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A Bourdieusian study of reflexivity, capital and emotions in the development of career aspirations.

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

This qualitative study considers the development of career aspirations among nine female undergraduate students from working- and middle-class backgrounds studying in the management school of a Russell Group institution in Northern England. It provides new insights by bringing together Bourdieusian theory and theories of reflexivity to consider the extent to which capital, reflexivity and emotions enable and limit students' ability to adjust personal biography and develop career aspirations outside social field of origin. My analysis of participant stories indicates that the accumulation of capital is important to the mitigation of painful emotions, the reflexive accommodation of change to personal biography and the development of career aspirations outside social field of origin. The study identifies the ways in which universities might better support female working-class students in the development of aspiration.

Full paper

Introduction

Since Dearing (1997) policy initiatives highlight the opportunities Higher Education (HE) offers for upward social mobility. However, despite expansion to near universal access (Trow, 2010) there is

evidence to suggest that the experiences (Coulson et al., 2018) and outcomes (Boliver et al., 2021) of students differ according to social class. Working-class students who attend elite institutions are at greater risk of unemployment (Crawford et al., 2016) and at a disadvantage in terms of average earnings (Britton et al., 2016) and progression to elite employers (Friedman and Laurison, 2020).

This paper draws on Bourdieusian theory (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and theories of reflexivity to consider the extent to which capital, reflexivity and emotions enable and limit students' ability to adjust personal biography and develop career aspirations outside social field of origin. The study enhances the existing literature on social capital; drawing on Reay's (2004) work and the social support literature (Taylor, 2011) to provide insight into the importance of relationships to capital accumulation. Emotional, companionship and esteem support are identified as elements of social capital with the potential to limit painful emotions experienced as habitus adjusts to a new field (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

The study further adds to previous work by utilising the concept of "reflexivity in the context of personal biography." Previous work on reflexivity is somewhat polarised, Giddens (1976) and Archer, (2003, p.133) claim that reflexivity has the potential to enhance agency and free individuals from the "constraints and enablements [of society]." Atkinson (2010) and Burke (2015) examine these claims but neither find much evidence of a critical awareness of societal constraints and both reject the potential of reflexivity to enhance agency. I argue that reflexivity differs according to its focus, for example everyday actions, personal biography or the structures of society. Some theorists (Giddens, 1976; Archer, 2003) use the term interchangeably to describe reflexivity with different foci and seem to suggest that if individuals reflect on everyday actions they also reflect on the structures of society. Others reserve the term to describe a critical awareness of structure (Atkinson, 2010; Burke, 2015). Drawing on McNay (2013) and Ingram and Abrahams (2015) I evaluate the utility of the concept of "reflexivity in the context of personal biography" to capture the ways an individual might consciously reflect in the context of their life story and potentially adjust personal biography on encountering a new social field.

Methodology

This paper considers the development of career aspirations among female undergraduate students (n=9) from working- and middle-class backgrounds studying Management in a Russell Group institution. It focuses on HE and work placement experiences.

Data was collected in two phases, an unstructured life story interview in which participants were asked to reflect using two prompts and a follow-up semi-structured interview. An extensive literature review was undertaken to operationalise key concepts and data was analysed thematically across and within narratives. I examined the ways in which individual participants developed their aspirations over time and the ways in which capital, emotions and reflexivity can expand or limit aspirations within and beyond individuals' social field of origin.

Findings

The stories of participants suggest that the availability of family capital relevant to the field of HE facilitates the accumulation of career-relevant capital whilst in HE and that such accumulation has the potential to limit painful emotions which might be experienced on movement to a new social field. Relationships with peers in HE and colleagues whilst on work placement were particularly important to career-relevant capital accumulation.

Both working-class and middle-class students provided evidence of reflexivity in the context of personal biography in relation to career aspirations. The stories of middle-class participants suggest that they activated both family and accumulated field-relevant capital and reflexively accommodated emerging career aspirations in the context of continuity of personal biography with no evidence of painful emotion. In contrast, working-class participants experienced painful emotions as they moved into the unfamiliar fields of HE and work. Subtle differences in the availability of field-relevant family capital and the accumulation of further capital influenced the extent to which working-class participants were able to mitigate painful emotions and reflexively accommodate change to personal biography or to reflexively resist change.

Conclusion

My findings suggest that reflexivity and emotion can enable and limit students' ability to adjust personal biography and develop career aspirations outside social field of origin. Furthermore, family capital is important career aspiration development but universities can foster the accumulation of career-relevant capital by facilitating strong peer relationships and by embedding work experience opportunities and employer mentoring schemes.

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