be undertaken it would be helpful to consider two of the cases cited in Burke's study (2012).

Burke (2012) considered the implementation of widening participation policy at seven different universities. Although most approached widening participation through outreach activities two institutions (one being a Russell Group member) used contextual data to more fully build individual educational profiles of students who had been made an offer. This may go some way to helping student retention as those universities which have had the most success at widening participation recruitment also had the highest drop-out rates (National Audit Office [NAO], 2007). For Burke (2012) though, the difference in how widening participation is conceptualised, structured and undertaken across different English institutions reflects the stratified system of higher education itself. This system highlights issues of inequity in relation to place and the different provision, resources and opportunities available to students.

## 2.9 Conclusion

To contextualise the expansion of higher education it is useful to consider that in 1960 there were only 200,000 full-time students (DfES, 2003b) with very few studying part-time. This rose to a high of 426,208 in 2011 (before the introduction of increased tuition fees). When tuition fees of up to £9000 were introduced in 2012, the university application numbers dropped by nearly nine per cent to 384,170 (Independent Commission on Fees [ICOF], 2012). This fall in numbers largely comprised mature and part-time students.

It has been argued in this chapter that the diversity of students in higher education cannot be taken as an indicator of greater equality within the system, and attention is drawn to the ways in which differing expectations and interpretations of widening participation have resulted in a disjointed approach at both the national and the local level. Bolton (2010) points out that over the latter part of the 20th century there was very little change in the proportion of university students from lower social classes, even the rapid expansion in the 1990s had very little impact on inclusivity. From 2005 there is evidence that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have increased participation in higher education, but that the gaps in participation remain very large and the rate of change is slow.

The stratified higher education system has resulted in notions of diversity where it can be argued, widening participation students are being offered access to a lesser or diluted version of higher education with new degree subjects and work-based learning foregrounded at those institutions that are demarcated as locally based or teaching focussed institutions (Archer, 2007). Russell Group universities remain research-based and elite institutions resulting in less privileged institutions affording less social, economic and cultural mobility to staff and students.

Foskett (2011: 121) believes that many of the intended outcomes of widening participation have not been achieved which leaves important questions remaining unanswered. “The nature of the policy, the policy process and the connection between policy as text, policy in action and the real world of individual decision-making has not been understood”. It is anticipated that this study will add to a fuller understanding of the micro-level of individual decision making of the widening participation students in this study who chose to go to university.

# Chapter 3: Literature Review

## 3.1 Introduction

With the advent of mass higher education there have been a variety of approaches to promote the inclusion of under-represented groups, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Burke, 2012; Fuller et al., 2011). The welcome expansion of higher education has been an on-going process. However it has not been an altogether successful enterprise, particularly with regard to its aim of social mobility and inclusion. Reay et al. (2005: vii) describe it as being "accompanied by a deepening of educational and social stratification and the emergence of new forms of inequality". As has been discussed in the previous chapter higher education rates of participation continue to vary according to socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity, despite longstanding national policy to widen participation in the United Kingdom (Gorard et al., 2006; Kahn, 2009).

This chapter will consider the theoretical understanding that has developed in research in order to interpret some of the key concepts identified in relation to widening participation and social mobility. The analysis of these ideas acts as a framework to critique both the widening participation policy approaches discussed in Chapter Two and to underpin the interpretation of the participants' biographies in Chapter Six.

A person's capacity to participate in higher education can be shaped by a variety of factors including societal structures, family influences and individual aspirations (Reay et al., 2005). The combination of, and differences between, these considerations is individually conveyed in each life story but some broader themes have been identified in the literature that discusses the changing relationship between structure, reflexivity and agency in modernity (Archer, 2003; 2007; 2012; Atkinson, 2010; Beck, 1992; Bourdieu, 1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986 ; 1991; Giddens, 1990; 1991). The relationship between society and the self is a long-standing focus of sociology which has developed from symbolic interactionism to theories of the reflexive self where there is "renewed interest in the social processes by which selves are produced and reproduced, crafted and challenged" (Coffey, 2001: 52). This has resulted in a concern with the ways in which self-identity is constructed, and in turn constructs, social life.

In this chapter these key theoretical ideas will be explored in order to contextualise and understand the dialectical relationship between agency and structure particularly as they relate to young people's transition to higher education. Raffe (2008: 278) defines a transition system in a broad way when he writes about the importance of considering a range of contextual factors like the labour market, educational systems including vocational education and "the relatively enduring features of a country's institutional and structural arrangements which shape transition processes and outcomes". There is a particular focus in this chapter on the work of Bourdieu (1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986) as his theorising about economic, cultural and social capital have been influential in understanding and conceptualising difference in educational attainment, experience and identity. Additionally theories about reflexivity as they relate to social mobility will be explored as they may relate to decisions to participate in higher education. The remainder of this chapter discusses the influence that Bourdieu has had on more contemporary educationalists involved in research into widening participation.

In order to make data interpretation meaningful it is important that the discussion includes not only explanation, but theorisation and a consideration of the economic, social, cultural and historical conditions that influence the participants' lives. The meaning that the participants have made of their lives as a result of telling their narrative is contingent on the structures that have shaped them to a greater or lesser degree (Erben, 1998; Plummer, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988; Roberts, 2002). It is the analysis of their negotiation of these structures using their agency and capital to determine their choices about higher education participation that has been at the centre of this research. Reay et al. (2005) point to this as being a largely under-researched and under-theorised area, with existing studies written from the perspective of parents and families, rather than young people themselves. Additionally many of the theories that address issues of choice, reflexivity and structural constraints can be critiqued for their lack of empirical data (Atkinson, 2010) making this study pertinent to inform the on-going debate about widening participation.

## 3.2 Theories of Individualisation and Agency

The context for widening participation policies has been that of a post-industrial, neo-liberal economy where knowledge rather than traditional skills are the main productive force. Much of the rhetoric of widening participation has reflected this

change, with economic arguments for increasing and widening participation to provide a better educated workforce (Burke, 2012). One thesis associated with changing societal and individual relationships in a global social political economy of the late twentieth century is that of individualisation. This idea is advanced in the writings of sociologists like Archer (2007), Bauman (2000), Beck (1992; 2007), and Giddens (1990). Their work will be considered in this section as a potential explanation for the role of individual agency in accounting for decision making about higher education before comparing it with the work of Bourdieu (1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986).

Before turning in more detail to theories about agency and reflexivity, it is important to understand why they have such influence and commanded far-reaching debate. The starting point for discussions of individuality arise around the perceived proliferation of choice brought about by modernity, where the shrinkage of traditional industrial occupations and the growth of the knowledge economy results in individuals becoming the authors of their reflexive biographies (Giddens, 1990). These biographies might reflect amongst other things the attitudes, identities, lifestyles and life chances in the realm of leisure and social consumption, rather than traditional occupational class divisions. Accepting this argument means that linear standardised, sequential life transitions, often measured by socio-economic indicators (like class) have altered to encompass complexities across a range of aspects like family, leisure and education (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990; 1991). Berger (1977) anticipated this when he wrote about individuation in the choice brought by modernity and the fact that biographies and identities have become design projects to be worked upon by the individual.

As a focus for the discussion about individualisation the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990; 1991) will be discussed in more detail before considering how the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Archer (2007) in particular may support a more comprehensive understanding of participants' decision-making about higher education. In firmly situating this discussion within the theoretical framework of agency, capital and habitus it is anticipated that the interplay of these factors in individual lives can be illustrated in the narratives of the young men in this study.

Atkinson (2010: 8) points out that there are semantic differences in terminology; both Beck (1992) and Bauman (2000) use the term "individualisation", whereas Giddens prefers to talk of the "reflexive project of the self" and Archer (2007) of the spread of "autonomous reflexivity". Beck (1992: 135) defines

individualisation as the sense that “each person’s biography is removed from given determination and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent on decisions”. This is because Beck (1992) considers that the overall proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing.

Beck’s (1992: 88) central tenet about individualisation is tied up with his argument that an industrial society was structured through social class while a “risk society” is individualised as people deal with risks presented by technological or other processes in their everyday life. Beck (1992: 88) writes that the change from modernity to reflexive modernity means that in a welfare state “... class biographies, which are somehow ascribed, become transformed into reflexive biographies which depend on the decisions of the actor”.

Beck (1992: 102) does however make a particular case for Britain, where he believes that class membership is still apparent and the object of conscious identification in everyday life. This is evidenced in “sharp class divisions between residential areas ... and in types of education”. When discussing education in further detail Beck (1992: 93) sees the educated person as an agent of reflexive modernisation because he or she “incorporates reflexive knowledge of the conditions and prospects of modernity”. There is little explanation in Beck’s (1992) work though about how this knowledge may be translated into action. Beck (1992: 94) sees that an individual entering higher education may expect upward mobility through education but adds that this is an illusion, as “education is little more than a protection against downward mobility”. This view is similar to that of Bourdieu (1986) about credential inflation and will be discussed further in this chapter as it relates to student expectation of higher education.

Several authors link modern society to the growth of individualised identities because of the breakdown in social class systems. The significance of agency in these authors’ work is that it becomes central to the potential for people to negotiate their way through society by creating their own reflexive projects. There are some differences in approach though, Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) for example differs from Giddens (1990; 1991) and Beck (1992) in her nuanced typology of reflexivity based on empirical work and the idea that social outcomes must be seen as interplay between structure, culture and agents. The way in which these theories impact on educational decision making is as an explanation for agency as a factor in social mobility, and the ability to access higher education.

In contrast to Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) who does not collapse structure and the individual, Giddens (1990; 1991) attempts to transcend the dualism of subject and object through the concept of structuration. He writes that "structures exist only in and through the practice of human social agents". Elliott (2009: 124) describes this as Gidden's way of accounting for the production of habitual practices as "simultaneously the force of systemic structures and the individual accomplishments of agents". The starting point of his analysis is not society as fixed and given, but rather the active flow of social life.

Giddens (1991: 5) uses the term the "reflexive project of the self" to describe what he sees as the human condition in the post-traditional order of modernity. This project consists in "the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised biographical narratives". The diversity of lifestyle choice is seen as increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily life. Decisions about paths and choices of action are notionally taken reflexively by comparison with a variety of other ways of doing things, for example young people's decision to choose higher education as opposed to working. The context for the narratives is multiple choice as filtered through what Giddens (1991: 5) describes as "abstract systems".

Similar to Beck (1992), Giddens (1991: 6) does not suppose that everyone has equal access to particular lifestyle choices as class divisions and other inequalities like gender or ethnicity can be "partly defined in terms of differential access to forms of self-actualisation and empowerment." This is because modernity "produces difference, exclusion and marginalisation." Whilst modern institutions may look as if they promise emancipation, they create mechanisms of suppression, rather than actualisation of the self.

Theories of individualisation have been critiqued for both their lack of empirical data and the theoretical incoherence of each position (Atkinson, 2007a; 2007b; 2008; 2010). Atkinson (2010) critiques individualisation as assuming that new social forces have moved individuals from collective modes of existence so that class is no longer a factor in constraining or enabling life decisions, like entering higher education. From this perspective it is assumed that traditional ways of living that may have shaped behaviour, values, views and identities in the past are no longer of influence.

However, the focus on individualisation and people's supposed ability to construct their own biographies has also been subject to critique for not taking sufficient account of constraints like socio-economic factors (Atkinson, 2010).

Overall critics of the extended reflexivity thesis believe that the approach has a weak view of structure, which fails to account for the restraints on agency (Adams, 2006). Evans (2001) has used the term “bounded agency”, to describe how boundaries or barriers circumscribe and sometimes prevent expressions of agency in a study of youth transitions in England and Germany. This may be relevant to this study as the higher education context within which the young people in this study are making choices has been previously described in Chapter Two as a stratified, two-tier system with inequality in representation of widening participation students in more elite institutions.

However for Giddens (1991) paths of action and scenarios of choice are symptomatic of the post-traditional social order but Elliott (2009: 142) for example, criticises this approach, maintaining that the attempt to transcend the dualism of subject and object “betrays a sociologically impoverished grasp of the emotional lives of people”. So it can be argued that the on-going focus on reflexivity ignores the actual position of people in society and does not take account of the complex interplay between people and their context. The way in which this interplay occurs in decision making about higher education amongst under-represented young people is fundamental to this study.

There is some acknowledgement that societal structures may influence or negate individual choice, as previously mentioned in the writings of both Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990; 1991) but Atkinson’s (2010) view must also be considered. He argues that economic, social and cultural capital would be needed to realise a fully reflexive pursuit of different lifestyles or the ability to anticipate change and determine an individual biography. These points will be discussed further with reference to Bourdieu’s (1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986) work in section 3.5.

Atkinson (2010) has critiqued reflexivity theorists about their lack of empirical data but this is misapplied when we consider the work of Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) who undertook several empirical studies. This included a longitudinal study of undergraduates, to produce a nuanced view of agency based on a typology of reflexivity in an attempt to understand social mobility. This and other modes of interpretation, such as cultural and social capital as they may relate to this study will be discussed in subsequent sections.

## 3.3 Modes of reflexivity

Archer (2012) in a wide-ranging social theory, attempts to explain both how agents negotiate their way through life choices and circumstances whilst also considering the relationship between structure and agency and the role of reflexivity in mediating between these two factors.

Archer (2007: 5) defines reflexivity as the means by which we make our way through the world. She argues that the process of reflexivity has "been unexplored, under theorised and, above all, undervalued". This is for two reasons firstly because the implicit knowledge that we need to act involves a type of day-to-day reflexivity, resulting in a vague taken for granted term. Whereas Archer's (2012) interest in this area lies in exploring reflexivity that allows larger and more complex projects, like the decision to become a student in higher education. Secondly Archer (2012) believes that reflexivity as a social process has been undervalued and under theorised, particularly by Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990; 1991).

For Archer (2007) the social world can no longer be approached through embodied knowledge, tacit routines, or traditional custom and practice alone. In this way Archer (2007) makes a similar argument to that of Giddens (1990; 1991) and Beck (1992). However whilst acknowledging that we all engage in reflexivity, Archer (2012) makes a distinction between the everyday thought processes that everyone engages in and the subjective powers of reflexivity that mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action such as the decision or not to enter higher education. This is the process of reflexivity that Archer (2012) is concerned with analysing, which will allow individuals to gain some governance over their lives through strong evaluation of their social context in the light of their concerns and adjusting those concerns in the light of their circumstances.

Like Beck (1992), Archer (2012) is conscious that structural factors can act as deterrents to certain courses of action because of their impact on the individual. When considering this Archer (2007) believes that individuals modify their own goals in terms of contextual feasibility but are more active rather than passive in this adjustment in order to meet individual projects. Archer (2012) acknowledges though that some social formations and ways of life generate more social reflexivity and agency than others. Archer's (2012) interest in examining the role of agency as a mediating factor between free will and social structures is

apparent. In this way she attempts to avoid either a structuralist or individualistic approach.

Archer (2012) identifies four forms of agential reflexivity that will be outlined in the next section before considering their possible application further in this study. These approaches are particularly relevant to this study as much of Archer's (2012) work in this area is concerned with patterns of social mobility, based on a longitudinal study of students at two universities.

## 3.4 Different types of Reflexive Adaptations

The interplay between personal subjectivity and structural factors in widening participation students is a focus of this study, so a deeper analysis of Archer's (2003; 2007; 2012) work is useful here. One of the main reasons why Archer (2007) perceives reflexivity as so vitally important is that it allows people to negotiate everyday life and the ability to determine future courses of action.

Archer's (2007: 16) view is that what reflexivity does is to mediate by activating structural and cultural powers, so there is no single and predictable outcome. This means that Archer (2007) defines her typology as tendencies and trends, rather than predictive categories. When external contingencies intervene on action patterns in combination with individual subjective reflection, differences are bound to occur but in multifarious ways.

Archer (2000; 2007; 2012) presents a more nuanced view of agency and the typology of reflexive thinking may serve as a helpful source to analyse some of the students' life stories in this study. In Archer's (2007) framework social outcomes are seen as the product of interplay between structure, culture and agents so reports of their effect on lives will necessarily be contingent and changing, and as individual as the people themselves. A particular concern of this study is with the negotiation of learners' transitions to higher education given the external referent of being labelled widening participation. This negotiation involves reflection, realisation, and in some circumstances painful progress against the odds (Bowl, 2003). It is this situated knowledge within the unique biographical experience of individuals that contributes to the singularity of this study.

Archer (2007) differentiates between four types of reflexive adaptation, communicative, autonomous, meta-reflexives and fractured reflexives. These are not mutually exclusive forms of reflexivity and Archer's (2007) research found

that her interviewees participated in more than one form of reflexivity at different times (see table 3.4.1). Archer (2007: 12) finds no correlation between an individual's dominant form of reflexivity and socio-occupational class background, but says that the "regular conduct of each kind of internal conversation generates a patterning of social mobility over the life course of its practitioners".

Table 3.4.1: Modes of reflexivity (Archer, 2007: 93)

| | |
|---|---|
| Communicative reflexives: | Those whose internal conversations require completion and confirmation by others before resulting in courses of action. |
| Autonomous reflexives: | Those who sustain self-contained internal conversations, leading directly to action. |
| Meta-reflexives: | Those who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society. |
| Fractured reflexives: | Those whose internal conversations intensify their distress and disorientation rather than leading to purposeful courses of action |

Despite the caveat that categories of reflexivity are not predictive, Archer (2007) can be criticised for using her definitions as though they are character identifiers. These categories suggest a fixed mode of reflexivity, rather than a more dynamic understanding. In a critical appraisal of approaches to reflexivity Dyke et al. (2012) used data from a study of social networks to find that whilst Archer (2007) provided a valuable lens with respect to the navigation of educational pathways, people revealed different and changing approaches to reflexivity in different situations as may be the case of the students in this study.

As has been previously mentioned despite criticisms from Atkinson (2010), Archer (2007) is one of the authors writing about reflexivity and modernity who has conducted empirical studies. However for Atkinson (2010) the practical realities of class are still very much alive. Atkinson (2010: 12) critiques Archer (2007) when he writes that "... the reflexivity described by Archer as being generated through an internal conversation would be impossible to capture using her largely quantitative methodology". Despite these critiques of Archer's (2007) approach what is interesting and relevant to this study is the proposition that

regular conduct of a particular form of internal conversation contributes to individual social mobility.

Archer (2007) is concerned with exploring how social properties influence the courses of action that people adopt. In trying to understand this, the author notes the need to specify how objective structural or cultural powers are reflexively mediated. For Archer (2007) the difference lies between active and passive agents, those that either exert governance in their own lives or are people to whom things simply happen. Using these binary opposites as categorical terms may ignore both the fuzzy grey areas that exist in peoples' lives and still does not fully explain how people utilise reflexivity (or not) at key moments in their lives. Archer (2007) suggests that one way to examine this is to consider the variability in action of people that are similarity situated, like the young people studying at the same university as in this study. Ultimately her aim is to understand and explain differences in social mobility; however her overriding focus on defining different forms of reflexivity means that the structural constraints and habitus are at times overlooked (Elder-Vass, 2007) although not to the extent that exists in the work of Giddens (1990; 1991).

Other approaches to the relationship between self, society and agency will be developed in the next section as an alternative or complementary theoretical lens for this study.

## 3.5 Theories of Capital, Field and Habitus

Having discussed the framework for reflexivity that Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) offers it is important to consider other arguments that relate to access to higher education. In particular the work of Bourdieu (1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986) concerning habitus, field, agency and capital will be considered as an explanation of structural constraint and complexity in the field of education.

Dika and Singh (2002) outline the intellectual history of the term capital, noting that although the term originated as early as 1920; the initial theoretical development of the concept is attributed to Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988). Both Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1998) have significantly influenced the sociology of education and particularly the term social capital has been developed in a number of further studies (Dika and Singh, 2002). The theorisation of capital has been defined and developed by various authors over the years (Ball, 2003) so it is important to specify that the ideas about capital as

developed by Bourdieu (1986) will be the focus of this study. This is because Bourdieu's (1986) work considers and articulates ideas about structural constraints and unequal access to institutional resources based on class, gender, and race as may be apparent in this study. Furthermore Bourdieu (1986) develops his idea about other different forms of capital in relation to, and dependent on, economic capital which will be pertinent to this study.

Bourdieu (1986: 243) explains the relationship between educational achievement and cultural capital as making it possible to:

> ..explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class factions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class factions.

Bourdieu (1986) outlined three forms of capital namely cultural, social and economic. Bourdieu's (1986) ideas about capital are based in theories of social reproduction and exchange and symbolic power. Maton (2005) makes the point that although Bourdieu remained committed to the analysis of education throughout his career, his work became increasingly associated with the sociology of culture. Maton (2005: 687) believes this accounts for the "very few Anglophone empirical studies that have employed his conceptual framework to address higher education". It is anticipated that the research presented in this thesis will contribute to further understanding in the area.

Bourdieu (1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986) is concerned with studying how society generates particular practices in individuals "as a way of rethinking the relation between identity and social structure in social theory" (Elliott, 2009: 143). Bourdieu (1985) writes about his concept of habitus, which is a key feature of his theory. Habitus is the moulding of individual dispositions within the culture of the society concerned. Habitus consists of "durable dispositions" and "structuration of practices" which generates practices and representations to achieve goals. For Bourdieu (1985) habitus is some kind of social unconscious, a particular way of being that is imbued within every individual, dependent upon social circumstance. It is described as collective dispositions which are embodied, as they have been imprinted during socialisation. Bourdieu (1985) sees habitus as a compilation of collective and individual trajectories and points to more complex, differentiated notions at the level of the individual. Reay et al. (2005: 24) expand on this idea:

> A person's individual history is constitutive of habitus but so also is the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of. Thus for Bourdieu the subject is the ...individual trace of an entire collective history.

Habitus is however somewhat flexible, allowing individuals creative strategies with which to negotiate unforeseen social structures. However as an acquired system the habitus is also deeply ingrained and, for Bourdieu (1986; 1990) our bodies are moulded into needs and dispositions through a process similar to, but wider than, socialisation. For Bourdieu (1986; 1990) agency is bounded by habitus, because habitus predisposes individuals so that "agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances" (Bourdieu, 1990: 77). This predisposition to ways of behaving emphasises the constraints and demands that impose themselves on people (Reay et al., 2005)

However there is an important rider to this, established dispositions can be transported between fields, but there is always the possibility of a lack of fit. This is the gap where reflexivity can emerge, particularly during times of crisis. An example of this could be the transition to higher education. Reflexivity can also occur in the specific and concrete negotiation of conflicting fields (Skeggs, 2004) like widening participation students entering higher education. Reflexivity is also a habitus-field requirement of certain fields, like that of academia. Bourdieu (1986) also describes how people can move through social space with differing volumes of capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) in different fields to develop dispositions (habitus) as they move. This may offer some explanation of how students accrue or inherit capital within families in order to motivate them to access higher education.

Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises social life as being anchored in wider institutional contexts through the idea of field, this pre-exists the individual and there are a number of different fields, including education. Fields serve as a relation of force between individuals and groups engaged in struggles to exclude or admit others. The stratified, two-tier higher education system already been discussed in the previous chapter would serve as an example.

In developing his theory of habitus, Bourdieu (1990) pointed out that groups were able to use cultural symbols as marks of distinction "signalling and constituting their position in the social structure" (Field, 2008: 16). Bourdieu (1986) also introduced the term social capital as part of his wider analysis of the social field as determined by the amount and weight of relative capitals and the particular

strategies that people adapted to pursue power and status. Bourdieu (1986) visualises three different forms of cultural capital one being its embodied form. The accumulation of cultural capital in its embodied form begins in early childhood. Education is institutionalised cultural capital and the objectification of that capital is academic qualifications.

Lareau and Weininger (2003) argue that the dominant interpretation of cultural capital as perceived by Bourdieu includes competences like technical skills. Bourdieu (1986) describes credentials as institutional cultural capital because certificates and degrees guarantee a technical capacity, but also attest to a social competence understood as "a sense of social dignity on the part of the holder ... and a corresponding capacity to set herself apart from others" (Lareau and Weininger, 2003: 581). So competence underlying the gaining of credentials has a technical and status dimension that cannot be disentangled from cultural capital. However Bourdieu (1986) points to academic qualifications guaranteeing material and symbolic profits as being dependent on their scarcity. So both the increase in numbers of students and inflation of qualifications may lead to less cultural and economic return on investment in education for widening participation students such as those in this study.

Bourdieu (1986; 1990) links agency with capital and field (structure) through the workings of habitus. His work on habitus has been criticised for being overly deterministic and inaccessible to empirical study, perhaps because of his emphasis on its embodiment. Reay et al. (2005: 23) though point out that in relation to charges of determinism, Bourdieu has put forward the view that habitus becomes active in relation to a field and can generate a wide "repertoire of possible actions, simultaneously enabling the individual to draw on transformative and constraining courses of action". Elliott (2009: 149) describes this as the "concrete negotiations of the self in relation to social relations". The notion of structural constraint or enablement is seen in the habitus as a "system of dispositions to a certain practice". This means that the habitus prescribes the kinds of agency demanded by culture. With this frame of reference similarities can be seen with Archer's (2007) definition of agency. Archer (2007) notes that meta-reflexivity, for example, is associated with social mobility and fostered with a university education. Nonetheless she wishes to distance herself from any structuralist interpretation of agency.

There are some very real differences between the theorisation of agency of Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) and Bourdieu (1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986) which are

worth discussing in order to consider the relevance and application to this study. For Bourdieu (1986) fields limit what individuals can do. Agency and autonomy are embodied in the concept of habitus, with the caveat that "agency is still a bounded process, compromised and attenuated, via habitus, by social structure and unconsciousness" (Adams, 2006: 515).

Adams (2006: 516) believes that the way that Bourdieu defines habitus is hardly reflexive agency in any meaningful sense of the word so that it is "difficult to know where to place conscious deliberation and awareness in Bourdieu's scheme of things". Archer (2007: 42) comments that "The nub of these difficulties is that Bourdieu's agents do not confront circumstances, but are an integral part of them". This interpretation can be considered in the context of young people's discussion about their decision making around the transition to higher education.

David Elder-Vass (2007) has attempted to reconcile some of the views presented by Archer and Bourdieu by outlining a theory of human action that encompasses both the conscious reflexive deliberation stressed by Archer and the acquired dispositions embodied in Bourdieu's habitus. Likewise Adams (2006: 515) argues in a similar way that we could see reflexivity as a "form of collective cultural capital, which becomes engrained in individual agency".

Archer (2012) provided a rebuttal of Elder-Vass and a further elaboration of her position. Archer (2012: 81) writes that Elder-Vass's interpretation of her theory as an argument about the extent to which we are able to modify our habitus is not acceptable because in contemporary society

> ... natal background and socialisation practices no longer provide guidelines to action for the young members of any class, let alone ones tantamount to assuring reproduction of social position.

The work of Archer (2003; 2007; 2012) and Bourdieu (1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986) might usefully be applied as a theoretical lens with which to discuss and analyse participants' life stories and the dialectical relationship between reflexivity, agency and capital during the decisions made about participation in higher education. The application of Bourdieu's (1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986) theories in studies relating to transitions to higher education will be considered next.

## 3.6 Bourdieu - contemporary studies about widening participation

As previously noted Dika and Singh (2002) have provided a critical synthesis of the theoretical and empirical literature about social capital since the conceptualisation of the term by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988). The focus of this work has been with respect to literature about education that studies social capital and educational outcomes, usually in school situations.

Other research about widening participation have focussed on issues of social justice and emphasised how rates of participation in higher education continue to vary according to socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity (Kahn, 2009). In addition research literature highlights a range of barriers to participation in higher education, categorising them as situational, institutional or attitudinal with the resulting tendency being for policy makers to focus on removing barriers (Burke, 2012; Gorard et al., 2006; Reay et al., 2005). There is an acknowledgement that addressing barriers has only had a marginal effect on participation rates and "research on barriers pays minimal attention to reasons why non-participants do not engage" (Kahn, 2009: 261). In fact Gorard and Smith (2006) further suggest that more sociological explanations are needed for uneven patterns of participation as a structural factor of society. Likewise Clegg (2010; 2011) also explores some of the complexities of mass higher education which, when charged with widening participation, systematically reproduces "inequalities of both experience and outcome" (Clegg, 2010: 93). She argues that this contradiction leads to differential forms of educational experience and outcome for students from less privileged backgrounds.

There are fewer studies utilising the theories of Bourdieu (1977a; 1977b; 1984; 1985; 1986) which research higher education choices of widening participation students, making this study pertinent. Key findings from empirical research in this area will be discussed next as useful concepts to inform the analysis of themes in Chapter Six.

Smyth and Banks (2012) researched decision making in a fee-paying middle class school and a working-class school in Ireland. Their work shows that individual (and familial) and institutional habitus of the school act together with individual agency to influence post-school planning. Within the family the different approach of parents has been discussed in a study by Rachel Brooks (2004). Maternal influence on decision making around higher education participation was

intended to maintain middle-class familial advantage; however overall Brooks (2010) noted in her study the considerable variety of cultural capital available in families and that parental roles depended on their ability to access this.

In a study concerned with the wider network of influence on higher education participation, Fuller et al. (2011: 134) explored how educational decision-making is embedded within social networks and "emerges in response to the interplay of complex sets of values, beliefs and behaviours across and within generations". They point out that widening participation policy has traditionally focussed only on the chooser and has not sought significantly to engage with other elements in their social networks.

Ball et al. (2000) considered the transition patterns of young people in London over a four year period from ages sixteen to twenty. The focus of the study was to consider young people's ability to construct reflexive identities. Their conclusion was that reflexive identities are based on structural conditions because new economies whilst offering new opportunities also produce new inequalities. They describe these constraints or opportunities as leading to secure or fragile identities. These definitions are based on socio-economic criteria, secure transitions are those which young people from privileged backgrounds are more likely to construct, where there are stable transitions with long term goals and positive self-perception. By comparison for young people with fragile identities the priority when negotiating transitions is often difficult due to class circumstances and difficult events in their life.

Crozier et al. (2010) found that less elite institutions recruit larger numbers of working class students and that those institutions were less well resourced. This presented students with fewer cultural demands in terms of studying which in turn reinforced already low volumes of cultural and social capital. Crozier et al. (2010) points out that elite education (like Oxford and Cambridge) provide a personal and highly targeted education so conditions of learning and support develop cultural capital.

It is the inequalities in capital within families and lack of capital on an individual basis that has frequently been seen as determining access to particular life choices, including education. Auerbach (2006) notes that what counts as parental involvement to most educators are practices traditionally associated with white, middle-class parents, like help with homework and attendance at school events. In a study that analysed the roots of immigrant parents' stance as supporters of their children's education Auerbach (2006) found that virtually all encouraged

their children to study and do well at school. Auerbach (2006: 278) describes this as moral support, stressing the value of education and hard work, encouraging students to study and giving narrative advice. This narrative advice, for example, consisted in Latino families of stories to reinforce the message, like making a comparison of working hard in the fields with working hard at school. There was a common strategy employed of calling on older siblings as role models. So despite the lack of economic capital in some families other forms of capital can be employed to advantage children or develop a specific habitus. The moral support to succeed is important in the families of immigrants because "more than children generally, the children of immigrants become the repository of their parent's expectations".

In a study that compared the progression of middle and working class students to higher education, Reay et al. (2005) discuss the importance of also considering the subjective aspects of cultural capital like levels of confidence, certainty and entitlement. In this study of five hundred applicants to higher education, there was evidence to show that state school and working class pupils were likely to be selecting from a limited set of options and that familial and school habitus had a pronounced effect on educational trajectories. Most students from middle class backgrounds saw higher education choice as inevitable and taken for granted, whilst working class youngsters regarded higher education as chancy and uncertain and that choice comprised "places for them and places for us" (Reay et al., 2005: 160). Reay et al. (2005) also noted the uncertainty and lack of in-depth knowledge about courses with working class students. Outcomes were the result of serendipity and an intuitive response to a university and made with a narrow focus, in a directionless manner.

Ball (2003: 82) in a similar study of middle and working class students found that the social capital invoked by working class students was largely familial and personal. This could be compared to that of middle class students which was given in networks of social support providing relevant and valued resources, like personal and professional contacts. The advice provided to working class students about higher education was "bland recommendations" and "limited descriptive information". Ball (2003) found that in the case of working class students advice given rarely involved other adults and certainly not adults who could offer any useful advice about choosing or applying to university. In the case of working class students this was most frequently because their parents or close relations had not attended university whilst middle class students were able to access and mobilise social capital in order to see education as a series of steps

into a profession. Middle class students are therefore more aware of educational choices and what they may open up.

When non-traditional students arrived at university Bowl (2003) found that for the majority entry to higher education was anticipated with anxiety and experienced as a shock. Their choice of institution had been constrained by perceptions of themselves as fitting in at particular post-1992 institutions because they were aware of status differences between institutions. In this study black and ethnic minority students felt conscious of the extent to which their ethnicity marked them out. Bowl (2003: 129) identified self-blame on the part of the students associated with not fitting in and struggling with some academic work which meant students "internalised the message of exclusion". In some cases this feeling of exclusion had occurred much earlier in the participants' education when students were disadvantaged because of lack of familial capital meaning that parents could not access the benefits of education for their children to provide an educative role model or advice and support, including financial help. Lack of economic capital both at school and university meant that many students had to work to support themselves and their families which set them apart from their more wealthy peers socially and academically as they had to juggle managing their studies whilst also working to maintain themselves.

## 3.7 Epiphanies

Biographical texts will typically be structured by the significant, turning point moments in a subject's life (Denzin, 1989: 22). Turning points according to Bruner (1996) are something that naturally occurs as part of a narrative of self-construction as people reflect back on their life course. Epiphanies are accounts of turning points sometimes representing profound changes in selfhood and identity often characterised by descriptions of becoming a different person. At other times epiphanies can be seen as a process which can lead to insight awareness and changed behaviour. For Denzin (1989: 70) epiphanies are moments of crisis during which personal character is demonstrated. He defines them as "interactional moments and experiences which leaves marks on people's lives". Denzin (1989) identifies four types: major, cumulative, illuminative and relived. Epiphanies can reveal much about the key events and milestones in peoples' experience with respect to their family or education for example. Epiphanies are moments where the exploration of the meaning of a life can occur.

Denzin (1989: 70) acknowledges the derivation of the term epiphany noting that the notion is:

> ... deeply entrenched in Western thought. At least since Augustine, the idea of transformation has been a central part of the autobiographical and biographical form.

Denzin (1989: 33) argues that students of the biographical method should "attempt to secure the meanings of epiphanies in the lives of the persons they study". However the agency and meaning attributed to the moment is always given retrospectively and so may be construed in the light of current concerns (Erben, 1998). Often the profound self-realisation of an epiphany can lead to on-going educative self-formation also known as *Bildung*. Gadamer (2004) defines *Bildung* as individual responsibility for learning and transformation to an increased level of self-understanding. Bourdieu (1986) views *Bildung* as a form of embodied cultural capital, which requires time to cultivate.

These turning points can yield insights into how individuals give meaning to their past lives and their hopes and expectations for the future and plans to achieve them. Roberts (2002) suggests that epiphanies help understanding of the situatedness of the self educationally, socially and politically.

So in order to examine the relationship between perceptions of selfhood, choice and reflexivity it is worth considering the details of epiphanies mentioned in the life stories of the participants. These can be construed as extended and very detailed moments of self-reflection, a crisis in reflexivity often leading to profound life changes and a process of educative self-formation.

## 3.8 Conclusion

Theories of capital are useful concepts that have been used to explain educational development and outcomes. Social capital has been described as one of sociology's most popular theoretical exports (Dika and Singh, 2002).

It is suggested that further research, like this study, is needed in order to understand the interplay of factors and mobilisation of capital in different fields like home and higher education for example. This would improve understanding about the influences on choice to participate in higher education made by widening participation students.

While many of the studies about transitions to higher education reflect the interest and concern with structure and agency, there are fewer studies that consider in detail this relationship with respect to widening participation students. In-depth biographical approaches are needed to understand the interplay between factors that affect decision-making before entering higher education. For example Dika and Singh (2002) point to the need for more research about access to and mobilisation of social capital. Particularly they highlight the difficulty of disentangling the possession of social capital from its mobilisation. This is important to avoid simplistic conclusions about the ability of young people to engage with higher education and to enable broader insights into the hopes, expectations and lived experience of those students who do decide to go to university. As Fuller et al. (2011: 149) writes "knowing more about different groups of potential students is key to achieving further diversification of the student population".

Additionally the relationship between identity, reflexivity, agency and subjectivity need to be further explored in the decision making process of students before and after transition. Adams (2006: 523) has made a cogent argument for the importance of post-reflexive choice:

> ... to fully understand contemporary identity formation we need to emphasise what comes 'after' that moment of reflexive awareness, in which choices are resourced or otherwise.

The dialectical impact of structure and agency on the constitution of subjectivity is one that is very complex and best made sense of through an understanding of reflexivity at moments of transition as in the focus of this study.

# Chapter 4: Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

In order to understand the methodology used in this study it is important that the philosophical background to the research is discussed. The aim of the inquiry or problem under examination should influence the approach used, including the form of research design (Hammersley, 2006).

The tradition that is chosen and the method of data interpretation are not only influenced by the research question, but by the researchers own life experience (Grbich, 2007). This chapter will therefore introduce the ontological background to the study in some detail as well as discussing the study's methodology and ethical stance. Grbich (2007) points to the importance of framing your research and making that explicit to achieve a level of transparency that permeates through from research design to interpretation, analysis and writing up of findings. Similarly Cresswell (2007) points out that a philosophical assumption about research should in turn mediate the position taken with respect to ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric and methodology in order to maintain research transparency.

It is important to understand the paradigm underlying research methods, as this means that the researcher can move beyond the identification and application of those methods as simply a technical exercise and make clear how that understanding is formed by their findings and their perception of the world (Cohen et al., 2007; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). In this chapter the approach taken in the study will be elaborated with relation to the main purpose of the research, which is to explore the lived experiences of students, designated as widening participation, who make the decision to enter higher education.

## 4.2 Interpretive paradigm – the approach of life stories

Within social science, an interpretive approach has been defined as one that represents reality through the eyes of individuals, such as the participants in this study. This assumes reality is constructed as a result of the subjective meanings and understanding these individuals place on their experiences as they develop socially (Robson, 2002). The importance of viewing the meaning attributed to experience and behaviour in context (in its full complexity and multiplicity) is

emphasised, as is the role of language in constructing that meaning. Accepting this paradigm also acknowledges that findings are co-constructed and are grounded in the data (Cohen et al., 2007).

Biographical studies exist within the interpretive paradigm. Denzin (1989: 7) defines the method as "the studied use and collection of life documents which describe turning points in individuals' lives". Erben (1998) believes that biographical research has a two-fold purpose. The general purpose is to provide greater insight into the nature and meaning of lives with the specific purpose of analysing a life (or lives) for a particular reason. The research focus of this study necessitated an investigation of the dialectical relationship between family and education, and the self as agent. This requires an understanding of the social world of the participants and the wider societal context for, as Erben (1998) acknowledges, individual motivations and social influences have no easy demarcation because lives are part of a cultural network that relates to wider society.

In "The Sociological Imagination" Mills (1959) puts forward the argument that "sociology can be defined as the interaction between biography and history". Mills (1959) described the sociological imagination as the capacity to see things differently and saw this as an essential element of the craft of social science. He believed that, if practiced well, this enabled people to make connections between their own biographies and broader patterns of historical development which could be interpreted. So the potential for the individual and researcher to recognise experience as being mediated by, and existing in, a wider structural context, can be achieved through analysing the biographies of people , in this case students who have been categorised as widening participation. In arguing for a concern with biography, structure and history, Mills (1959) outlines how human meaning of public issues can be revealed in accounts of people's lives. For the focus of this study this may reveal what Ball (2003: 3) has described as the "micro practices of social reproduction".

In a similar way, Bertaux (1981: 36) pointed out that life stories are indispensable for discovering "patterns of practices" in the lives of particular groups of men and women and are "an excellent discloser of underlying socio-structural relations". In this study the roles of structure, agency and capital are theorised in the narratives of the participants, which is a novel aspect of the work. The assumption is that the context of the immediate social group, like family and friends are the vehicles to enable an individual to understand him/herself and

society. Therefore a dialectical analysis of the individual and group give access to the universal. As Erben (1998: 1) points out: biographical analysis must involve the continual examination of the relationship between family, primary group, community and socio-economic forces, because to explore one without the other, is to impoverish interpretation and "do methodological damage".

The potential of the biographical method is that life history "grounds ... stories of personal experience in their wider social and historical context, and pays attention to social relations of power" (Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010: 2). It situates experience in biographical and historical time. Using this method will yield rich data about the prior educational, familial and cultural contexts of the students in this study, as well as record their experience of university life in their first year. Therefore the potential for biographical analysis to uncover a dialectical interplay between the individual student, family and society means that influences on choice about higher education can be more fully explored using biographical inquiry.

The history of the autobiographical method has already been detailed by a number of authors (Bertaux, 1981; Denzin, 1989; Erben, 1998; Roberts, 2002; Plummer, 2001) so the focus in subsequent sections of this chapter will be on the particular features of biographical analysis for research, rather than a reiteration of historical antecedents for the method.

## 4.3 Context, Time and Narrative

As has been discussed, one of the assumptions of the interpretive paradigm is that individual meaning is constructed over time and in context. The way in which time is constructed and understood in narrative will be explored in the following section.

Historical consciousness is defined by Bertaux (1981: 53) as the "repercussion felt by the individual, arising from his insertion in history". In practice, this amounts to understanding how social change has been understood and experienced through time-order reference points and expressed in personal narratives. Bertaux (1981) describes three different modalities of time: historical consciousness (defined above), the social representation of time and personal image of time. These definitions are similar to Ricoeur's (1980) ideas about historical, temporal and narrative time. According to Ricoeur (1980: 256-257) temporal time is "that in which events take place", historicality is described as the

weight of the past and objective history, whilst narrative time can be defined by "plot". Narrative and plot configure and synthesise temporal and historical conditions. All of these modalities can be traced, to a greater or lesser extent, in the individual life stories presented in Chapters Five and Six.

"Life lived in time" is the key feature of narrative for Bertaux (1981: 70) because he argues that the assessment of the subjective standpoint of the actor, in and of itself, is not a satisfactory goal for biography. Bertaux (1981) argues this because he believes that a difficulty resides in the lack of a clear conception of what kind of subjectivity is to be gained from autobiographical material. It could be said that an autobiographical narrative informs us about how, the subject thematises and constructs his or her own biography in a given situation and, by doing this, reaffirms or even constitutes his or her own biography and identity, and acts accordingly (Erben, 1998; Ricoeur, 1980). The construction of identity over time is an important strand of biographical study. Brockmann (2012) makes the point that biographical research and theory is where identity can be uniquely traced as process-related and constructed, rather than static and rigid, particularly at moments of transition, as in this study.

However time, as a component of narrative, must contextualise and frame the discussion of lives, as it is narrative that articulates temporal and historical conditions. Emplotment is the way that individuals make sense of those conditions as they impact on their lives (Ricoeur, 1985). For Ricoeur (1980: 256), there is a "structural reciprocity of temporality and narrativity"; this is because the identity of a character unfolds as a narrative over time. However this unfolding occurs as an illusion of sequence because it is an individual in the present narrative that is re-creating past events. The moment of real existence can never be narrated, but the recounting of it occurs through imagination and performance. Ricoeur (1980: 176) writes:

> These narratives, in fact, represent a person acting, who orients him- or herself in circumstances he or she has not created, and who produces consequences he or she has not intended.

This alerts us to the constructed nature of remembering in the life history and the role of the interviewer in that construction.

Bertaux (1981) warns us that if the subjective view of the actor was all that could be gained from the biographical method, most of its applications would be invalid. His argument is that even if we accept the subjectivity inherent in any

biographical account, we cannot satisfy ourselves with information that is purely geared to the contingencies of the present. We expect not only evaluation, but also reference; not only “situational”, but also “historical truth”. Whilst accepting this position it is important to remember that, as Plummer (2001: 236) outlines, memory plays an active role in constructing history; and that there are many kinds of social memories that need to be considered in understanding a life, apart from autobiographical memory. An example that Plummer (2001) gives is post memory which categorises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, for example, parental narratives of suffering following Diasporas. Whilst transformative remembering, according to Plummer (2001: 235), is a dynamic process of remembering because “the recollection of an event... serves as a psychological marker from an early to a later form of self-knowledge” This description is similar to that of Denzin (1999) about major epiphanies that effect a change on individual circumstances that are remembered during interviews.

Plummer (2001: 87) alerts us to the fact that quite often life stories, in various forms, are seen as a “journey towards an ultimate, truer understanding of a unique inner being, an inner quest for self; the injunction to know yourself”. As a result, a biographical study can have a two-fold effect, both illuminating meaning for the individual and giving a voice to those stories that may not necessarily be heard otherwise. Biographical research therefore has an emancipatory potential which is pertinent to the focus of this study of widening participation students.

## 4.4 Biographical Interpretation

Plummer (2001: 241) writes that “all autobiographical memory is true: it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where and for what purpose”. The role of the researcher therefore lies in the interpretation of the narrative in terms of its phenomenological veracity.

Biography is conceived as a social creation/construction, so that we become our own stories. Bruner (1993, as cited in Plummer, 2001: 238) writes that that there is no such thing as a “life as lived” to be referred to. Life is created or constructed by the act of narration. Accepting this position informs the role of the researcher. Firstly, it is important to accept and engage with the plots that people build from the occurrences of their own lives. Secondly, researchers devise a plot that communicates with the plot of the subject. Researchers depend on individual reasoning, personal interest and analysis (using contemporary social sciences) in

order to achieve this through a “palimpsestic process” which is best undertaken using “verstehen hermeneutics” (Erben, 1998: 14). This process involves the explanation of subject meaning as a result of a hermeneutic analysis of the accumulated biographical data which forms the overall text, both interaction and language. Erben (1998) also writes that the internal coherence of the research is also important, whereby interpretations are judged in relation to their degree of analytical coherence, referential adequacy and instrumental pertinence.

Josselson (2007) points to the dilemma of the life researcher when attempting interpretation. She argues that those who try to give voice to the participants struggle with faithful representations, whilst those who use narrative to analyse socially constructed processes struggle with interpretive authority. This study has been undertaken with the view that, whilst as much as possible must be done to convey participants’ lives and the meaning they give to them, this must also be theoretically interpreted. Not to do so is to impoverish individual experience.

Life stories when presented can be written and edited in a number of different ways (Roberts, 2002). Atkinson (1998) suggests that the method usually ends up being a short, or mini-autobiography, with one person having guided another through the telling of his or her story in his or her own words. Even when in the broadest sense the life stories are left to speak for themselves, it is likely that some editing has occurred with respect to language or style.

The accounts in Chapter Five have been composed, particularly to aid a chronological narrative and to embed contextual data gained from university records to explain the participants’ widening participation status. Attempts have been made to use the participants’ own words as frequently as possible so that their individuality comes through and no overtly interpretive framework was imposed in doing so (Charmaz, 2006).

## 4.5 Pilot Study

Before recruiting the participants for the main study, the wording of the questions was tested once, on two students who agreed to discuss any areas that they felt were not clear. Useful feedback was gained about the suitability and clarity of the questions in terms of eliciting rich, detailed information about individual lives.

Such a trial run of the process enables the researcher to highlight unanticipated responses that could prove useful in the overall research design and to try and

eliminate any ambiguities or problems with wording (Cohen et al., 2007). In the pilot it was apparent that in order to gain rich, complex data, an open-ended interview technique was required. Some of the answers given to the questions naturally opened up further areas of exploration and explication. It was felt that, in order to consider the journey to higher education, biographical histories would be the most effective instrument to take account of influences and turning points in educational trajectories.

Bruner suggests (1991) that meaning is constructed during the interview, when people use narratives to talk about their lives, because stories are our way of organising, interpreting and creating meaning from our experiences while maintaining a sense of continuity through it all. This assumes that the researcher is able to elicit such meanings, recollections and reflections from the interviewees which will be discussed further in the following section as the approach towards interviewing is outlined.

## 4.5 Data Collection

It was apparent from the pilot study that some of the questions should be shortened and simplified in order to gain accurate chronological information and to be clearer in order to encourage the telling of an in-depth life story. The set of questions finally developed for the interviews were based on recommendations by Atkinson (1998: 41). Atkinson (1998) suggests a series of detailed questions covering directions to pursue and keep the story going. The questions selected were those aimed at obtaining thoughts, feelings and experiences of education, family background and episodes of personal change. Following the pilot these questions were not seen as prescriptive but merely guiding points for a conversational dialogue about the students' life and educational experience.

The focus of the research was on the lived experiences of those students who had been labelled widening participation on their transition to higher education. In order to identify these students in the first year of study it was necessary to request to see the contextual detail provided when the student made an application to the university. Based on the information supplied for the school where the research was conducted, the number of applicants for whom widening participation contextual data was provided at the first year of entry numbered twenty-eight. However not all of the students arrived at the university. This may be because the students had pre-registered and then decided to either go elsewhere or had arrived and left fairly quickly afterwards.

This consequently narrowed the field of potential participants. An invitation to participate in the research study was issued. The students involved were self-selecting and five agreed to participate. In order to collect as much detailed data as possible, the students agreed to be interviewed twice: once after they had been on the course for approximately two months, the second time was before they took their first year exams at the end of the academic year, and all except one student, returned for a second interview. The student who did not return agreed to be interviewed a second time and a date was set but the participant did not arrive. Subsequent emails and telephone messages were not responded to, so the lack of response was taken to show that the student did not wish to participate further in the study.

In the first interview, questions were focused on asking for reflections about prior educational and family experiences and the route to university, whilst the questions in the second interview were prompts to encourage reflection about the first year of study. The data from both interviews was amalgamated for analysis. Additionally all the students were provided with a notebook and asked to write down their thoughts, feelings and experiences of university life and anything else that they cared to record. Of the five students, two made detailed notes and some drawings. The notes were incorporated into the discussion and analysis in Chapters Five and Six. These were analysed using the same method discussed in the next section.

All of the interviews were conducted in a university office so that the environment was quiet and confidential. This could have been seen as a hierarchical situation, but on reflection it was considered that students might find it easier to fit the interview into their timetable if they did not have to travel far. On average each interview was an hour long with the longest taking two hours. Each interview was digitally recorded with a small unobtrusive machine. Although they understood the need to record the interviews a couple of the participants seemed to be a bit nervous of the process initially. However once the interview was underway they seemed to forget that they were being recorded. It was explained that note taking during the interview may obstruct the interview flow (Cresswell, 2007: 125) and the open-ended nature of the questions meant that people did not need to pause in order for their answers to be noted. This meant during the interview full attention could be paid to the participants in order to interact and develop points of interest or ask for further clarification if needed.

Every attempt was made to establish an informal, relaxed, concerned and tolerant atmosphere so as to develop trust and rapport (Josselson, 2007), but it must be acknowledged that some participants naturally responded with longer, more detailed answers to questions than others. Two of the participants gave the longest interviews with much rich information. These are the two participants who also completed entries in the diary. It was considered whether or not to focus just on these two life stories. However on reflection it was seen as important to use all of the stories to provide a wider range of experience of those students designated as widening participation.

The interviews were transcribed as were the diary entries. The first interview was transcribed by the researcher in order to become as familiar with the material as possible. However it quickly became apparent that this would be a very time consuming task. A professional transcription service was therefore employed for the remaining interviews and these transcripts were carefully checked against the recording and additional notes made of any omissions, errors or pauses in the original.

## 4.6 Data analysis - The Approach of Grounded Theory

The identification and analysis of themes is a central tenet in grounded theory. Interview information which necessarily includes events, perceptions and expressions of feelings can be categorised. Before considering emerging themes situated in the vignettes of student lives in Chapter Five, the approach of grounded theory that was adopted in this study is discussed and contextualised.

Since Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory in 1967, there have been many discussions about its use not least because the two founders of the method have subsequently differed about the way it is applied in certain circumstances. In grounded theory, theories emerge in an inductive way from the data as Strauss and Corbin (1994: 273) remark “grounded theory is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed”. Denzin (2010) notes that grounded theory is not a unified framework and multiple versions now exist which range from positivist to post-modern. Though their commonalities mean this method is concerned with data analysis, which is closely connected to the world being studied and “the development of integrated theoretical concepts in data that show process, relationship, and social world connectedness” Denzin (2010: 296).

Of the various approaches to grounded theory, the work of Charmaz (2006) was adopted in this study because it is most suited to the interpretive paradigm. Charmaz (2006: 130) sees a constructivist approach in grounded theory as one which means "theorising the interpretative work but acknowledging it is an interpretation. The theory depends on the researcher's view". Charmaz (2006) also emphasises that data and analysis come from shared experiences and relationships with participants. This distinction is an important one to make as the approach followed in this study makes the assumption that interviews are co-constructions and analysis of meaning, and significance in peoples' lives is an interpretation.

The data analysis initially involved a process of focussing on the recordings of each interview several times in order to become immersed in the particulars of each story. Reconstructing the chronology of events meant that stages, changes, turning points and influences on individuals could be better understood and conveyed in narrative form. To aid understanding of the journey through education and work a diagram was developed which can be seen as Appendix A.

Focussing on the recordings helped identify recurring themes and aided reflection about some of the theories or explanations for interpretation. The benefit of this is that this type of analysis can help you to identify implicit concerns that can serve as a focus at later interviews (Charmaz, 2006). The initial coding was undertaken line by line (an example is given in Appendix B). Charmaz (2006: 50) recommends this as the first step in coding because "ideas will occur to you that had escaped your attention when reading the data for a general thematic analysis". Charmaz (2006) also recommends that data is coded with words to reflect action. The first stage of coding revealed some interesting foci in the data, these are interpreted and analysed in Chapter Six.

Whilst doing the initial coding thoughts that occurred were recorded as memos. Grbich (2007: 77) defines memos as a "descriptive record of ideas, insights, hypothesis, development and testing". Charmaz (2006: 50) appears to put more emphasis on this process when she describes memo-writing as the "pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers". It is pivotal because writing successive memos throughout keeps the researcher involved in analysis, but the intention is also to increase the level of abstraction of ideas. Additionally the recording of thoughts and processes in memo form in this study, allowed for some self-reflection about the findings. This included memos to self that tried to record potential bias.

The next stage of coding arrived at some key themes. Charmaz (2006: 57) describes focussed codes as more directed, selective and conceptual than word by word or line by line. She suggests establishing some strong analytical directions through focussed coding which synthesise and explain larger segments of data. Charmaz (2006: 61) does not use axial coding according to Strauss and Corbin's (1994) formal procedures, but makes subcategories of a category and shows the links between them. She justifies this approach as offering more simple and flexible guidelines which still allow researchers to follow the leads that they define in their empirical materials. The coding of the data in this study arrived at six themes. These were derived by identifying repeated words which were grouped together in the following six themes; morals/ethics religion/epiphanies, family/home influence, attitudes to study/achievement/ambition, social issues/friendships, educational influences/self awareness (reflection on working/responsibility for finances/transition to university). The process moved backwards and forwards between the interview transcripts and generalisation of the data in a classic hermeneutic circle using top-down and bottom-up approaches (Erben: 1998). Following the identification of these themes, repeated reading of the data in context and reflection about predictive generalisation suggested that some of these themes could become sub-categories for three super ordinate themes of family, educational experiences and expectations, epiphanies (see Appendix C).

## 4.7 Ethics

Whilst the lineage for particular methodologies can be traced to philosophical traditions and some methodologies can be considered to be more reflexive than others, the simplistic assumption that reflexivity will be fostered by following a particular method is misleading. "The principle of reflexivity ... implies recognition of the extent to which researchers shape the phenomena that they study" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 15). Furthermore much ethical governance has proceeded from institutional anxiety (Josselson, 2007) potentially undermining the type of reflexivity that should permeate the research process, and replacing it with the completion of a formal set of procedures.

Any research faces ethical issues. These are normally subject to review by ethics committees. Grbich (2004) has pointed out that issues of concern around ethics are normally related to researcher accountability and issues of privacy, as well as protecting institutions from litigation. Whilst this is important it has been argued

throughout this chapter that narrative research relies on people in a relational endeavour including the duties and obligations that are felt towards participants and the obligation to accuracy and authenticity in interpretation (Josselson, 2007). In this study the method of analysing the data has been discussed in the previous section, the coding was undertaken through re-reading the interview transcripts to try and maintain the veracity of the participants meaning by considering the context. The approach taken to interpretive authority (Josselson, 2007) was to try and give voice to the participants but also to interpret the data.

Every aspect of the work is therefore affected by ethics including an understanding of the paradigm that underpins the research. Lynch (2000: 47) also suggests that the implications of reflexive inquiry remain unspecified until we learn more about the relevant theoretical investigations and contextual applications. This will become apparent in the forthcoming discussions in subsequent chapters. The interpretive paradigm and the approach of biographical inquiry have been discussed in previous sections of this chapter. The research interest in undertaking this study lies in exploring the lives of individuals who are designated as under-represented in higher education because of my experience of being a working class child being the first in my family to go to university.

With respect to formal ethical procedures as a general principle it is assumed that participants will understand the research process, that any potential harm will be minimised and that they have a right to confidentiality and the ability to withdraw from the research at any stage. Also, they should be provided with information about how their data will be stored and used. This is usually covered by the principle of informed consent.

Before research could be conducted for this study the consent form, information sheet and interview questions were submitted for vetting via the University of Southampton ethics process (see ethics approval in Appendix D). Here some issues were raised that needed to be further addressed. For example it was essential to obtain approval from the Faculty research Committee to interview students at the University I was working at.

Additionally further information was sought about how the power relationship with students would be negotiated, especially as some of the students participating in the interview were taught by me. The result was that a section was included in the information sheet to inform participants that their studies would not be adversely affected if they decided not to participate or withdrew from the study. At the beginning of the interview each participant read and

signed a consent form and it was made clear that they could decide not to answer a question of they did not want to, or could elect not to participate in the research at any stage.

One key concern was in introducing the reason why the students had been initially approached. The students had all been selected because contextual data had been used to designate them as widening participation. A section on the participant information sheet explained that students were asked because the area/postcode that they applied from to come to university, traditionally had a low number of young people participating in higher education.

## 4.8 Conclusion

In discussing the theoretical basis for the methodology, as well as the practicalities of the research endeavour, it has been emphasised that research is a social practice significantly located in context (Usher, 1998) and that the researcher and researched "affect each other mutually and continually in the course of the research process" (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000: 39). This study has a lineage in the interpretive tradition and, within that tradition, the specific methodological focus that will be used is that of biographical analysis. The strength of this approach lies in producing narratives which enable interpretation of the location of students' designated widening participation, within both, the context of their auto/biographies and the wider societal framework.

# Chapter 5: The Biographies of Widening Participation Students

## 5.1 Introduction

This is a study of the life stories of five students from normatively constructed "non-traditional backgrounds" who have entered higher education. Their stories are being told here, rather than overly interpreted, because, as Erben (1998: 13) reminds us the strength of the biographical approach lies in being able "to weave social context and individualised life together". Furthermore understanding the life story is, according to Erben (1998: 13) and others (MacIntyre,1985; Ricoeur, 1988) only possible through narrative because lives are lived through time and made intelligible by being composed of narratives "a life that is studied is the study of a life in time".

The stories of the five young men presented here have been explored with the aim of considering the lived experience of students designated as widening participation. The intention has been to discover what affects their choice regarding going to university to gain a better understanding about the interplay of influences on this. Erben (1998: 14) discusses how the biographical researcher in studying the individual can also arrive at a deeper understanding of their surrounding social context because it is impossible to separate "the inner and the outer, between the interiority of selfhood and the social determination of selfhood".

The main focus of the research was to identify the interplay of structure and agency in individual educational trajectories at the transition point to higher education, and thus has influenced the lens through which the data has been analysed in the next chapter. Attempting a snapshot at this particular moment in time would not have been sufficiently helpful in understanding the contributing influences and factors that had led to their decision. A detailed life story was therefore sought in order to more fully understand the role of family, prior educational experience, agency and the value and importance placed on education by the participants. Likewise interviews were conducted at two points in the first year of study in order to be able to understand students' transition and progress. Mann (1998: 46) points out that it is particularly important to consider life history as a method that has the potential to "illuminate how people

articulate, comprehend and shape their lives in relation to public narratives". This would assume though that people are aware of those public narratives and it can be argued that in some of the life stories presented here there is little or no personal awareness of widening participation, and that the potential to access higher education is articulated in very different and sometimes contrasting ways.

Some influential accounts of modern selfhood (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) are not firmly grounded in empirical research but more often use hypothetical vignettes in order to establish theory. This leaves unanswered questions about the reality of how individuals experience and conceptualise influences and constraints in their lives and how this relates to more abstract ideas about agency and structure from theorists such as Archer (2000), Bourdieu (1985; 1986) and Giddens (1991). This (and the chapter that follows) present the findings of the study and discuss the theoretical implications of the themes found within the narratives. In order to contextualise and discuss the findings in sufficient detail a short biography of each participant has been presented. This involved introducing each life story individually in this chapter before comparing cases thematically and theoretically in Chapter Six. The advantage of this approach is a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of individual routes into higher education and the meaning that young people afford to this transition in their lives as a whole in terms of how it has affected their identity and selfhood. It can be argued that perceptions, distinctions and choices about Higher Education reflect family networks and habitus which in turn reflects and impacts on identity; this is because as Reay et al. (2005: 160) point out choice is rooted in "fine discriminations of places for us and places for others – social structures in the head".

The approach used is that of interpretive biography, which has been discussed in Chapter Four as one which offers a particular insight into the relationship between individual identity, cultural background and wider society. This interplay became evident as the life histories of the participants are outlined in the following sections. Table 5.1.1 gives an overview of the participants' background.

Table 5.1.1: Background of the Participants

| Given Name | Age | Gender | Ethnicity | School / college attainment | Working Experience | Self-defined class |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dalmar | 24 | Male | Black | GCSE & BTech | P/T whilst studying | Working |
| Oliver | 18 | Male | White | GCSE & A Levels | None | Middle |
| David | 20 | Male | White | GCSE & A Levels | None | Middle |
| Jake | 19 | Male | White | GCSE & Foundation | P/T whilst studying | Middle |
| Ben | 23 | Male | White | City & Guilds BTech | None | Lower middle |

## 5.2 Dalmar

**I chose to live in a foolish and naive way which affected everything like education. Well basically if I had a role model at a younger age and teachers that did care a lot better and that actually pushed you to achieve, well all of that contribution would have helped but you can't really pick, you can't really pick.**

Dalmar came to England with his family when he was two years old. His mother and step grandmother together with six of his seven siblings escaped war torn Somalia as asylum seekers and settled on a council estate in South London. His father, whom he does not really know or have a relationship with, remained in Somalia.

As Dalmar's life story unfolded it became apparent that the move to England had also been seen as an opportunity by his mother to find a better future for her children, but her own plans included retirement back in Africa, when all her children were settled. In fact this is what happened during Dalmar's final year of study at university when his mother, having seen her family settled and educated, returned to live in Somalia.

Dalmar described his mother as having been a business woman when she worked in Somalia, she was a cook and supplied food to other businesses, like shops. Later on, Dalmar described her as having "many restaurants and stuff" and two homes in the country. It did appear that in Somalia the family were economically self-sufficient and had a high level of economic capital. The country had suffered a catastrophic period of civil war since the 1980s so as an asylum seeker Dalmar's mother must have hoped for a better and peaceful future for her children. This was not to be the case.

Having moved to what he described as a "partial neighbourhood" in London because of its predominantly white population; Dalmar described some of his earliest memories as seeing police officers outside the door nearly every week. This was because "there was a mission to get rid of us". There was serious and overt racism which included threats towards and intimidation of family members. On one occasion Dalmar remembered that fireworks had been posted through the letterbox, eggs were regularly thrown at the windows of the flat and people gathered outside making a lot of noise at midnight to frighten the family. Individuals could never be identified because "the sad part was that we were unaware who it could be as they all wanted us out". Dalmar described how things did not really improve until "as time passed more ethnic groups arrived in the neighbourhood". He was proud that "our family refused to be bullied out, with more ethnic groups the attack has stopped".

The campaign against them made his mother very anxious for her children's safety, particularly during their early childhood. Amongst the racist intimidation to the family at home there were regular threats made over the phone to kidnap Dalmar and his twin sister. Dalmar's mother became so fearful that she used to pick up the twins fifteen minutes before the end of school. The legacy of this was that when he was older Dalmar remembers his mother "being spooked" when he did not call her to say he would be back late.

Dalmar started secondary school at a large comprehensive in the area. In 2011 nearly half (48.5%) of pupils at the school were classified as living in low income households and being in an area of high deprivation. It was this index of economic deprivation that led to the classification of widening participation in Dalmar's case. Under the POLAR classification system his application to university was labelled widening participation because he was living in a postcode area where nearly 50% of people are living in circumstances where deprivation affects

children. This change in circumstances can be again compared to the relative level of economic independence that Dalmar's family experienced in Somalia.

Dalmar enjoyed school but more for its social side. He said of this time "Looking back at it now I wish I could change the world. I enjoyed it in a way. I enjoyed it too much. I neglected my education". His peer group seemed to have been important and influential on Dalmar, he described himself as being "caught up with a group who at that time were cool". Reflecting back on his education he said during the interview that he had "no drive", he did not know what he wanted to do and cared even less. This feeling was compounded by the attitude of the teachers. The majority, he described as "diabolical" and felt that they were prepared to label him as a failure. This affected his self-esteem and it was noticeable that it took the influence of family and friends to eventually persuade him that he could go to university. He did however listen to the advice of one teacher at the school who inspired him to believe that he could do better and change his circumstances. Generally Dalmar expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment with the educational system; he felt that everyone was letting him down including the Government as they talked about there being "loads of apprenticeships or schemes available for you guys...but there wasn't. There was hardly any". These structural inequalities in opportunity left Dalmar carrying on at school as there were few viable alternatives apart from working.

Dalmar stayed on for one year in the sixth form to study for A Levels but his AS grades were not sufficiently good enough for him to carry on so he moved to a local college to study for a BTech in Electrical Engineering for three years. He then worked full-time for a further two years. Dalmar worked in order to support his family as his older sister suffered from post-natal depression and other family members were away or studying. This was typical of the responsibility that he felt towards his family and was clear throughout both of the interviews. It was evident that Dalmar loved and respected his family, feeling a particularly strong connection to his mother because of what he saw as her sacrifice for her family in coming to England as a single parent.

At this time Dalmar still had no set intention to go to university despite being encouraged to do so by his family. Dalmar eventually changed his mind as a result of working. He became disillusioned with those managing him and felt that he could, if he studied for a degree, have a career. Dalmar was working with a Caribbean man in his early fifties who became a very good friend and who encouraged him to go to university. Dalmar referred to this man in glowing terms

and with warmth in his voice so it would appear that he became something of a father figure:

> He was pressuring me to do it. He said you don't want to be staying here like me, because he was a fifty four year old guy from the Caribbean..and he knew that education was important..because coming from a different ethnicity it's very important for a person to progress, because we are all privileged to be here, in some sense, and you should take full advantage of doing well...

The absence of Dalmar's father was partially compensated for by the presence of his elder brother, his step grandmother and his mother, of whom he is very proud. His older brother seemed to have taken the role of a father, and together with his mum advised him to go to university. The social capital that Dalmar could draw on with respect to going to university was familial (Ball, 2003). His older brother had been the first in the family to go to university (again serving as a role model for Dalmar). Dalmar's twin sister went next and then Dalmar. Several times throughout both interviews Dalmar mentioned the central role of his mother in his decision to go to university in terms of her ambition for her children to do well and succeed. He did respect that ambition and mentioned being thankful to his mother for pushing him, he said:

> Well I knew that my mum always wanted me to go to university, she said that's the minimum that I want from you. But it was her history that persuaded me ... it was traumatic the way she described her situation coming here so I felt like a bit of a weight if I didn't achieve anything coming here... I know that university is a stepping stone to a career... and I thought that it would be a failure if I didn't achieve at least something.

Despite feeling a burden of responsibility to do well, it took a life-changing epiphany for Dalmar to realise that he wanted to attend university himself. Epiphanies is a theme that has arisen in two of the participants biographies (Ben and Dalmar) and will be discussed in much greater detail in the next chapter.

At sixteen years old Dalmar describes himself as being involved in "more kind of illegal stuff", implying that he had been in trouble before this age. He was in a gang that was involved in selling drugs and he "got into a lot of crime". In his first interview Dalmar said that he regretted not taking his education more seriously and attributed this to being "caught up in a group who at that time were cool". He describes how he has always had two groups of friends "one which had a positive

impact and the other dragged me back". He mentioned the group that had a positive influence on him as one that consisted of friends who were studying at "prestigious" universities like Warwick, Bristol and Imperial, but who had come from the same disadvantaged background as him. Dalmar already perceived a status difference between certain universities (Tiechler, 2004).

Dalmar's epiphany came when two of his friends were stabbed, one died immediately and the other died later. In a separate incident a friend of the family committed suicide. Dalmar describes in some detail the change that this made in his life. In the interview the recalling of the epiphany was an emotional moment and so it is best described in Dalmar's own words:

> ...it was like, aged sixteen, that's the time I was doing more kind of illegal stuff, which I shouldn't be doing and.. or being part of it, and, ugh, that's when my friend got stabbed, and he survived... but the next one, I was seventeen, and when both of them passed away, they were murdered, and seeing... driving to the house, as I drove towards, you know, the front door, I saw his mum, full of tears, and that's the point that I... It felt like a baseball hit me across the chest, and he was, he was a bit younger, and if I like look back at now, it feels like, we were trying to encourage him to join that kind of system and it feels like, I do feel like I should be blamed for it. But I wasn't there when it happened, so , I kind of like, I don't know what happened, so, what kind of, what happened then, but seeing two of them, kind of passing away, and, ugh, it was like a shock. I thought, like, I knew his cousins, I knew his friends, now I felt like a void in life, like something had been taken away, apparently, you can never replace it, and that what it is, you can never replace a friend now...

The realisation of the loss of his friend on both himself and his friend's family, made Dalmar reflect on his own actions. He describes the gang background that he had been involved in as a "kind of system" implying there was a culture with rules and norms. Later comments implied that this system would be something that was difficult to disassociate from as he said that "the only way to get out is like whether you turned your life religiously". This is because "when you become religious your friends that you used to have, they're no longer your friends". Dalmar started to take his Muslim faith more seriously from this period. The other major event that combined to make Dalmar reflect on his life was the death of a close family friend:

> Sorry... It's kind of like a shock and now I've seen kind of my neighbours, my mum's good friend, like, her daughter, I knew her, especially when I was young, and her getting bullied and she committed suicide when I was just entering college and that kind of ... Because in our faith, committing suicide, is like a sin, it's forbidden, a severe punishment and our family was religious and for some-one to be bullied and pushed to the edge, - she jumped off a ... I was like, I was devastated, devastated and she was a good friend to my mum, and seeing everyone just... going away, apparently, it's like a shock, 'cause I understand like... my Mum, because we came to this country, in order to escape civil war, and seeing my Mum's face, it's like seeing everything passing by her, and I thought, Mum was worse, she lost relatives there as well, and the stories that she tells me that when she was young, about how, the way she escaped, it's kind of shocking, I'm like, you know what, I'm going to do the best of myself, you want me here to do the best , not to do foolish stuff, so yeah, that kind like changed me.

Dalmar originally applied to study Radiography at a university in the Midlands before having a "change of heart" and deciding to study engineering design at a modern university on the south coast. His reason for changing his choice of course was the perceived wider options offered by the subject and the transferable skills of his BTech in Electronic Engineering. He was also attracted by the marketing material produced by the University. When choosing his course Dalmar had fewer options than some other participants or middle class students because modern universities would be the only institutions accepting BTech qualifications. The cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) he had accumulated with respect to his qualifications had a lower exchange value than that of A Levels. During the first year Dalmar, perceived a difference in the value of his qualifications. He felt he was not as experienced in certain subject areas as students with A Level qualifications; he described A Levels as "like gold compared to BTech". This meant that he had "to work more because they (students with A Levels) had an advantage because they come from a good academic superior like class".

Before university Dalmar had worked to be able to save enough money to pay for his living expenses and during his first year at university Dalmar continued to work in two part-times jobs. This was to be able to send money home to help his family and to support himself. His investment of economic capital was firmly equated with the ability to succeed in his mind because if "it didn't work out it

would be a waste of money, in a sense I can accomplish it because I've got money." He equated acquiring a degree with doing well because "it's the highest echelon in the sense of a career." He attributed this belief in government rhetoric "because society drums it into our head that education is the best way and..once you graduate, you'll be paid more than an average person."

Having thought carefully about the course and university before arriving, Dalmar described the actual process of starting as a "culture shock". He associated this "emotional and mental challenge" with having to mix and live with different people. Not all of whom he got along with or would want to know back in London. He experienced racist comments from members of the local population. In the class he described how he felt that he "had to do a bit more in order to compensate for being the only black male". All in all he had not enjoyed the first year of study.

## 5.3 Ben

> **University is by no means the shining land of hope I had desired, but I am still glad I came. I don't view university as an end, but as a means. This place is a canvas for self- discovery, a back- drop.**

Ben went to a private nursery school at the age of three in central Norfolk. He was proud to recall that Princess Diana also went there, although not at the same time. He then transferred to the reception year in a state school when his parents could no longer afford to pay for him to attend. He moved from the local primary to the local secondary school in 2001 at age 11.

Similar to Dalmar, Ben can be described as having a complicated and not entirely successful relationship with secondary education or straightforward traditional transition to higher education. When he was twelve years old and a year after starting secondary school, Ben's education was interrupted by a period of severe depression, which he attributes to two factors. Firstly he felt that he had become unhappy in the first year at secondary school when he changed from being in all the top sets at primary school to a lower level in a much larger secondary school environment. This was not streamed for the first year and as a student Ben considered himself to be "intelligent and questioning". Ben therefore felt that he was more able than his peer group but was not being challenged. For example he was proud that he was good at Maths but described himself as needing to know why he had to learn certain things and how they could be applied. The answer

that he was given at school (that it was on the curriculum) did not satisfy him, and he began to feel more disconnected from the field of education. He did not see the relevance and application of Maths until later on when he was studying woodwork and then engineering. He recalls his school experience when he says:

> I asked a teacher why we were learning algebra of some sort, I said, what's this actually useful for and why are we learning this? And the answer I got was, you're learning it because it's on the curriculum, which is not a helpful answer… I couldn't see anywhere in the future where I'd apply it and I made the judgement that obviously all the stuff they're teaching me is rubbish and I don't need it.

Additionally his parents split up sometime during his first year at secondary school. They eventually divorced. The trauma of this meant that Ben became "very, very unhappy" to the extent of contemplating suicide and persuaded his mother to take him out of school when he found out that "structured schooling isn't legally compulsory". Ben was therefore home schooled by his mother between the age of twelve and fifteen. He has two sisters, both younger than him. Both of his sisters were also home schooled for periods of time, one sister also suffered from severe depression so all three children were out of the state system at some stage.

The home schooling was not overly productive as the method that Ben and his mother tried to follow involved the completion of project books which were sent away to be marked. Ben felt that this was still too much like the school system and so eventually gave up, describing this period as "education spent most of my time on the sofa reading books". Later he realised that this had not served him entirely well, when he discovered whilst at college that he did not know how to formally revise for an exam and study.

Ben recovered from depression at about the age of fifteen and decided to go back into education. This was as a result of a religious experience when he "started talking to God and God started talking back". This was an epiphany and is discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

During this period Ben started to feel less a victim of his circumstances, and stopped feeling that he had been "wronged" and began to look back and think "why did it turn out this way?" He spoke of knowing that his view of school might have been clouded by his depression and it might not have been as bad as he remembered but that he did feel very isolated and frustrated at the time.

Ben re-entered the formal education system at the age of 16 after he had pretty much “shaken off the depression and decided I wanted to do something”. The entry point was via Connexions (the youth careers advice service which has now had its funding cut in his area). Advisors there suggested a place on a City and Guilds carpentry course at a local college for two years. This solution was not particularly educationally challenging, but likely to be based on Ben’s lack of formal experience and qualifications.

Ben obtained a City and Guilds intermediate construction award in carpentry and joinery, followed by a City and Guilds in cabinet making from age 18-20. Ben’s father had been in the Navy and Ben felt that he wanted to follow in his father’s military footsteps by joining the Army. He was persuaded by his father that he “needed a trade so that he would have something to fall back on”, even though his father had a post-graduate degree. So taking vocational qualifications helped Ben back into formal education whilst satisfying his father’s recommendation to ameliorate on the perceived risk of joining the services.

Between the ages of 19-20 Ben also studied for a City and Guilds in mechanical manufacturing engineering, this seems to have been influenced by a teacher that “took a shine to him” and felt he would do well on the course. At this stage Ben’s application to join the army had been rejected because of his earlier depression and he had started to contemplate going to university as an alternative. So realising that he did not have sufficient qualifications to enter university Ben completed a BTech in engineering for two years when he was 20. Ben entered university when he was nearly 23 and like Dalmar, entered with vocational qualifications. Both applicants mentioned the limited choice in terms of universities who would accept vocational qualifications like a BTech and Ben also mentioned, like Dalmar, that he felt disadvantaged by not having studied for A Levels.

Ben entered university with high expectations, hoping that he would mature within a structured environment. The ideal of self-improvement that he held could be linked to the notion of *Bildung*, which is described as an investment in learning linked to increased personal understanding (Bourdieu, 1986; Gadamer, 2004). In many ways this is similar to the ideal of self-improvement inherent in many religions and it is significant that Ben had a strong Christian faith and attended an evangelical church. Ben discussed his hopes and aspirations for university as being about “personal growth and giving myself a foundation for later on and developing my personal abilities and skills”. One of the key skills that

he identified as needing was time-management. It is interesting and to some extent unexpected that Ben's aspirations for the future did not reflect gaining subject specific knowledge that would lead to a job, but rather the more general goal of maturing and developing as an individual which is an ideal more allied to *Bildung*.

The metrics used to determine that Ben was a widening participation candidate upon entry to university show that he came from an area with the lowest participation in higher education (68% of the youth population) and with 72% of young people being in an area of deprivation with respect to education, skills and training. He was not the first to go to university in his family as his father studied for a Masters Degree and his younger sister preceded him at undergraduate level. In fact Ben's father recommended the institution that Ben studied at, having completed his higher degree there. The families' social and cultural capital appears to have been utilised as advice about higher education (Reay et al., 2005).

Ben, like Dalmar, struggled with the first year at university in terms of making friends and working with his peer group. Both students, having taken slightly longer to arrive at university felt themselves to be more mature than their cohort. Ben felt distanced from his cohort by his different attitude to study. Ben described how in class he sat alone usually at the front while others "huddled at the back" how he considered an assignment a "challenge while they consider it a hassle" because "even our moral compasses are widely different". Ben therefore found himself quite isolated in group work in particular where his motivation meant that he took the lead and often did the majority of the work. His anticipation about university education meant he was "hoping to be challenged" and hoping to find people he "could actually synergise with". However these prior high expectations about university had not be met within the culture he found himself in.

## 5.4 Jake

**My parents have always been quite a strong influence on me coming to university. From the start of choosing GCSEs and then A Levels, they chose things that not only was I just good at but things that were potential for me.**

Jake was one of three children and the second in the family to go to university. He opted for the same University as his elder sister who is studying architecture, but chose a different subject. Throughout the one interview it was apparent that Jake's parents in particularly had a strong influence on him, one which could have resulted in safe and familiar choices like choosing the same university as his sibling.

He was educated in a market town with a population of approximately 42,000 people, progressing through primary and secondary school in the same location. He stayed on at the secondary school for his A Levels, even though he recognised that he might have done better by transferring to another school or sixth form college. He said "...the other two schools had a really good reputation, their A*s to Cs is probably well over 70%, whereas ours was I think something like 40%...everyone got into the sixth form really, anyone could get in". Jake gave his reason for staying on at this school as not wanting to lose his friendship group because at the time he didn't like change.

Jake's parents have always been a big influence on him. He attributed his liking of design to his dad who has worked in different parts of the world designing aircraft wings for a large aircraft manufacturer. He spoke of his parents influencing his subject choices and more generally encouraging him to be ambitious. This may be also because Jake lacked confidence in his own abilities as his earlier comment about the ease of entry into his sixth form indicates.

Jake remembered that his dad helped him and his sister with Maths at GCSE, when he recalled they were both "very good at Maths". The transition to A Level study though proved more difficult. Jake studied Maths, Physics, Business and Product Design, following advice from his parents to change some of his original choices like Media Studies and Physical Education to Maths and Physics. Attempting this number of subjects was obviously too ambitious. At AS Level, Jake gained three B grades and a U in Physics, which he subsequently dropped. At A2 he received a C in Business Studies and Product Design and an E in Maths.

Jake said he found his A Levels quite stressful, studying four subjects at AS Level including those with a large coursework component. He described studying Maths like this: "I think if I'd had another year to take year two again, so A Levels again, I would have got a lot better. I think I just didn't grasp it quickly enough, it just wasn't, I didn't have enough time...I just didn't get it quick enough".

In addition to his father giving personal coaching for Maths, his parents paid for private Maths tuition. Jake credited his parents for keeping him on the “straight and narrow”, he described them as having problems with him “being lazy” and pushing him to succeed. The alternative he felt would be that he would have dropped out of school and “just done what I wanted to do”. This support even extended to his first year at University. When Jake went home at weekends his parents checked that he didn’t have work to do and expected to see what he was working on. He described this interest, not as his parents checking up on him necessarily, but in him having to demonstrate that “I’m passionate about it, because if I don’t show them they must be thinking well is he actually enjoying it, why can’t you share it with your parents?” Whilst most parents mentioned in this study showed an interest in their child’s education, Jake’s parents were exceptional in their monitoring of progress, which on the one hand could be seen as supportive, but on the other as overcompensating for Jake’s earlier lack of drive and motivation.

Realising that his grades may not be sufficient for university entry after his A Levels, Jake decided to search around for a course that would help him get into university in the shortest possible time. At this stage he preferred not to go into clearing for a place because, “I didn’t want to go through clearing and go to a university where it was all a bit half hearted and half the course would be people that just got put there from clearing”. Instead he found a place on an Art and Design Foundation course at a nearby city which gave him a level three qualification sufficient for university entry. He realised that it was the only way that he would be able to go to university without retaking his A Levels.

Like many other students Jake looked at courses at several universities as part of the application process. He credited his father with being influential in the decision making process here as well. The course that Jake finally chose was accredited by a professional body giving added potential for employment upon graduation. Jake’s father recognised this as being important for future career prospects and told Jake that “if you realised how much that is worth having you would know where to go”. Another important consideration seemed to be distance from home as Jake’s parents felt less happy about universities that were further away. In fact Jake said that during his first year he went home at weekends for about 90% of the time.

As well as his parents Jake described his working part time at Sainsbury’s as being an influential learning experience. Jake had worked from the age of 16 for

the supermarket and still continued to work during the holidays of his first year at University. He described the level of responsibility he was given as being one of the key factors in his enjoyment of this job. He prided himself on his relationship with customers and saw himself as having a level of maturity in this respect.

Jake was categorised as a widening participation student upon entry to university because he lived in an area with one of the lowest participation rates in higher education and with high skills and training deprivation. Neither of Jake's parents went to university, Jake's father did an apprenticeship as a carpenter and his mother stayed on to take A Levels before working and eventually managing a small chain of businesses. She then became a housewife. They were however ambitious to have an education for their children that they had not experienced themselves. This meant they invested their economic and cultural capital (in terms of time, money and help with study) in creating and maintaining opportunities for Jake, an ambition he did not always feel able to deliver, particularly during his A Levels.

Jake did not feel that he had to study hard now that he was at university. The reason he gave is twofold firstly that previously at school he "didn't really do much work and then all of a sudden came out with good grades". Secondly he felt the first year was a "recap" which meant that "if it was all hard work from the word go I just don't think you'd learn about yourself, I don't think you'd mature enough".

## 5.5 David

> **I think the difference is my mum regrets it (not going to university) and therefore kind of wanted me to do it whereas my dad doesn't.**

David was the first in his family to go to university. Both of his parents were serving police officers and David said he would also quite happily join the police force if he felt that the degree he was studying for did not lead anywhere.

His parents divorced when David was three years old, which as he was so young he says was not too traumatic for him. Both parents are in new relationships and David has a younger half-brother who is five years old. David said that he did not really make a decision to go to university but that it was always assumed that he would by his mother. David's mother helped him with his applications and visited various institutions with him. His father, he felt was more concerned about the financial implications of studying at university and might have preferred him to

get a job. He linked this feeling to understanding that both his parents have good jobs in the Police Force without having been to university. Bourdieu (1986) has pointed to the potential difficulty experienced in the education field when the lack of scarcity value in credentials means that the exchange of economic capital for cultural becomes undervalued. However David, and his mother, considered that a degree is a minimum qualification for most careers.

David lived and was educated in a town on the southern outskirts of London. He described this as "like a village so it's nice". He progressed from a small junior school to a secondary in the same town and stayed on for A Levels in the sixth form at the same school. David described his state secondary school as having a wide catchment area and a "wide ranging class" which was "quite diverse". When David took his A Level Product Design there were only two pupils in the class in an overall sixth form of fifty. Even though David recognised that his school did not have the best results he believed that "you would probably do well anywhere if you worked hard enough". David was described as a widening participant applicant on attending university because he lives in an area that has a low participation rate in higher education.

David described himself as working hard at school for his GCSEs and getting on particularly well with Maths. He then decided to study Maths, Physics, History and Product Design at AS Level but finding that he "sort of just flopped" with Maths at AS Level, he dropped this and continued on with the other subjects to A2.

When asked about his ambitions at school David said that he never really had any career aims and described himself as unclear about what course he wanted to do at university. He saw apprenticeships as "second best" as he considered that he was "always intelligent enough to go to university". He applied and was accepted to study History at another institution before taking a gap year. After applying he seemed to question his decision about the subject:

> ... I knew I enjoyed (chosen technical subject), but then I didn't know whether I was capable of doing it at degree level, so the year before I did my gap year I had a place to do History at ... and that was kind of like, after that I realised I was like ... I'm doing it just to get the degree. I chose a degree like as vague as History because I just wanted to get a degree.

The gap year that David took served many purposes as it allowed him the traditional reason of a break from studying, but also allowed him to decide on what he really wanted to do, given his misgivings about his original choice. He

seemed to have felt under confident about studying the subject that he eventually chose. So during his gap year he spent some of his time travelling to open days and having university interviews. Most of the time though was spent working in the hospitality industry.

Several times during the interview David mentioned that the social side of life during his sixth form and first year at university were equally as important to him as studying. He described this and living away from home as “a massive part really, it’s almost as big as a degree”. At the same time David felt himself to be more mature than some of his peer group because of his gap year. He felt that he had coped with the work in the first year, but had left everything to the last minute because of the priority he put on the social life at university. This had meant that to meet end of term deadlines he had spent two weeks in the library which was “just horrible” and meant “staying there until late at night”.

Even though David’s parents did not appear to take such a “hands-on” approach as that of Jakes he also tended to show his parents his university work and get their opinions about it. This seems to originate with the need to reassure parents about progress and enjoyment of the subject that Jake also expressed. There is also a sense that some parental monitoring is involved, as David said that he always let his mother know that he had a deadline coming up and that he had handed his work in. David said he did this because he was not at home “so I’m more keen to let them know how I’m doing or show them the stuff that I have done”.

## 5.6 Oliver

### Keeping my options open – seeing what happens.

Oliver’s family comprises his parents and two sisters. They live in a rural area, but one which is relatively close to a cathedral city within commuting distance to London.

Oliver’s parents noticed that he struggled with certain things like Maths and English at his state primary school and so made the decision to pay for him to attend a private primary school and then prep school. There was obviously sufficient economic capital within the family to make this possible. At prep school Oliver found that the system was very strict, with lots of discipline and long days starting with chapel in the morning.

At age eleven Oliver re-entered the state secondary system because his levels of Maths and English had improved. He described this as a "real big shock – I didn't know what hit me". He was put in "probably the worst behaving form there was". At the same time though this was a positive move compared with what he described "losing" his personality at prep school:

> ... because it was so strict and with that sort of discipline I was being kind of squashed as a person, I wasn't really myself at all, I was quite shy and it took me a while to realise okay that's not normal.

Oliver compared this with when he was at primary school there he was "less than shy" as he was a "real hyper child and really quite loud and disruptive". He said of this transformation "I went to (named prep school) ... all the discipline, completely controlled me and then I came back out again and found a medium at (named secondary school)".

Following GCSE's Oliver could have moved to another nearby town where there is a sixth form college but decided to stay at his secondary school, which had become familiar to him despite his initial shock. He chose to study Biology, Geography, Product Design and Psychology at AS Level but described the workload and the complexity of the subjects as something that he wasn't really expecting. He also went through a difficult time as he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) just as the AS exams started, although medication helped his condition. With hindsight he recognised that his condition had probably affected much of his schooling.

Oliver blamed himself for not trying hard enough for his AS Level subjects. He described himself as doing better at A2 when he focussed on two subjects Geography and Product Design. He also took a new subject Physical Education at AS Level at the same time.

Oliver was not the first in the family to go to university, his father studied business and his older sister was studying Psychology as an undergraduate. His parents encouraged him to think of university as something that would suit him, but left him to decide for himself as they realised that if they tried to persuade him against his inclination he probably wouldn't do any work or would leave. He put it like this:

> ... they've always supported my decision to carry on with education, it was always like, they didn't sway me but they always kind of, I felt from them that they thought it was the right thing to do and I think it as well.

The other thing that Oliver thought about doing was taking a gap year to travel and work. However he did not feel confident in having the ability to find a job and so decided to apply to university following his A Levels with the hope that "uni is the next stepping stone, hopefully from there, it will give me some other options and maybe open up some work opportunities". Oliver said that his reasons for taking the path that he did lay not in a positive choice but rather a concern about the alternative, like having to find a job. He described himself as not liking to make decisions in advance but preferring to act as the situation presents itself as someone whom preferred to "see where life leads me". This level of confidence in the future and smooth transition to university is something which Reay et al. (2005) describes as being associated with middle class behaviour. The activation of resources to help Oliver when he was struggling at primary school also points to this.

The reason Oliver gave for applying for the particular course and university he is currently studying at was twofold. Firstly that he wanted to take a BSc course as he did not feel himself to be an "arty person" and secondly the proximity to home of the university. He said that his parents also had a good feeling about the university.

Oliver had what could be considered a middle class background as his parents could afford to pay for private schooling at select times. There was the expectation that he would attend university and family members had already obtained degrees, or were in the process of doing so. He described the area that he lives in as "wealthy". His categorisation as widening participation is surprising given his circumstances, but is based on his postcode address, which falls in a rural area with low representation of young people in higher education.

Oliver was still encouraged to study by his parents during his first year at university, with his father giving practical help with business coursework. However he had also developed a network of support with his peer group with about "five of us working in a group and figuring it out together". Like most of the other participants Oliver believed that one of the most important things about his first year at university was moving away from home and maturing.

## 5.7 Summary

This chapter has presented the findings from the research by documenting the participants' life stories from the interviews and diary entries. While the individual

nature of each story is evident, there were some commonalities that emerged which will be presented and analysed in the next chapter. One of the themes that will be evident already through reading the stories in this chapter is the role of the family, particularly in educational decision making. Also prior educational experiences as well as hopes and aspirations for the future emerged as super ordinate themes from the data. Finally life changing events or epiphanies had a profound effect on some participants. These themes will be explored using the lens of capital and agency in Chapter Six.

The sections above have reconstructed each biography in order to understand more fully the chronology of the individual life and the networks of interactions that shaped educational decision making. The richness and the complexity of biographical detail allows for individuality to be examined as well as the interplay of cultural and structural influences on lives.

Therefore it is hoped that this research which considers the transition of widening participation students to higher education will allow their voices to be heard and contribute to the understanding and body of professional practice in this field.

# Chapter 6: Discussion

## 6.1 Introduction

This study explores the lived experience of students designated as widening participation who make the decision to enter higher education and aims to discover what influenced their choice about going to university. In government rhetoric the group of people designated as widening participation have frequently been homogenised although there are differences in age, gender, ethnicity and background between students that are all labelled in the same way. In the previous chapter some of these differences were explored in the lives of the five young men who agreed to participate in this study. This involved an exploration and initial interpretation of their life stories in order to also understand the educational, familial, social and cultural networks within which individual lives develop and have been influenced by the societal context within which widening participation policies have arisen as discussed in Chapter Two.

Central to the research question is whether or not individuals perceived, or were knowingly influenced by, the structural constraints present and active in their lives and if they felt that they had the ability and agency to develop their own choices and trajectories. The theoretical lens used to discuss the influences on participation will consider the work of Bourdieu (1986) where it is argued access to higher education is dependent on the differentiated distribution and utilisation of relevant capitals (Reay et al., 2005). Archer's (2000; 2007; 2012) findings about individual agency and whether or not this serves as a mediating role between individual action and social structures is also considered. The discussion is framed by the theoretical aspects of narrative analysis with respect to identity construction and agency in time and context.

Bruner (2002) calls the process of imagining and creating alternatives subjunctivization and optimistically insists on the importance of possible worlds which mean that people can transform themselves and their social contexts. To a certain extent this idea can be allied to Archer's (2007) theory that active (as opposed to passive) agents develop courses of action to realise life projects or to Gidden's (1990, 1991) and Beck's (1992) theories of reflexive individualism. The question remains to what extent, if at all; these various views on capital and agency can be seen in the biographies of the participants. Bruner (2002) has criticised the general lack of understanding about how people interpret, construct

and use stories and Monteagudo (2011) points out that narrative enquiry has been non-existent or marginal in educational analysis. The detailed research and interpretation into the lives of this study's participants will add to knowledge in this area as the sites, resources and circumstances for agency or utilisation of capital are analysed in detail in this chapter.

The complexity of educational decision making is reflected in the participants' stories and highlights the many influences upon them that were neither mechanistic nor simplistic. Atkinson (2010) suggests patterns of participation are best understood by unravelling and exploring educational trajectories in order to understand the effects of parental capital, for example, in decision making. Whilst this is important, it is essential to remember that Bourdieu (1986) notes that people have a wide array of resources, social networks and cultural training and do not use all of these resources in all fields (for example deciding about higher education or not). The way in which some of these resources have been capitalised, when and by whom (for example parents or participants) is essential to explore so as to understand the role of decision making, cultural background and agency in educational choices.

During interpretation of the findings several themes were evident that will be analysed in more detail in the following sections. The themes identified were family, educational experiences and expectations although there is also some overlap between them. Epiphanies became a separate theme. Some of these super ordinate themes were broken down into smaller sub-themes to aid interpretation of detail and theorisation of the themes.

Bourdieu (1977a cited in Atkinson, 2010) sees the social space as constructed so as to reveal the maximum differences and similarities between people. As can be seen in the previous chapter students in this study were approaching the choice to enter higher education from different familial and educational backgrounds, so both the differences between the details of some narratives as well as the commonalities, yield important insights into the lives of others.

## 6.2 Family

All of the participants mentioned their family as having been a point of contact for their educational decision making process. Tysome (2004) has shown that parents are having an increasing impact on how candidates choose courses and institutions. In line with Tysome (2004) participants in this study mentioned their

family as being involved in the decision to enter higher education to some degree. However the extent, to which parents and other significant individuals influenced decision making and hence educational trajectories, varies and can be dependent on levels of familial capital (Ball, 2003; Reay et al., 2005). Sometimes the process of ensuring a smooth and successful transition to university has occurred through parental intervention at a much earlier stage of schooling as in this study, for example Jake's father helped him with maths and later employed a tutor to help with A Level study.

Bourdieu (1986) has suggested that entering higher education can be conceived as a form of exchange between economic and objectified cultural capital (the academic qualification). Obtaining the qualification for some students, like Dalmar, meant he had to work part time whilst studying to generate economic capital to support himself.

The role and importance of gender dynamics around educational choice and selfhood is notable in this study, although ultimately outside the scope of this thesis. However it is worth noting that what constituted 'family' was different for all of the participants, with some young men like Dalmar and Ben being raised by a single parent or primarily by their mother. David and Jake relied on the support of one parent in particular (their mother and father respectively). Additional networks of support for Dalmar included advice to go to university from an older co-worker and in all cases (except that of David) siblings were mentioned as advice givers or trail blazers for going to university first. Family diversity did not mean any reduced emphasis on the value of education or input into decision making, instead different gender relationships were involved in this process.

The complexity of decision-making is further compounded by the previous educational experience of the participants and parental expectation. For example Bowl (2003) has suggested that widening participation students choices are marked by a lack of information, support and guidance at school or college prior to entering higher education. In this study the main sources of advice about higher education came from within the family but there were some commonalities and differences in student narratives about family contributions to the decision-making process. These will be explored in subsequent sections using a number of sub-themes which contribute to the bigger picture.

### 6.2.1 Family help with schooling

Jake mentioned that his family were influential on earlier schooling that helped him to ultimately progress to university. The home environment was conducive to Jake succeeding in the subjects that his parents preferred for him, with his father being able to provide help at home with GCSE Maths and a tutor when it came to A Level study. Jake said that his family had always been quite a strong influence on him and had guided him to make choices about certain subjects at school:

> They didn't want me to just to do art and things like that, because they knew I was, they've always thought I was quite clever so they wanted me to do like a Maths or Science as well to kind of give it a bit of diversity. So they always pushed me with that and I mean with A Levels as well, I could have chosen some A Levels that would have got me nowhere in terms of this course.

Jake's father's cultural capital was being used to help his son's progress and later the family invested economic capital in a Maths tutor to help achieve their ambitions for Jake. His father had taken an apprenticeship and was now in a managerial role for a large engineering company and Jake had been encouraged to follow in his footsteps by taking STEM subjects at school and acquire science capital as this was part of his father's experience.

In her work Sullivan (2007) has identified two modes of diffusion of cultural capital that are both relevant to Jake's experience. Firstly there is the active form of transmission that is demonstrated when Jake's father helped him with his schoolwork. Secondly passive cultural capital transmission describes the connection to educational advancement that surrounds a child through every day practices, routines and taken for granted ways of thinking and acting. For example, Jake commented that his parents always perceived him and his sister as clever, they valued a broad education for them both, and they encouraged homework and monitored progress. Predispositions and capabilities are shaped and influenced by context which made participation in higher education for Jake seem as though it is something which is a natural development.

Jake described his family as "quite posh in a way compared to a lot of my other friends". This perceived difference is part of the family habitus as Jake describes how his parents have influenced his "manners" which have always been "very formal". An example he gives that made his friends "take the mick" is when "we had dinner and my parents eat in the dining room, they have everything laid out

nicely, we have serviettes and stuff like that". Jake's family's habitus meant that not only did they perceive themselves as different to others but their cultural and economic capital meant they valued education and were prepared to invest in the symbolic capital of the degree qualification. Jake did demonstrate some agency when he secured a place on the access course that meant he was sufficiently qualified to progress to higher education, which is evidence of his own interest in going to university.

All of the participants were asked to nominate what class they thought that they belonged to, even though the POLAR classification of widening participation applied to all of them. Oliver described the area that he was bought up in as "wealthy" and his parents were able to pay for him to attend a private preparatory school when they felt that Oliver was not making "sufficient progress" at his state primary school. Oliver described how they "teamed up with my primary school" in order to discuss options for him. Oliver's parents not only mobilised their cultural capital in order to negotiate his educational future, but they were also able to utilise their economic and social capital to obtain what they wanted for Oliver. In employing their various forms of capital Oliver's parents were acting, albeit at a different stage in his education career, in a similar manner to Jake's. Atkinson (2010) points to the value of having parents who know, how and when to "strategise" about the conversion of various forms of capital to advantage their children. In Oliver's case his parents were able to work with education professionals at a key stage so as to equip Oliver with the necessary skills for the future. Ball (2003: 92) has noted that the mobilisation of resources by middle class parents at moments of crisis often includes trying to ensure a clear trajectory. This trajectory involves "insulating children from others who face similar difficulties but lack remedial resources".

It is notable that Oliver is one of the students (the other being David) who had a linear and smooth transition to university compared to Ben and Dalmar and both come from middle class backgrounds where expectations about attending higher education are part of the family habitus. David noted that "overall it would be a wise decision to carry on" from his A Levels as if this did not require a great deal of thought and decision making on his part. When Oliver went to his parents for help with university choices it was straightforward because "they know me and they can recommend and read over things more thoroughly than I do".

Unlike Oliver, David was the first in his family to go to university. Like Oliver this was expected because he always thought of himself as a person "who would get a

job that would need a degree". David's mother was able to help him with school work around the stage of his GCSE's, which he described as "driving it into me..it did cause some friction." David described his family as "quite well to do" and his school as having "a wide ranging class." This is similar to Oliver's and Jake's description of their middle class background and the more socially mixed comprehensive schools they each attended. In each of these cases family capital was utilised to gain educational advantage by compensating for any (real or perceived) shortfall in the education system or their own particular difficulties in learning, or as a boost to exam success.

Bourdieu (1986) has explained how parental capital can give people a head start in education through the domestic and inherited transmission of cultural capital. Both David and Oliver have depended on inherited capital, during the transition to university, which has led to a level of dependency on family resources and a lack of their own reflexivity or agency.

Whilst Ben described his family as "poor as church mice" and therefore lacking in economic capital his family habitus predisposed him towards education, for example the habit of reading at home was established by parents at a young age; there was no television in his home suggesting they espoused particular values, such as the importance of education. His grandparents were missionaries and his father had a career in the Navy before training as an electrician and his family could be described as lower middle class. Ben's story shows that his educational trajectory was fragmented as he was out of formal education for four years, but Ben had a habitus that valued education and he drew on his family's cultural and social capital to eventually enter university. Ben could not draw on resources of economic capital but he acknowledged that his family background not only shaped his sense of self, as this "has a massive effect on how you form" but was also positively influential in supporting him educationally "it's more about the environment than money". He described a household where "from a young age we were addressed as miniature adults". Again we can see what Bourdieu (1984: 70) has described as the operation of cultural capital of the previous generation utilised to advance the next generation, both a "head start and a credit".

In contrast, Dalmar's mother had limited ability to help with school, or recognise when help was needed. Reay et al. (2005) have identified certain characteristics with respect to first generation applicants to higher education whose parents were born outside the United Kingdom. Their parents have low incomes; as a

result the student can expect little financial support in terms of choice-making or funding for higher education.

Dalmar recognised that his mother reinforced the fact that she had been a successful businesswoman in Somalia by way of motivating Dalmar to succeed educationally and that she could draw on some reserves of capital that valued education and saw it as a mark of distinction, but changes to her circumstances meant that, according to Dalmar "... whereas she's kinda, I won't say oblivious, but she's limited in the knowledge so sometimes I have to tell her stuff, (hesitates) yeah, it would be better if she was more engaged to what's actually going on."

Dalmar's mother, whilst encouraging, is not knowledgeable enough about the UK education system and her change in status since moving to this country suggests that she lacks the requisite economic, social, cultural capital to directly help her children at school and university. Yet Dalmar's mother has invested, what Reay (2000) describes as emotional capital in encouraging Dalmar to carry on with his education. Reay (2000) found that in her study of class and gender processes embedded in parental involvement in education that mothers in particular became emotionally engaged in their children's education. Secondary school for Dalmar was a difficult experience and will be discussed further in section 6.3.1.

### 6.2.2 Family help with university choices

Jake's family was very influential in helping him choose a potential course and university. His decision making around choices was made in conjunction with his parents, Jake's father for example valued the professional accreditation at the course that Jake chose, he said to Jake "if you realised how much that is worth just having that one word (accreditation) almost, then you'd know where to go". The growth in importance of qualifications has been linked to economic development in the modern period as people link their acquisition with increased social mobility (Dore, 1976; Fuller, 1999). Furthermore universities have become a "core social institution that forms the bedrock of a knowledge economy" (Tomlinson, 2013: 175). The increased focus on credentials has resulted in a degree becoming the minimum qualification for many jobs. In recommending the course at the university that Jake chose, his father recognised the competitive edge that accreditation could give because of his own background in the same vocation.

Jake's sister was already at the same institution that Jake finally chose. Distance from home was also something that affected Jake's choice as the university chosen was "closest to home" and meant that "it does fit perfectly into my lifestyle being here". However even though Jake was predisposed to value education his reflexive style could be described as "communicative" in Archer's typology (2007). This is where internal conversations require completion by others; in this case Jake discussed his options very thoroughly with his parents and had them confirmed, particularly by his father. The connection between Jake and his family was strong to the extent that his agency could be considered bounded (Evans, 2001) and university a hiatus in his relationship with his family.

Whilst David acknowledged his mother's influence on his progression to university as being "active and encouraging" compared to his father. David's father was "less keen". The reasons for this was not an aversion to higher education, but as Fuller et al. (2011) identified a view that the financial output does not necessarily justify the rewards. David's father had "looked more at the money side of it" and felt that "a lot could be done without a degree especially if I was unsure of what degree to take". David's father is a policeman who has forged his career by working "up through the ranks" and saw this as something that is preferable to going to university to study for a degree where certain courses may have no obvious employment outcome. On the other hand David recognised that his mother "pushed him towards university" because she regretted not going herself. Ball (2003) found in his study that the expressed interests of the parent and the inferred needs of the child may not be the same. Ball (2003) attributes the middle class parental desire for their children to go to university as being anxiety around social reproduction in a congested labour market. David's mother is ambitious for him to succeed in an area she would have liked to herself. David said of this transference of ambition that his mother "assumed" that he would go to university, that she was "very encouraging" and "took me to all the places". David's mother exhibits both an active and passive form of capital transmission, she encourages David with his school work for example and was active in investigating all of his university options, he said of himself "I've never really had an ambition of a career, I want to travel a lot ... I've never really had much of career ambition really".

David, like Jake, exhibits very little agency at this stage in his life, he is accepting of his mothers plans for him because the only viable alternative that he can see (joining the Met) also requires him to have a degree. David did take a gap year to

travel but spent a lot of that time working before travelling in Europe. Like Jake to some extent his selfhood is developing, but still being framed by the family.

Both Jake and David allowed the decisions about university to be largely taken out of their hands and could be regarded as embedded within the family networks Reay et al. (2005) developed the idea of contingent and embedded choosers in order to describe the different discourses of higher education choice of ethnic minority students. Part of the definition of a contingent chooser is that parents are onlookers and offer minimal support (defined by Reay et al. as social capital) that is distinct from the kind of parental involvement experienced by Jake and David. Whilst Dalmar's mother was very encouraging towards him improving himself by going to university she was unable to actively provide advice and support because of lower levels of cultural and social capital. However she summoned others in her endeavours to persuade Dalmar about the benefits of going to university by using his older siblings, in this case Dalmar's elder brother for advice about education (Auerbach, 2006). Dalmar's older brother was the first in the family to study at degree level and he said his brother "drummed it in his head, work or study".

One of the reasons given for this strong encouragement is that Dalmar was expected to improve himself and take advantage of the opportunities that were not open to his mother who came to England as an asylum seeker from Somalia. Despite the racism that the family experienced when they first arrived, he described England optimistically as giving you "opportunities to really do well, to excel in whatever you want there's no restrictions." However he also perceived the status differences (Teichler, 2004) between universities as "some friends of mine they all went to Imperial and Cambridge, from a horrible background" which made him feel "I can do that, but not as good." Dalmar felt less confident than the members of his peer group who had managed to go to elite institutions because he did not have the correct qualifications for entry and therefore lacked the necessary cultural capital.

The emotional capital that Dalmar's mother invested in him and her wish and ambitions about his future, could not come to fruition until Dalmar felt confident in himself and his abilities to be successful at university. Dalmar said that despite his mother and his siblings telling him to go to university he "thought that degrees are for intelligent people and only selected people should go". Dalmar's fragile sense of himself as a potential student most likely lay with his

prior schooling and lack of educational achievement. Dalmar therefore saw going to university as a risk to his sense of self if he didn't do well academically.

Dalmar therefore exhibited what Reay et al. (2005) have referred to as a Bourdieurian sense of place, the knowledge about your relationship to the world and your place in it. Archer and Hutchings (2001) found that working class non-participants in higher education positioned themselves as outside higher education because they frequently associated entering it as something they may take advantage of, but felt they did not own. Working class students saw the move to higher education as one bounded by risks, costs and uncertainty. The costs for Dalmar, as an ethnic minority, were similar in terms of finance and time, as well as a risk to his sense of self. Dalmar did not consider himself to be suited to higher education until he developed his own sense of agency and *Bildung* which will be discussed further in section 6.5.

Ben admitted at one stage he was "totally against the idea of going to university" but this was for very different reasons compared to Dalmar who didn't believe he could get in and was concerned about the risk associated with going to university. Ben developed a strong sense of agency that made him reconnect with education following an epiphany (which will be discussed in section 6.5). Prior to this he had formed a low opinion of the education system. However he later changed his mind and decided to apply to go to university. Ben did discuss his decision with his parents and his grandfather but believed that:

> it was very much a decision that I made by myself and my parents have always been supportive but allowing me to make my own decisions and my own mistakes.

Ben was therefore able to use his agency with respect to university choices, although this was not entirely divorced from family capital. Ben's older sister had preceded him to university and his father was able to advise him about the particular institution that Ben chose because he completed his master's degree at the same institution that Ben eventually chose, so that it "came personally recommended by my dad." Whilst Ben's decision making appears to be agentic it was still bounded by familial relations, particularly with Ben's father's social capital bought into play with regard to the eventual choice of university. Ben did not acknowledge the bounds to his agency with regard to his family but, like Dalmar, he did recognise that his choice was limited to modern post 1992 institutions as noted, "I have vocational qualifications so that limited me to where I could get in."

Oliver's decision about the university to attend was not based on the qualifications he had obtained but because he was attracted to the course on offer and also the proximity of the university to home, because it was "only an hour away from home". His reliance on home and family was key to his educational decision making and he felt that his parents supported him in this: "we discussed the other things that I could do and thought uni was the best option." Oliver's father had studied business at university and he went to his parents for help with his choices because he felt they could make recommendations. Even though Oliver felt that he was making his own decisions it was apparent that his family had an influence on his decision to study at university and helped him research his options. With Oliver, there was a sense of entitlement and smooth transition that is associated with middle class cultural capital and Oliver did not exhibit any of the anxiety about going to university that Dalmar had articulated. Oliver described his thinking process about university "I thought overall it would be a wise decision to carry on and just see where it takes me basically". Normal biographies are linear, anticipated and predictable unreflexive transitions often driven by an absence of decisions (Reay et al., 2005). Bourdieu (1990: 33) referred to this as "intentionality without intention" and his seems to highly apposite in Oliver's case.

Oliver, Jake and David did not exhibit a great deal of criticality in their thinking about higher education; rather they demonstrated that they have relied heavily on their parents' guidance. When viewed under the lens of the growing marketisation and commodification of higher education Reay et al. (2005) have shown that the workings of cultural and social capital operate to maintain and reinforce inequitable differences and distinctions; meaning that middle class students have more information about universities and university courses and therefore inevitably more choice than others like Dalmar.

It is apparent in this study that the decision making about higher education is still embedded in networks of relationships, the most important being familial and that differing forms of capital are mobilised, so that for some students the transition to university is almost unreflexive in its expectedness.

## 6.3 Educational Experiences and Expectations

The designation of a widening participation student has been applied to all of the students in the study, yet differences in prior educational experience mean that inequalities still exist in terms of unequal access to educational opportunities.

This inequality can be seen in the relative ease or difficulty of students' prior educational experience and how this equipped them to cope with their first year of study.

### 6.3.1 Prior Educational experience

Of all of the participants interviewed Dalmar and Ben have the most complex and protracted transition to higher education. Both took longer than the standard term of two years to gain their entry level qualifications (BTech). Dalmar failed at AS Level and decided to go to college to study for a BTech and Ben re-entered formal education at college and also took a BTech. Jake's transition to higher education was not altogether straightforward either because he took an extra year due to poor A Levels results and obtained a university place through taking a foundation course.

Dalmar reflected back on both his lack of motivation at school and teachers that "drummed it into you, you are not going anywhere in life". Apart from one inspirational teacher who encouraged him, he described being "labelled as a failure at school", something that he came to believe of himself and may in part account for concerns about applying and going to university discussed above. He was involved in a gang dealing drugs during his school years which he partly blames on "being let down by everyone including the government, and then they tend to wonder why we do what we do". Bourdieu (1990) notes that working class dispositions are the products of both opportunities and constraints framing earlier life experiences. According to Bourdieu (1990: 154) these dispositions are "durably incalculated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions in the objective conditions". Dalmar recognises the structural constraints that made his youth difficult in terms of poor schooling and lack of opportunities.

Dalmar's lack of confidence is carried through to university. When he compared himself with other students academically in the first year he said "but I have to be on my toes more than they do". The disjunction that an individual feels as he/she enters a new field (university) is most comprehensively felt and articulated by Dalmar. Bourdieu (1986) argues that disjuncture of this sort when consciously experienced leads to classificatory judgements about practices. Dalmar, for example, perceived a difference existing between him and the other students in terms of entry level qualifications, with A Levels being the "gold standard". He believed that he had to work harder because he had a BTech compared to those

with A Levels who have a “strategy to revise” and a “strategy of how to lay out an assignment”.

Dalmar’s life did not provide the social and economic advantages that others, for example, Jake and David had  instead he came from a background of poor initial schooling, involvement with a gang and having qualifications that have taken him longer than others to achieve.  His choice of a modern, non elite and less prestigious university was also constrained by his prior education and background. Although agency and reflexivity play a part in his transition (and will be discussed in more detail in section 6.8) in reality the structural constraints he had to overcome and particularly the lack of economic capital in the family means that the continued potency of class and inequality is evident. Reay et al. (2005) have pointed to choice around higher education as being a social process that is both structured and structuring, with the process for working class students like Dalmar to get to university and succeed as being chancy and uncertain.

Ben’s experience mirrors Dalmar’s in that he was also older when he entered university with BTech level qualifications. His difficulties with depression which meant he took longer to gain relevant qualifications have been previously discussed in Chapter Five. His absence of formal schooling during secondary age made him realise he “didn’t know how to study” when he arrived at university. However he felt the actual subject of his BTech equipped him better than other students because the vocational subject route meant “I decided what I wanted to do in life”. Despite an unconventional secondary school education that resulted in the same qualifications as Dalmar, Ben appeared to have more confidence about being at university than Dalmar that may be derived from his family’s social and cultural capital.

Even though Oliver had found his A Levels “stressful” he saw his first year at university as “building on what I already know in some cases”. So his prior schooling gave him the confidence and knowledge to feel “it’s merely just like touching up (on a subject) and getting familiar again.” For this reason he had not been surprised by anything, academically in the first year and “everything’s been what I would expect at uni.” Oliver was able to recognise a fit between himself and university that meant he felt comfortable there. This confidence and entitlement reflects a habitus already disposed to education feeling at home in higher education culture. Reay et al. (2005: 92) refer to this as “class matching between student and university, a synchronisation of familial and institutional habitus”.

As has been previously discussed Jake had the input of his father to help with GCSE and a maths tutor for A Level Maths. Jake felt without his father "he definitely wouldn't have got anywhere." He said his poorer performance at A Level was because "I got really sloppy and I got a bit lazy". Like Oliver he described A Levels as stressful, but felt "uni was a bit easier because at least it's all one kind of subject." David had worked "quite hard to get his GCSE grades" and found "it easier at A Level because of that". However the "sixth form was like 50 people so tiny, really small" and for one subject "there was only two of us in the class". David felt that he "had an advance" for certain subjects because he had studied them before at A Levels which meant a level of confidence with respect to first year exams because "although I've got a lot to revise, I'm pretty sure I'll pick it up quick because I've done it before".

### 6.3.2 On- going monitoring

Another sub-theme that emerged from the overarching theme of educational experience and expectation was the degree to which parental influence continued to operate during the first year once students were at university. Whilst the help and guidance given at the decision-making stage is hardly surprising, it might have been expected that parents would encourage a certain degree of independence once their children were settled. Instead three of the five participants (David, Jake and Dalmar) discussed the continued involvement of their parents in their studies ranging from general queries about progress through to the expectation of being shown coursework.

It is possible that this concern about progress started earlier in some students' education, and has become a habit. Jake, for example, said of his parents:

> I mean they definitely have problems with me for being lazy and not doing work but it's probably only because of them I've got where I am, otherwise I probably would have dropped out of school and done just what I wanted to do...

This meant that when he went home at weekends during the first year and his parents didn't see him working they asked if he had any work to do and "they are always active, they always want to see it."

The possible factors influencing parent's on-going involvement could be concern around performance to succeed linked to the increased fee regime, and the sense already mentioned, that for some, higher education is a financial and emotional

risk for the family (Gorard et al., 2006). When viewed in the light of Archer's (2012) model of reflexive thinking patterns, the reliance by students on confirmation and discussion with parents is suggestive of communicative reflexivity, where internal conversations require completion and confirmation by others.

David said that he let his parents know what he was doing in his studies more now than when he was studying for his A Levels. As he was not at home he described how he was keener to let them know how he was doing and show them projects that he was working on. Dalmar responded to his mother's enquires about his studies confirming that "she always messages me on Skype and stuff always asking how I'm doing", but Dalmar felt that his mother did not have sufficient cultural capital to help or really judge his work in any meaningful way. Dalmar noticed different parental approaches and compared his background with that of white students who he felt had parents that are less interested in educational outcomes and are more "hands off" although this was not necessarily the case as it can be seen that parental monitoring was occurring with respect to Jake and David as well.

However as Dalmar adjusted to university life at the end of the first year he reflected on the fact that he had changed and that his mother's support was limited because:

> ... if my mum was more like engaged with educational stuff I think it would be more beneficial for me, she would understand what kind of expectations there is and what kind of results I should be getting and what career aspect I should be getting.

Oliver said his parents "encouraged him to study whilst he was at university". His father had helped with one piece of coursework in his subject, because "that's what he does for a living, so ... I learnt a lot from that." Apart from this Oliver had largely replaced parental help (cultural capital) with his own peer group support (social capital). Oliver had developed a support network that meant "instead I go to other people for help."

The rationale for some of these students to continue to involve parents in their undergraduate studies, suggests a level of anxiety about higher education on behalf of parents and young people. Jake described the need to show that he has made the right choice. He said:

> ... it's also showing that I'm passionate about it, because if I don't show them that they must be thinking well is he actually enjoying it, why can't you share it with your parents?

### 6.3.3 Work during study

Dalmar repeatedly described engaging in higher education as a "risk". This risk was associated with both a fear of the academic unknown and concern for financial security. This can be contrasted with the progress of Oliver to university where his parents "just had an attitude where they supported me whatever I wanted to do and then they said well this would probably be a good idea for you... so it's pretty much up to me". The support that Oliver is referring to is economic help as well as general guidance. Oliver did not have to find a part time job during his first year so he could concentrate on study and enjoy university social life.

Dalmar had saved enough money from previous jobs to pay his first year tuition fees and worked throughout his first year doing two part time jobs in order to support his studies. He saw this as an investment in himself "... so I thought, I want to put it on, put it on myself". In contrast Oliver and David did not have the burden of juggling jobs and study and Jake worked only during the summer holidays whilst Ben relied on student loans which meant "I have a budget to play with ... and I have the flexibility to mess up a little bit."

Dalmar recognised that his lack of economic capital had an impact on his social life at university because "I was working it's also a downfall because I didn't participate in the clubs, the societies, the socials, all those kind of stuff...because I had the stupid idea of paying for it myself".

Not only was Dalmar paying for his studies he was also sending money home to his family to help with the family budget. He reflected on the difficulty of working and studying "I know that I can't literally work next year because I can't keep up with the workload at uni". Bourdieu (1986) notes that the transformation of economic capital into cultural requires time. During the first year at university Dalmar is busy working and does not have the time to either develop himself through studying or joining in with student activities. Dalmar, unlike Ben also starts university from a position of not having much cultural capital invested from the family (Bourdieu, 1986).

Cultural capital is primarily a relational capital and exists in conjunction with other forms of capital like economic, symbolic and social. In addition to their interconnection Bourdieu (1993) describes one form of capital as being able to be translated into another. He describes this as being like a game of roulette when he writes:

> Those with lots of red tokens and a few yellow tokens, that is lots of economic capital and a little cultural capital will not play in the same way as those who have many yellow tokens and a few red ones ... the more yellow tokens (cultural capital) they have, the more they will stake on the yellow squares (the educational system). (Bourdieu, 1993: 34)

Ben's relative financial freedom and family cultural capital meant "I can work on improving without worrying about not eating this week." As a result he was also studying German and Japanese, free language courses available at the university that allowed him to the opportunity for self-development. It would seem that the acquisition of one form capital (economic) has repercussions for the acquisition of cultural and social capital, limiting the potential of the university experience for students like Dalmar. Whereas for Ben his new found economic independence from his family combined with a habitus that valued education meant he could develop a new educational identity at university. The exploitation of cultural opportunities at university can result in what Tomlinson (2013: 191) has referred to as a "personal and cultural emancipation" which may occur as students identify with their new cultural environment.

## 6.4 Perceptions of Selfhood and Educational Identity

In many ways it is impossible to divorce individual perceptions of selfhood from educational identity. "Who" the students believed themselves to be and "what" they hoped to become was inextricably tied up with their educational selfhood. Four of the participants, Dalmar, Ben, David and Jake were insightful about their values like wanting to make their family proud of them and linked this element of their self-concept to their decision to participate in higher education and their future aspirations. Values and beliefs, ways of being often originating in family or religious contexts (in Ben and Delmar's case) gave rise to ways of coping and resilience at university.

The participants all mentioned their hopes and expectations for the future when they graduated. The assumption was that a degree would lead to a better job and

a more positive career trajectory. However as Tomlinson (2013: 193) has commented degree level qualifications have lost their ”potency in shaping graduates future employment outcomes”. This is because, as Bourdieu (1986) identified forms of distinction like the symbolic value of a degree, relies on its scarcity value.

The government’s message about increasing participation can be seen at the individual level in Dalmar’s statement:

> Society drums it into our head that education is the best way and, and to be honest, yes it is ‘cause once you graduate, you’ll be paid more than an average person...so it’s a system that we all follow.

Jake equated gaining a degree with earning more money in his chosen discipline, although he also acknowledged that he “didn’t feel ready to work” directly after taking A Levels. Jake’s parents encouraged him to be ambitious and he described having ambition as being an important motivating factor in life. Jake also defined himself against his peer group at home by clearly expressing his desire to break away from the traditional lifestyle that he saw around him:

> ... people that my parents have known from growing up, that are always going to be in (home town). You’re going to go down the pub on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday night and they’re going to be there having the same drink they’ve had for the same 20 years.

Jake compared himself to this group because “I don’t want to be that, I don’t want to be stuck in (home town) either. I just wanted to; I don’t know I want to live a little bit.” Jake saw his way out of this background being through obtaining qualifications and moving away to university. This developing sense of self and reflexivity about his background has its origins in Jake’s parent’s ambitions for him to do well and have a good job.

Ben described his main reason for coming to university as personal growth and challenge, including independent living. His earlier fragmented education had meant that he had not been particularly challenged academically and he found an enjoyment in being at university with new opportunities to learn. Ben was frustrated that his excitement was not shared by a group of like-minded people. His choice of university was restricted to one of the less elite and prestigious modern universities that accepted an alternative vocational qualification like the BTech. As an older entrant who was keen and enthusiastic about study and self-

improvement Ben found himself at odds with his cohort, whom he perceived as more absorbed by the stereotypical student lifestyle.

Dalmar's choice of university was limited, like that of Ben, to those institutions who took his particular qualification. Dalmar had a difficult educational background and had a low level of confidence in his academic ability. He was reflexive about why this might be and commented on the wider reasons he felt let down by his school and the government. He saw few educational alternatives, apart from university:

> ... but it felt like everyone was letting you down, like even the government, they are talking about loads of apprenticeship schemes available for you guys. But there wasn't. There was hardly any. And then they tend to wonder why we do what we do...

Dalmar spoke of the influence that his family had on him as being "the value that I learnt was to you know be your best, do what's right". This and the importance of his religion meant that university had changed him because he could see himself "progressing". Dalmar felt he needed to progress because "people from a different ethnicity ... are privileged to be here in some sense and you should take full advantage of doing well"

Oliver saw coming to university as a "stepping stone" that might lead to a career in his subject, but at the same time he was ambivalent about what he wanted to do in the future, acknowledging that he preferred to see what comes along and gaining a qualification to see "where it might lead him". Reay et al. (2005: 33) describe the Bourdieurian concept of how middle class students move in their world as "fish in water" and have a self-assured relationship to the world arsing from a middle class habitus. Oliver felt at home at university in his first year and has a confidence about the future, which is reflective of his family's level of cultural capital, which equipped him well.

As might be expected in the first year of study, participants did not have fully developed views about exactly what type of occupations they might go into, beyond expecting that a degree was a necessary pre-requisite in the employment market. Dalmar stated that "once you graduate, you'll be paid more than the average person ... so it's the salary ... and once you reach the age of eighteen you go to university, it's the system". Dalmar was expecting an increase in economic advantage and capital as a result of obtaining a degree qualification.

However those from working class and minority ethnic groups have been shown to earn significantly less than average on graduation (Milburn, 2009). The policy context of widening participation may encourage the idea that a fair system of education is for all that are notionally equivalent, but in reality a heavily stratified higher education system still exists with credentials and university experience that have a different symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1986).

David considered degree programmes to be interchangeable because they all offered the same qualification and described himself as someone who would get a job that would necessitate having a degree. This is the mechanism of "qualification escalation" as Dore (1976: 5) has described it, which ensures that "the higher the educational qualification one gets the better one's chances of getting some job". Even though he enjoyed the subject being studied he was ambivalent about whether he found a job related to his degree pathway or used a degree as a qualification to enter the police force, following in his parents footsteps. David's confidence in a potential career in the police lies in his family's social capital. David's father, mother and step-father are all serving police officers. His intention was to try and succeed in his area of study but if this didn't happen he said that he would "happily join the Met" because he saw "how well my parents have done and there is such a variety to it". David, like Oliver felt settled in the first year. He was confident that his A Levels had equipped him well for university study.

Ben and Dalmar, two of the students who had the most complex educational backgrounds, demonstrate a sense of agency and new dispositions at university. Reflexivity is a process (Archer, 2012) which involves strong evaluation of social context in the light of concerns, allowing for adjustment to the context people find themselves in. Ben is active in finding additional language classes that allow him to develop his interests and possibly make new friends. Dalmar is reflective about his personal circumstances, how these compare with his peer group and how he can improve his academic progress. Ricoeur (1992) allows for the possibility of both change, and the significance of past experience, in his theory of dispositions acquired over time (idem identity) and selfhood in the context of new experiences (ipse identity). The transition to university has developed the educational selfhood of Ben and Dalmar in particular.

### 6.4.1 Fitting in and maturing

Most of the participants mentioned that one of the main outcomes from going to university was the move away from home, finding independence and maturing. So managing to live alone, making friends and enjoying student life were mentioned as being a very important aspect of the first year. However Dalmar saw the social side as less important than "finishing my degree, that's why I came here and that's what I plan to leave with." He perceived fitting in with traditional student life as more difficult because of his religious conversion and beliefs "you've got a few friends that were doing the petty stuff here, like asking you to smoke weed and I'm like no I don't want to do that." Dalmar has invested economic capital in his decision to go to university and saw this as a risk; he was therefore less willing and able to be drawn into student life because of the necessity to work. He did however form a connection with some students in the years above to gain background knowledge about coursework in order to reflect on what the future held. This showed an agency on his part that can be associated with a developing educational selfhood and development of cultural and social capital.

Ben also found his religious beliefs and developing educational selfhood meant that he found himself isolated. He compared his experience:

> I came wanting to grow up, to assume responsibility. Most of the other students I have met approach it as a chance to go wild, to break down the boundaries, to live without responsibility before they settle down later.

Overall though Ben felt the positive side was that "since coming to university I have grown in lots of ways. I am now largely independent, responsible for myself." Ben is using his agency to develop a more socially and educationally mature sense of self.

Whilst Ben and Dalmar saw university as an opportunity to become more autonomous and less reliant on regular family support, Jake continued to go home at weekends for a lot of the time during the first year. Nevertheless he did indicate that maturing and becoming independent "goes hand in hand with going to university .. .just purely because it's another stage in life". However it would seem that Jake had more difficulty in becoming independent from his family given his regular visits home. His bond with his family remained somewhat stronger than any formed with his peer group.

David had taken a gap year and felt himself to be more mature than the other students because of this. However during the first year at university he found the thing that had been most positive about this first year was “living on my own away from home” although the social side of life “was a very high priority like almost as important as the work in a way, just because of the experience and stuff”. This can be contrasted to the difference concerns and experiences of both Ben and Dalmar, who felt quite isolated and at odds with what they perceived to the typical student lifestyle.

Oliver had found no real surprises with respect to university life in the first year but felt because he was “living in a house with a few other people and I have to do everything myself I’ve matured”. He saw university as a transition “because it’s not just like the learning but then moving away from home as well, that’s another step I guess”. Oliver is starting to develop his own sense of self and independence from his family during the first year.

Self improvement and maturing as described by Oliver and David has the sense of a rite of passage. The actual ritual that marks and validates university education is of course the graduation ceremony, but there are stages of transition prior to this that it is important to remember. Van Gennep (1960) originally proposed a three-stage model of transition namely separation, liminality and incorporation. The separation phase means that the individual or group is removed from a previous state into a liminal phase. This is a social limbo where the individual may develop a close bond (communitas) with other group members and finally an incorporation phase (reintegration into society with a new state). Rites of passage can be interpreted as institutionalised transitions in social status (Barton, 2007). For Oliver and David this seems to have been a relatively straightforward process but Jake’s transition was incomplete as he continued to rely heavily on home and family for support. Both Ben and Dalmar acknowledge that they had matured as a result of moving away from home, however they had not developed a close bond with other students on the course as a result of not wishing to embrace, what they saw as a typical student lifestyle. The perception that Jake, David, Dalmar and Oliver had about their potential change in social status was linked to obtaining a qualification which they hoped would lead to a career, therefore in Bourdieu’s (1986) terms exchanging economic capital for cultural.

For Dalmar and Ben the ability to adjust to university life was not so straightforward for differing reasons. Class and ethnicity have been pointed out as being central to fitting in and feeling comfortable (Reay et al., 2005). Dalmar

was immediately conscious of his ethnicity in terms of being one of the few black students on the course. He described this as culture shock and says: "... because I'm the only black student in the classroom, or black male because there's a female who's black ... once I walked in the classroom I thought yes this is going to be quite difficult". Hall (1996 cited in Pilkington, 2003) points to the feeling of moving between different worlds and of shifting or new identities as young black people negotiate different cultural traditions, in this instance across university and home. But racial discrimination and racism severely constrain the possibility of identity construction for members of minority ethnic groups (Pilkington, 2003: 119). The post-modern notion of choosing and using different identities is therefore compromised.

Dalmar described his experience of trying to fit in with a practically all white class "... the thing is if I act like them I'm still not going to be accepted, it's just like the same as a monkey, he can wear a suit but he'll never be human, he will never be accepted". Despite the policy attempts to widen access to higher education Dalmar's statement reveals that there is an inequality of experience for those who "have been targeted as the beneficiaries of social inclusion" (Bowl, 2003). Dalmar perceives himself as an outsider which Bowl (2003) found in her study was indicative of students internalising institutional exclusionary attitudes.

The difficulty in Dalmar's transition to university was related to feeling different due to his ethnicity in a largely white, middle class institution. Despite his growing agency in terms of trying to develop his study skills and development of cultural capital, there is recognition that this might not be enough to overcome the more fundamental barrier which he perceives as race.

Ben also felt at odds with other students but for different reasons. Ben's ability to have a successful transition to and during university was hampered by his expectation that he would be in a like-minded group who were as interested as he was in doing well. He described his peer group as unmotivated and uninterested. He said "I've found the student culture frustrating. The emphasis on living it up and playing around instead of working – especially amongst the first years, drives me nuts".

Archer (2007) has argued that both attending university and the process of "contextual discontinuity" that this entails can lead to an increase in meta-reflexivity. Meta-reflexive people are those who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society. In this study only two of the participants (Ben and Dalmar) could be described as

exhibiting a degree of meta-reflexivity. They gave a detailed rationale about their reasons for going to university and reflected on the difficult process to get there. In Archer's typology of reflexivity Dalmar's mode of reflexivity could also be categorised as communicative. The decision making discussed during his interviews demonstrated an internal conversation that required completion and confirmation by family members or other role models, before resulting in a course of action. Jake also belonged in this category because he discussed all his options with his parents. Whilst Ben demonstrated elements of fractured reflexivity at times which is described by Archer (2007: 93) as being found in people "whose internal conversations intensify their distress and disorientation, rather than leading to purposeful courses of action". Ben's reflection on his difficulties with formal education and his peer group at university can be interpreted in this way.

Even though some students, like Jake and David, maintained fairly strong links with their family network during the first year (using family capital to some extent) there was a loosening of these ties, meaning these students had to draw on other resources. Whilst some students developed cultural capital through social capital by using peer group networks of help to study (Oliver and David) Ben and Dalmar found themselves more isolated; Dalmar because of his ethnicity and religious attitudes and Ben also because of his beliefs.

Dalmar and Ben discussed their modes of adaptation at university more thoroughly than all the other participants, suggesting that they found the transition more difficult and had to draw on a combination of differing resources, which included reflecting about their new context. In part the difficulties they experienced may have been due to the qualifications they had on entry, whereas Oliver, Jake and David had A Levels that seemed to provide a good foundation for the first year at university, even though they had all found them stressful to achieve. This relative ease of transition in study is associated with having what Bourdieu (1986) describes as the officially recognised competence as the syllabus of A Level study more fully matched that of the university first year curriculum.

Once at university Jake and David maintained stronger links with home that partially sustained their educational identities through communication with their parents whilst building peer group help at university. Dalmar in particular negotiated and adjusted to the first year in specific ways because he was concerned that his prior educational qualifications did not fully fit him for university. Bourdieu (1986) has noted that poor prior schooling necessitates more

time spend on self-improvement to counteract the effect. Dalmar's strategy to compensate involved talking to students in the year above to discuss the curriculum in order to develop his educational identity so "that when I'm in the second year I'll know exactly what I should be doing". In spending time discussing subject specific knowledge and assessment strategies, Dalmar was using his agency to build his cultural capital. In turn this led to him developing his social network, although not particularly with his own year group. The goal that saw him strategise about performance is the desire to achieve a first or upper second class degree. In Archer's (2007) conception of reflexivity this had occurred because Dalmar had a project to work towards, however he needed to mobilise social and cultural capital in order to do so

## 6.5 Epiphanies

Ben and Dalmar both spoke explicitly about experiences that could be considered as epiphanies (Denzin, 1989) in that they had radically altered the course of their lives and in the longer term influenced their decision to enter higher education.

Dalmar traced much of the subsequent change in his life back to an epiphany that meant he started to take his Muslim religion much more seriously through religious study with his twin sister, and therefore saw his life as a progression with university being a part of that because:

> when one of my mates got stabbed and I thought life is a bit short, so it's like I woke up and I thought you know what, that's going to be me one day and so I literally I just stopped doing that (gang). Seeing his parents, like his mum, it was kind of a shock and something I don't like really memorising. But at 18 I just literally stopped hanging round with my friends. I'm kind of glad they don't contact me again, but going back to London I will probably have to see them.

Denzin (1989: 73) describes what he calls the cultural locus of an epiphany as deriving from "larger group, cultural, ideological and historical contexts". Both Ben and Dalmar attribute their change in life to an experience which made them even more religious and from which they derive subsequent agency to change their lives. Denzin (1989) reminds us that many times individuals will claim that they have acted as if they have made their own history, thus ignoring vital structural factors. The difficult decision making process that Dalmar faced around his potential future path and the activities of his peer group coalesced in an

educational choice where he perceived a different future. It was only in seeing how that potential had changed the lives of those friends that had gone to university, that Dalmar felt this to be possible for him.

It is significant that Dalmar referred to both the gang and higher education as a system that he has to "learn how to understand". Finding a religious faith meant he was able to break away from the field of gang culture into the field of work and eventually education. Agency for this, and a new identity, was developed as part of the reflexive practice of religion that fosters self-improvement or *Bildung*.

In Ben's case it would seem that his epiphany was similarly the result of a series of events that build up to a crisis, in Denzin's (1989) terms, a cumulative epiphany. The result was that like Dalmar a religious faith (in this case Christianity) became the focus for a subsequent identity. Ben described how he started suffering with depression at the age of about 12 because "my parents split up around that period" and at the same time the move to senior school was not successful as he went from top sets at primary to being put with "everybody else in the first year".

Ben developed a complex relationship with education, blaming the system to a large extent for his depression. Ben saw formal education as something that he did not wish to engage with and so his way of determining his own future was to dissociate himself. He explained his feelings at school as being "trapped in a hell hole" because "it felt like the entire purpose was just to keep me useless, to stop me from doing anything, I wouldn't say isolate me but to put me in cold storage I suppose".

The perception that the school was not recognising his ability, whilst feeling a lack of challenge, combined with depression meant that Ben "ended up being very, very unhappy and it got to the point where I was mildly contemplating suicide". Ben "happened to find out that schooling or at least structured schooling isn't actually legally compulsory and I managed to convince my mother somehow to take me out."

Ben had an epiphany at about the age of fifteen and attributed his getting well again to hearing the voice of God, when he "started talking to God and God started talking back". Following this moment he decided to get better and re-enter education. The cultural locus of this epiphany is redemptive and transformative, Ben comes from a Christian family, his grandparents were missionaries and his parents practicing Christians. His damascene conversion

meant that he had a reason to engage again with life and education. This meant that “I didn’t kill myself; I started to looking at the way the world works. I became very interested in things like politics and economics ... a lot of it was also based on the way that I felt I’d been failed by the system”.

These epiphanies allowed Ben and Dalmar to completely change their circumstances and their religious faith continued to sustain their sense of self, the ideology associated with religious faith impacting on their educational life through certain values and ways of being. For example, Dalmar reflected on his need to try and understand his classmates (with whom he feels he has little in common) and Ben explained his faith as something which encourages him to improve himself and make the most of what god has given him. He believes that “everything that I have is a gift from God; I want to make the best use of it I can”.

In both of these cases the agency for actions and forms of behaviour is partially attributed to a higher power. There were undoubted structural barriers that needed to be overcome in order for Dalmar and Ben to continue onto higher education, including a complex educational background and the need to move away from a particular peer group and way of life that Dalmar believed was holding him back. However in both cases they exhibited enough agency to make the decision to go to university as a way for self-improvement.

## 6.6 Conclusion

The evidence suggests that there are a number of constraints on the processes of educational choice which depended on prior achievement often fostered or deterred by the lack of parental cultural capital. It could be argued that for all of the students in this study there was little element of choice about which university they could go to because of the sort or level of qualifications they possessed.

Despite attempts to foster a mass higher education system, there is still a two-tier system in operation reflecting different perceptions about the status, worth and value of particular institutions and the qualifications they award. Once at university however even the modern institutions which are considered to be more accessible to students from widening participation backgrounds, have a culture that proves difficult to negotiate for some students.

Reflexivity theorists argue that changing occupational structures and the global economy will lead to more individualised reflexive biographies. However, in

contrast to these postmodern views the narratives of the students in this study showed family habitus and capital and prior education were key influences on the agency of the individuals; acting as either constraints or facilitators on their successful progression to higher education and feeling at home there.

The approach of biographical enquiry (outlined in Chapter Four) allows for a particular consideration of the relationship between time and narrative that could explain the role of agency in the participants'narratives. Josselson and Lieblich (1999) discuss how identity is formed through narrative when individuals come to terms with events in the past in parallel to the actual lifelong process of becoming what they are. A sense of self and agency is discursively accomplished as individuals use narrative in the present to attribute agency and coherence to their past. Ben and Dalmar, as previously mentioned had the most complex and extended transition to higher education and attributed agency to their past actions (particularly at times of crisis) as they interpreted their lives retrospectively. Denzin (1989) points out that autobiographical meaning of selfhood is unstable and realised only through time and temporality. David and Oliver appeared to exhibit less reflexivity and agency because their transition to university has been much more straightforward so that impetus for the process of self-creation and re-creation is less of a drive in telling their narratives.

The consideration of the individual narratives all categorised as widening participation students shows that very real differences exist in what is frequently considered to be a uniform group. Awareness of the differences will have an impact on institutional practice and policies with respect to widening participation and will be discussed in the next chapter.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

## 7.1 Summary

This study has explored the lived experiences of students designated as widening participation who make the decision to enter higher education. The aim of the study was to discover what influenced their choice about going to university. It has employed the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's (1986) notions of capital and Archer's (2003; 2007; 2012) ideas on structure and agency as well as reflexivity. In doing so it has considered the influences on the students' choices and decision making including family and social networks, previous educational career path and for two of the students particular turning points, or epiphanies in their lives. What is evident from the life stories is that even though each person entered university under the umbrella term of widening participation, their narratives were highly individual and nuanced. So differences, rather than simply similarities of each person's story emerge from this study.

## 7.2 Findings

### 7.2.1 Choice

One of the findings of the study was that choice was limited for the participants. Students engage with higher education in very different ways and this is true for those students who have been designated widening participation as in this study. Similar to the study undertaken by Reay et al. (2005: 159) there was "little evidence of the consumer rationalism that existed in official texts". In fact the participants in this study had selected their higher education institution from a limited set of options, for some this was because they wanted to stay close to home, like Jake and Oliver, some were also guided by their parents who liked or recommended the university (Ben and Jake). Whilst for others, like Ben and Dalmar in particular it was due to the type of qualifications they possessed (BTech).

In a stratified two-tier system of higher education the level of qualifications of all the students meant their choice was limited to more modern, less elite institutions. This meant for all of the participants their choice was reduced suggesting that their agency was bounded (Evans, 2001), albeit for different reasons.

The idea of university needed to be seen as in the realm of possibility, particularly for Dalmar who came from the most difficult economic and educational background. This realm of possibility was demonstrated by members of his family and peer group preceding him to university, and other inspirational role models (a teacher at school and a co-worker), giving him the confidence to feel that he could go to university as well. Making the choice to go to university in the first instance for Dalmar was an economic risk because he was working and supporting his family. Other students like Oliver and David had sufficient levels of familial capital to make choice and progression to higher education linear and unproblematic.

### 7.2.2 Agency

In all cases the students' parents had been strategic about the use of various forms of capital to advantage their children educationally (Atkinson, 2010). For example employing social capital to intervene in their child's education (Oliver) or cultural and economic capital to help with A Level exam preparation (Jake) in order to gain academic capital. All of the families had a family habitus that valued education and experience of university education (either through parents or siblings who had attended) with the exception of David (whose mother had an ambition to go to university). Bowl (2003) has noted that experience of university indicates a greater holding of social capital in the field of education, however Dalmar's mother had to mobilise the social capital of his older brother as she had less of her own because she was educated outside the united kingdom (Bowl, 2003).

Mobilisation of the resource of one form of capital for the objectified cultural capital of the academic qualification of a degree was evident in the students' stories (Bourdieu, 1986). This exchange value helps to explain the choices these students (and parents) made with respect to higher education (Bourdieu, 1986). Whilst parental cultural, social and economic capital and family habitus differed for each of the students it was these resources that were drawn on at the transition stage to higher education rather than the individual type of agency, (meta-reflexivity) that Archer (2003, 2007, 2010, 2012) suggests might lead to social mobility. Gidden's (1990, 1991) and Beck's (1992) postmodern notion of individual reflexive biographies were not apparent in the narratives, and it would seem that various forms of capital were the key influences on these students' ambition to go to university. However, Dalmar, who had come from the most

economically difficult background, did exhibit this meta-reflexivity at times. For example, he reflected on earlier criminal influences, his poor schooling and lack of apprenticeships that he regard as the fault of the school system and the government. Dalmar therefore used his agency to surmount these structural impediments by eventually acting decisively to give himself a new life and a new sense of self.

These changes to Dalmar's selfhood seem to be as a result of the epiphanies he experienced. Both Ben and Dalmar had epiphanies leading to a religious transformation which emphasised the value of self-development or *Bildung* (Bourdieu, 1986) and could account for their eventual decision to enter higher education. The idea of a university education as being in the realm of possibility for these students differed, for some it seemed to be a foregone conclusion – both because of family habitus and mobilisation of capital to ensure university was a natural next step (Jake, Oliver and David). Whilst Ben and Dalmar's trajectory was less straightforward. Ben never doubted his ability to attend university, because of his family habitus, but changes to his sense of self after his religious conversion meant that he no longer dismissed the value of education and decided to apply for a university place. Dalmar came from the most difficult economic and educational background and lacked confidence and doubted his ability to attend university after his religious conversion. However his religious conversion seemed to have affected his self-perception and he wanted to improve himself. Therefore despite continuing doubts he went about turning his wish into a real possibility. This decision was sustained by the example of significant others such as members of his family and peer group preceding him to university, and other inspirational role models (a teacher at school and a co-worker) that gave him the confidence to feel that he could go to university.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990: 41) discuss how those who are excluded from education "internalise the legitimacy of their own exclusion" and accept certain types of education are superior in terms of cultural capital, which they do not possess. Dalmar recognised the difference of status between institutions but had relegated himself to an education with less capital (Reay et al., 2005). The other students in this study who entered higher education with A Levels (David, Jake and Oliver) found they had better symbolic capital with their entry level qualifications to make the first year of study relatively comfortable and as expected.

### 7.2.3 Transition to University

The transition during the first year was more straightforward for Jake, Oliver and David primarily because of their economic and cultural capital as previously mentioned. They did not have to work to support themselves which left them freer to develop supportive peer group networks and there was a fit between their A Levels and the first year curriculum. This gave a level of academic confidence to Oliver and David. Ben and Dalmar had the most difficult transition in terms of making friends in particular, but Ben's relative economic freedom meant he was able to work on a project of self-improvement in new areas of study and interest. Dalmar, because of prior poor schooling and the economic imperative to work whilst at university had the most difficult transition. His ethnicity also made him feel an outsider in a largely white middle class institution.

The level of on-going parental involvement and monitoring in this study indicated that education was both an investment and an emotional and economic risk for the parents as well. This risk was ameliorated in Jake's case through an encouragement to study certain subjects that were considered safe options in terms of a future career. Some studies (Bowl, 2003; Reay et al., 2005) have noted anxiety associated with the choice process of working class students with respect to higher education, but this has been less associated with parental attitudes. The term helicopter parents has been coined in some studies from America and this trend has been associated with rising tuition costs and increased consumerism in higher education (Shoup et al., 2009).

This study has focused on a contemporary debate about who has access to higher education in the context of widening participation. The particular contribution it makes to knowledge is what constitutes choice for widening participation students and the role that capital, structure and agency play in these choices and decisions made. Whilst the rhetoric of successive governments has linked increased participation to greater social equality and an economic imperative for a knowledge economy, the reality, as shown in this study, is a stratified and differentiated system of higher education (Teichler, 2004). These structural barriers mean that individual agency is bounded and as a result choice is limited for students, like those in this study, designated as widening participation.

## 7.3 Further Research

This study contributes to the body of research into widening participation which has been influenced by the work of Bourdieu (1986) for example Atkinson (2010), Ball (2003), Bowl (2003), Burke (2012) and Reay et al. (2005)

There are a number of potential avenues for further exploration which have been highlighted as a result of this research. This study has analysed the biographies of young men with a focus on their transition to higher education and raised some areas of interest regarding their experience and the influence on their decision making. It would also be interesting to see how students who are designated widening participation experienced the transition to employment and particularly if the theories of individualised reflexive biographies could be identified in a knowledge economy.

The decision making about higher education took place within family contexts. It would have extended the scope of this study if parents or other significant family members had been interviewed about their perceptions of higher education, alongside that of their children. The possible trend for increased parental involvement during the first year of study might also extend the scope of this study to concerns about consumerism and risk in higher education.

One of the participants in this study is from an ethnic minority and all were male, it would be valuable to undertake similar research with a more gender diverse body of participants. All of the students were studying on a vocational pathway and further work could be undertaken with students who are studying more traditional subjects.

This study focussed on the perspectives of the students, the context for widening participation policies was discussed as a series of successive government initiatives. It would add to understanding about the impact of these initiatives if research into the higher education cultures at particular institutions was examined. The perspective of academics regarding their perception of widening participation would also add to the body of research, especially in the context of research intensive or teaching focussed institutions. Additionally Burke (2012) has highlighted the need for more research into the identities, structures and practices of professional staff involved in university widening participation initiatives (often employed as part of the marketing team).

## 7.4 Implications for Practice

Each of the young men in this study gave very individual narratives that overall combine to give a nuanced and detailed insight into the decision making around higher education. Biographical analysis has highlighted much dissimilarity in this group's experience of transition to higher education. There is an increasingly differentiated field in higher education with developing forms of social stratification that can marginalise the very people it was intended to encourage (Reay et al., 2005). Therefore widening participation policy needs to take into account the very disparate experience of a frequently homogenised group.

One of the insights from this study concerned the differential learning experience of first year students; particularly that of Dalmar and Ben who had arrived with vocational qualifications. Dalmar, in particular felt that he struggled in the first year because of his lack of study skills. Many modern institutions have used widening participation monies to enhance learning and teaching often via centralised support services (Burke, 2012). However Bowl (2003) has noted that the pressures on academic staff to research and publish mean that teaching is low down on the list of priorities.

There was a mismatch between admission requirements, actual prior experience and knowledge and possibly academic expectation. This could be mitigated by diagnostic testing (where suitable) and signposting of additional sources of help. More importantly inclusive teaching with formative assessment and study skills embedded in the curriculum would help student progression.

Dalmar found his own sources of help from second and third year students and David and Oliver met to help each other with certain subjects. Group projects and more formal peer group systems, with students in different year groups could help the transition to higher education for some.

## 7.5 Reflections

To return to Mill's (1959: 225) conception of social research as being both an attempt to understand "varieties of individuality" and their relation to modes of "epochal change" this study has contributed to a deeper understanding of how students conceptualise and rationalise their decision making around higher education choice. It has focussed on the resources needed or indeed that are lacking at a key moment in the lives of students designated as widening participation; that of transition into the first year of study in higher education.

## 7.6 Epilogue

At the end of year two there was an opportunity to talk again to Dalmar informally over a cup of coffee. Overall he was happy with his first year feeling that he “had learnt a lot” and now “knew what to expect”. He was looking forward to finishing and with hindsight had “wished that he had done it earlier and had no fear”.

Dalmar had the option to try for a placement year at the end of year two but his mother had changed her mind about wanting him to do this and was encouraging him to “carry on” so that he could finish in three years. This was because Dalmar’s mother wished to return to Somalia (as she did during Dalmar’s final year of study) so that she was able to say “you know what I sent my children to university”. His mother no longer saw a need to stay in the United Kingdom once her children had graduated and Dalmar thought “I would be selfish if I don’t let her go”.

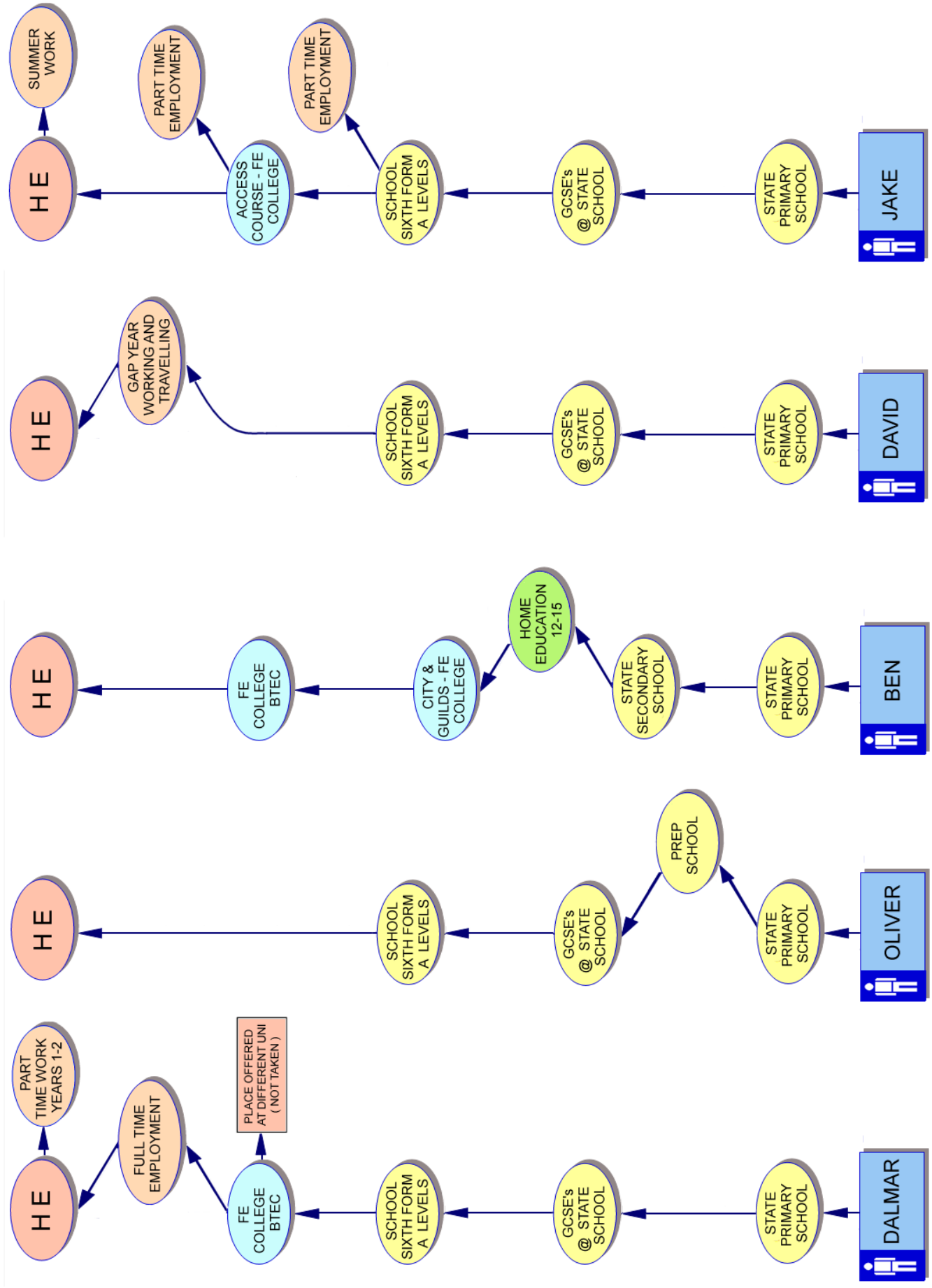
Despite wanting to concentrate on his studies, Dalmar had continued to work at one job in the second year (instead of two in the first year) because he was “helping my mum out as well paying rent”. Dalmar still believed that he needed a degree as the minimum level of qualification to get a professional job and wanted to apply abroad to try and get a job in Australia, Dubai or Kuwait. Dalmar also saw potential in the public sector because “with the government pension scheme...it’s ideal for the person who had got a degree”.

Dalmar felt that England had “adopted” him and he had “got the British values and stuff”. One of the key things that he felt he had learnt at university apart from subject specific knowledge was “to be patient and tolerant of people” and “time management”. These soft skills he felt would also help him gain employment. When he compared himself with his peer group in the gang he felt that they respected him because he had “moved on” and that when he saw them he thought “well you are in the same position”. He felt that “... it was their fault that they are not progressing. You can’t blame the government and societies influence”.

This is a contrast to some of his earlier expressed views and as such represented a significant change in his selfhood and identity which he attributed to his own agency. He was happy he had gone to university and so was I.

# Appendices

# Appendix A - Journey Through Education & Work



# Appendix B – Line by Line Coding

Linking lack of opportunities with crime

what the youths are doing today and, to be honest, I think it is worse now that it was then, the

Seeing escalation in crime

previous year, my generation, previously, children now are kinda more nice .. it was back then,

Perceiving differing levels of criminality

normal street robbery, (craft?) theft and petty arson. (12:42)

**Where were you living during the secondary... school?**

In an estate in ([redacted]), in London.

**Thinking about apprenticeship, now and looking back having nearly done your first year at university, do you think you would have preferred to do the apprenticeship route or not?**

No, no, that' the thing now, because I am a religious , I think God has done me a favour, not for me

Becoming religious has impact on paths taken

to have done apprenticeship, I think apprenticeship .. it's a riskier route, that's the thing, I think

Shifting perception of apprenticeship

university is always the best, as I said, because, you know how people look at BTec, for example,

Believing some qualifications better than others

and "A" levels, "A" levels are more highly valued compared to BTec, it's the same thing, I think university is valued higher than apprenticeship and I wouldn't change for (anything in the world?), I

Seeing university as qualification as currency

don't think. (13:43)

**When you went to school, did you enjoy it, at all, at the beginning?**

I did, I enjoyed it, I wish I studied more. I wish I studied a lot more. Just trying to be the popular

Regretting educational past

guy... The one people respected the most... Looking at it back now, I wish I could change the world. I

Wishing to turn back the clock

enjoyed it in way, I enjoyed it too much. I neglected my education. (14:17)

Seeing education as important

# Appendix C – Theme Coding

Well that's the thing it's like students here seem to have that stereotype that I'm a thug or I'm going to do something horrible, so it's kind of hard to actually communicate with people once they have that persona of me, so that also.

seeing other peoples perception of him

**Do you want to change that?**

Well that's the thing change it with the attitude I give out or the clothing I wear, that's the thing?

**You tell me where do you think it comes from?**

I don't know, I sort of think it's both really, the thing is if I act like them I'm still not going to be accepted, it's just like the same a monkey he can wear a suit but he'll never be human, he will never be accepted.

repeating racism? not being accepted

**How do you think that will translate to the job market?**

Well I think when I'm at work I am professional. I have been in an environment where I have to wear a suit and stuff like that and yes I can, that's the thing when it's a uniform you have to wear the uniform, when it's not a uniform this is who I am really.

**So do you think what you wear and the way you are expresses you?**

Yes but that's the thing it's like everyone, it's a personal identity really. So it's whether you're ignorant, you just have to be ignorant to think that really.

**Do you think education will be part of your personal identity?**

In what sense?

**Do you think that if you do well that says something about you, it becomes part of your…?**

Yes that's everything, it's like when you have a professional field then you're always, well when you're a judge people give respect, or if you're in a professional industry people will give you respect. But obviously if you're in like a lower aspect of that hierarchy people will give you less respect. So I aim to get that respect in some sense like.

expectations of education change seeing status differences

**Through qualifications?**

Yes, yes. That's it, I think that's everyone's aim but whether they reach it or not that's their…

**Looking back has that changed from when you were younger?**

Yes I actually do remember the days when I said "I'm never going to uni" I can actually hear it as if I'm saying it yes. But yes I'm kind of star struck as well being here as well.

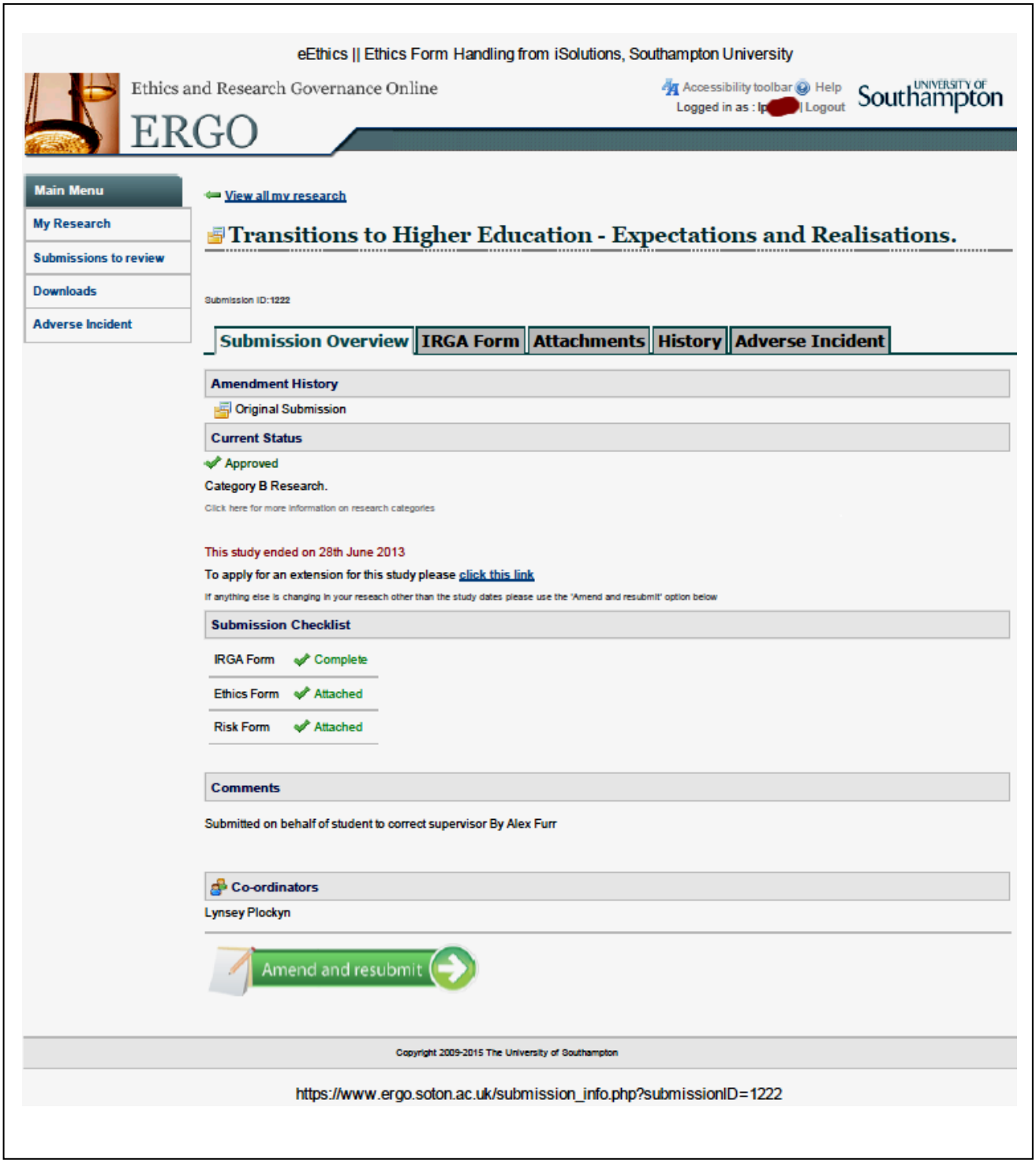
seeing it as a possible alternative

**Star struck about?**

In a sense where a few years ago I literally can't, I wouldn't say vouch for, I actually was certain that I'm never going to uni and when I was looking for the apprentice job I was like "Yes I still don't want to go to uni" but when I kind of looked at it I'm thinking "You know what if I don't do it, I'm going to

seeing uni as achievement previously seeing it as not for him

# Appendix D – Ethics Approval Form



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## Transitions to Higher Education - Expectations and Realisations.

Submission ID:1222

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**Amendment History**

Original Submission

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**Comments**

Submitted on behalf of student to correct supervisor By Alex Furr

**Co-ordinators**

Lynsey Plockyn

Amend and resubmit



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