**Kupfer, A. (2015) *Educational Upward Mobility – Practices of Social Changes*, Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 184 pages**

This book is an extremely valuable addition to the literature on educational upward mobility.

Kupfer has collected the life stories of 18 people from working class backgrounds in England and Austria, who, through protracted processes and against the odds, succeeded in accessing higher education study, which would not have been predicted by their background. Whereas existing research has commonly been about structural barriers to upward mobility, Kupfer explores the factors that enabled people from working class backgrounds to move to higher education.

Kupfer is able to do this by using the biographical method of Rosenthal (made popular in Britain largely by the work of Chamberlayne and Wengraf (e.g. Chamberlayne et al., 2000)), which in my view is the real merit of this book. As Kupfer points out, existing research has been largely quantitative, linking life chances to social background and educational attainment. Qualitative studies, on the other hand, are commonly restricted to limited periods of time, typically from the final years of schooling to entry into further educational pathways or the labour market, with semi-structured interviews conducted at times of ‘key decisions’ (e.g. Reay et al. 2010). Rosenthal’s method, on the other hand, by allowing the researcher to reconstruct an individual’s entire biography, gives insight into the complex interplay between structure and agency, the impact of structural conditions on people’s lives, and continuity and change in people’s perspectives.

Kupfer combines the biographical method (adapted to focus on social contexts rather than ‘types’) with the work of Bourdieu, and, in particular, his concept of *habitus*. This provides her with a unique methodological and conceptual lens for identifying conditions that facilitate upward educational mobility. She challenges claims (largely by Anglo-Saxon writers) that *habitus*, with its emphasis on social reproduction, is overly deterministic and therefore limited in its ability to explain social change. In a very apt and thoughtful chapter laying out her theoretical framework for the study, she demonstrates how *habitus* is conducive to exploring the interrelated nature of structure and agency, and, in particular, to explaining social processes and change. This is captured in one of her quotes of Bourdieu (38) referring to the ‘dialectical confrontation’ between habitus, as structured structure, and objective structure, i.e. where a habitus faces conditions different to those in which it was formed:

*In this confrontation, habitus operates as a structuring structure able to selectively perceive and to transform the objective structure according to its own structure while, at the same time, being restructured, transformed in its makeup by the pressure of the objective structure* (Bourdieu, 2005: 47).

Drawing largely on Bourdieu, Kupfer identifies eight ‘areas of social circumstance’ that may lead to educational upward mobility: socialisation; change in objective structures; lack of actualisation of habitus; consciousness; pedagogical effort; gender; educational institutions’ support for inclusion; and truth-seeking. The condition ‘truth-seeking’ is added by Kupfer as ‘human mental agency’ which she claims was omitted by Bourdieu. The data are presented in terms of what she considers the dominant circumstance in an individual’s life. What becomes clear throughout the book is that no condition on its own is likely to have led to higher education, but it is always the intricate workings of multiple factors and the dialectic relationship between structure and agency.

Kupfer (42) concedes the problematic nature of sampling her participants who are defined as ‘working class’ on the basis of their parents’ occupational position (ESeC categories 7-10) and educational qualifications (up to ISCED Level 3). As the findings reveal, there are a number of participants, whose parents were rather well off and were able to provide their offspring with secure living conditions, and one wonders whether they could indeed be described as ‘working class’. However, these examples serve to underline the importance of socialisation, inculcating a valuing of education, as well as the role of a secure and supported childhood.

Others lived in poor material conditions but still had parents or other relatives who valued education and encouraged them to do well, what Kupfer refers to as ‘education enabling socialisation’ (86). Where participants had not enjoyed supportive familial conditions, their habitus changed as a result of being exposed to different values and attitudes, for example, through friends, or brushes with particular social movements or associations. Others overcame structural constraints (such as highly gendered social norms) with the help of supportive others, notably families, friends and teachers. Some participants placed importance on their education after becoming conscious of constraining structures through emotional upheaval, such as witnessing a sibling’s divorce.

Some of the most fascinating passages are those where Kupfer describes the role of societal change as change in objective structures, such as that of National Socialism or the decline in agriculture, either curtailing opportunities or providing new ones. With the oldest participant being born in 1928, the book covers almost a century of societal change and its role in the construction of the participants’ biographies. Kupfer expertly uses her contextual knowledge in order to explain how the changes were experienced by the participants at the time and how they led to a change in habitus (for example, when, following the annexation of Austria by Hitler, industrialisation led to new opportunities (88 ff)). It powerfully illustrates the relationship between objective opportunities and an individual’s ‘horizon for action’ (Hodkinson et al., 1996), as individuals consider new possibilities in the light of changed situations.

Kupfer concludes her findings chapter by elaborating on one of the enabling factors, truth-seeking, as a psychological dimension of habitus. Thus, individuals may pursue education as a coping mechanism, such as dealing with an emotionally precarious childhood. Here the challenge is for educational institutions to constitute places offering security and comfort so as to promote these processes as a way of addressing social disadvantage.

Unfortunately, the assumption is all too often that young people’s learning dispositions are fixed. Kupfer’s analysis demonstrates that, far from being unchangeable, a person’s habitus is fluid, subject to transformation (albeit gradual and within limits) as individuals adapt to structural change or encounter new situations and experiences. I was reminded of Hodkinson and colleagues’ (1996) excellent description of non-linear and disrupted school-to-work transitions of young people in England, whose dispositions were subject to serendipitous events in multiple life domains. Kupfer’s book draws attention to the conditions that enable educational mobility. Once we understand these factors, deliberate measures may be put in place to tackle social inequality, rather than being subject to serendipity.

If there is one criticism to be made, it is a minor one. In presenting the data in terms of the identified social circumstances that enabled mobility, Kupfer had to make a compromise. The presentation of the life stories is a little fragmented as different episodes of the same biographies creep up under the different headings, and there is a fair bit of repetition to remind the reader of the relevant participants’ life stories. This makes it difficult at times to get a handle on individual participants’ *gestalt*, so important in the biographical method.

The book challenges the neo-liberal mantra of individualism and aspiration – so popular in Britain where it underpins the widening participation debate: the idea that individuals can rise above their background simply by effort, without considering structural disadvantage. The book will be of interest to scholars of education and sociology and should be on the reading lists of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

*References:*

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