Men Accessing Education: Masculinities, Class and Choice

Tom Woodin and Penny Jane Burke
Institute of Education, University of London

Abstract

This paper draws on an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded research project on men (aged 18-54) participating in pre-university access and foundation programs in four London further and higher education colleges. Men's educational choices and decisions are analysed and discussed within current policy debates about widening participation and lifelong learning. These choices are placed within a framework which focuses on masculinity in terms of classed and racialised identifications. For working class and ethnic minority students choices tend to be constrained by mix of material, institutional and emotional forces. For middle class ethnic minority students these factors are only partially alleviated.

Introduction

Since 1997, as part of its concern with 'education, education, education' Labour Governments in the UK have further increased the already burgeoning numbers attending university in the context of concerns about economic growth, as well as social justice. As a result, university entrants have increased dramatically to a current figure of 43% of 18-30 year olds, with a target of 50% by 2010, although the higher education system has become increasingly stratified and diversified. In the *Learning Age* (1997) the newly elected Labour government laid out its commitment to widening participation and this focus has been continued more recently with *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES 2003) and *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES 2003). Unsurprisingly, there also has been a growing awareness that a projected increase on this scale cannot simply soak up more of the same students but must attract those from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. In addition, there have been on-going official concerns that lower income groups, noticeably men, have not been attracted in sufficient numbers (DES 1987, DfES 2003). Indeed, widening participation to men from non-traditional backgrounds poses a serious policy challenge; only 25% of access students are male (QAA 2007) and men in the lower socio-economic groups have been identified as those least likely to enter higher education (Dearing 1997).

One way of fostering the participation of such students has been the expansion of 'access courses' – year-long pre-university courses targeting 'non-traditional' students. More recently, two year sub-degree programmes or 'foundation degrees' have also been piloted and expanded by the Labour Government as a key strategy to attract students from lower income backgrounds. Choice has been perceived as central to these initiatives and presented as a lubricating fluid of widening participation. A 'rational choice theory' has quite explicitly informed government thinking which has adopted the perspective of an ideal type of student making decisions on a level playing field. For example, *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (DfES 2003, p. 5) refers to students as:

> knowing enough about the alternative universities and courses to put in an application to an institution which can satisfy the potential student's aspirations, and for which the student has the appropriate qualifications and qualities.

A high level of awareness and agency is projected onto individual students, with the onus on them to make 'good choices' in a flexible and diverse education market. We are left with a sense that the university machine merely needs new points of entry here, and an extension of choice there, in order to funnel these new entrants into appropriate courses and eventually employment. Thus, the hidden hand of the market is expected to bring the interests of student, university, employer and economy into alignment.

In contrast, we view 'choice' as inseparable from wider social relations, structural inequalities and identities, as a process which is value-laden and culture-specific, leading to the social legitimisation of some choices over others. It is never purely rational but involves complex psychic processes in which emotion, intuition and accident play a significant part. Accordingly, our analysis locates choice within complex, contradictory and mutating identities that are intertwined with wider social and institutional forces. Choices are made through and against class, ethnic and gender relations and also, at the micro-level, with family and peers. Discourses also shape the choices un/available to certain individuals and groups within educational institutions through the operation of different forms of capital (Reay, David and Ball 2005) Having said this, conscious strategic and rational action can be identified clearly in some of the accounts below, a point which illustrates that reproduction is neither pre-determined nor takes place mechanistically (Hatcher 1998). However, we argue that such rational choices must be placed within this wider social framework.

While there have been studies of women in further and higher education (Skeggs 1997, Burke 2002, Bowl 2003, Quinn 2003), a corresponding attention has not been given to men, although it is a nascent and developing area. The increasing concern

that boys, particularly working class boys, are at risk of educational exclusion has been documented and linked to a wider perception of a 'crisis' of masculinity (Epstein, Elwood, Hey and Maw, 1998, Skelton 2001, McGivney 1999, Marks 2003). There also have been claims that men consider 'participation as incompatible with notions of working class masculinity' (Archer & Leathwood 2003). The growth of theoretical and empirical work on masculinity also has informed these studies, with education located as a key site where it is both constructed and contested (Mac & Ghaill 1994, Connell 1995, Martino 1999).

We set out to understand how broader social forces and cultural contexts impact on the ways in which choice is exercised by students on access and foundation courses. Our particular focus is the interconnection between masculinity and educational choice, although we are aware of the need for a theorised understanding of the ways in which gender intersects with other differences, including class and race (Webb 1997, Anderson & Williams 2001, Archer, Leathwood and Hutchings 2002).

Our analysis draws on interviews with men at four further and higher education institutions in the London region. Students from access and foundation courses were invited to take part in the research. The resulting group was characterized by a wide range of class backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, nationalities, and migration experiences. Each interviewee chose a pseudonym which also provided clues for further exploration. In total 39 men were interviewed, once at the beginning of their courses and then again towards the end[1]. We analysed key meanings and experiences of choice raised by our respondents and here we concentrate upon 14 of their accounts. For the purposes of this paper we divided the men into three broad categories: white working class, minority ethnic and middle class minority students. We identified these groups according to an initial survey in addition to the interviews and took into account factors such as employment, educational history and self-identification. Demarcating people in this way carried with it dangers of simplifying complexities of which we were very aware, notably the considerable overlap and blurring between them. However, it also served as a useful heuristic device to illuminate a set of issues around choice in relation to gender, class and race.

Risky choices: white working class men

There were only three out of 39 white working class men in our group, possibly an even greater absence than the wider picture of participation in Access to Higher Education courses: in 2005-6 25% were men, and 80% were white while just over 20% came from 'disadvantaged areas' (QAA 2007). However, despite the low number, these three provided a rich and suggestive source of insights into the ways that complex intersections of class, race and gender might shape men's educational choices.

The men's testimony brought into question government assumptions about free choice in a market place. The desire to progress educationally conflicted with aspects of their lives. One strategy for the mature white working class men in this study was to present their participation in higher education as a separation from their pasts. For instance, not being pushed by working class parents was sometimes seen as a cause of educational failure in earlier schooling thus reinforcing 'cultural deficit' discourses that explain educational exclusion as originating in poor working class family expectations (Gerwirtz 2001). When 'Bob', a working class man from a British/European background, expressed a desire to learn he found himself 'bitter' that his mum had never bothered putting him in for the 11+ which was necessary for entry to the higher status grammar schools:

> when I left college … I just realised it was absolutely awful and we learned almost nothing … So my mum was quite happy ... she didn't really push me to get good grades …

Expressing educational desires could leave the working class man isolated. A consequence of emphasizing that education was a form of escape from a working-class background also opened up the danger that potential failure could expose one to ridicule and destabilise one's sense of masculine self (Reay 2001, Reay 2002, Brine & Waller 2004). For instance, 'Paul's' choice exposed him to a feeling of considerable personal danger: '…if I don't do it and I fail I'll feel to myself I'm a failure'. One can sense the beginnings of the 'limbo' felt by many people in Jackson and Marsden's (1962) classic study of working class people progressing through grammar schools and universities – stranded from both their families and their middle class peers. Worries common to many students might be piled on top of one another, creating a mountain of fear which threatened to envelop the student, as with Bob who became concerned about

> the amount of work … Concerns … possibly that … it sounds terrible, but that I'm too old, that I've spent too long out of it … I'm afraid, and I'm going to have to go away and do a lot more work. Yeah. That's the concern … That I won't be able to do it.

Furthermore, age intermeshed with class to exacerbate the sense of risk associated with higher education participation, as illustrated by Paul's account:

> Well, right now it's [education] everything to me … the most important thing in my life now. If I was twenty one I'd probably say … I can just do it again... but I can't spend too much time studying and not earning. So it's more critical for me to get this course, study, pass it and get to university and get that … So it'll be basically twenty four seven, this.

Paul expresses an intensive level of anxiety around the possibility of failure. However, this was tempered by the fact that choices were predicated upon support from significant others and personal contacts. For those returning after a considerable break in educational career, external support from friends, family and partner were often a necessary minimum to embark upon an access course. Social capital, in the form of networks which provided financial and moral support, was identified as a key mechanism for supporting a return to study (Field 2005). For Bob, his girlfriend played a critical role in encouraging him to return to education. In Paul's case the 'middle class' family that he had married into supplied the nexus of support and encouragement alongside the educated and professional friends he met regularly at a pub quiz. Although Paul uses this as a mechanism to confirm distance from his own family, elements of working class masculinity might also facilitate educational participation.

Indeed, it is important not to see this evidence as supporting deficit models, locating the problem solely with white working class people themselves, for instance, by associating a 'lack of cultural capital' with the notion of deprivation. Aspects of working class lives were also utilized to make positive choices (see also Woodin 2005a). For 'Sweetie Pie', who had worked and travelled widely before studying, learning was enjoyable and he felt it was a privilege. Similarly, Bob's previous experience equipped him to handle his new surroundings; being back in education felt

> … strangely natural. I don't know why, but it feels fine, it's absolutely fine. You know, I'm listening to someone speak and I'm writing down what they've got to say. It's OK … going to these different places, you kind of get used to mixing with people and meeting people

Both Bob and Paul invoked the importance of reading widely in justifying their return to education, somewhat reminiscent of a tradition of working class culture and masculinity that was once more prevalent (Woodin 2005a, 2007). Paul also explained his return to education in terms of a paternal masculinity; by participating in learning he felt better able to support the educational development of his children. This explanation for choosing to participate echoes the working-class women's accounts in an earlier study of widening participation (Burke 2002).

These men also further challenged deficit understandings by emphasising the obstacles to their progress. For instance, Paul felt let down when his chosen course failed to run; this was compounded by the administrative confusion which surrounded his second choice which led him to write a letter of complaint. Finally, he gained entry to another college to study arts and humanities. He drew on a sense of entitlement and struggle against an unjust authority in gaining access to education

– until recently an almost archetypal image of working class masculinity (for example, Woodin 2005b). Although his account explicitly highlights individual determination, supporting notions of meritocracy, it also reveals the struggle of working-class men to access education against the institutional values and structures of colleges and universities. It reveals the complex operations of power across formations of masculine working-class identities and the ways that men might actively navigate such complexities within institutional contexts.

Contradictory masculinities and choice: ethnic minority men

Another significant and overlapping group comprised ethnic minority students many of whom might also be considered working class, although they had a mixed understanding of the concept. Those students occupied complex social worlds which spanned both the 'traditional' values and experiences of their parents and families as well as the 'modern' ones being constructed in English society. These men tended to be younger and were generally continuing education rather than 'returning' to it. Indeed, education was a key area where students could express themselves socially and individually. For 'Mohammed', whose parents emigrated from Bangladesh, education was 'the only thing I've been doing day-to-day … the key to the world … You can get the life you want, the money you want, anything you want'.

The choice to study through access and foundation programmes was complicated by conflicting versions of masculinity, and led to complex negotiations within the family in relation to acceptable futures and about what and where to study. Students struggled at times to contain the tension between forms of masculinity which stressed individual self-reliance and achievement on the one hand and submergence in group and community norms on the other. At one end of the spectrum, students were eager to meet the expectations of their family and wider ethnic minority community. For Polak, a first generation migrant from Poland, his parents had been unable to provide the forms of cultural capital validated by universities. But they nurtured his self-belief and provided some financial support which enabled him to remain in education:

> My parents made sure I did. Even though they couldn't understand the work I was doing, and they couldn't help me out with it, they said I had to go to university. They will pay for it, they don't care how I get there as long as I get there.

Again, Polak's account highlights the flaws of deficit discourses that blame minority ethnic and working class parents for their lack of expectations. For many such men, a distinct sense of ethnic identity helped to provide resources for an educational 'struggle'.

The family context played a different role for 'Dragon', a young second generation Pakistani man who hoped his choices would help him to construct a form of hegemonic masculinity, normalized as a 'good' job, house and family. However, the domestic context inhibited his options and he was content for his parents to play a major role in his decisions: 'whatever my parents wanted was fine for me as well … They'd choose the good and right thing. So I stuck with their decision'. Dragon's family shaped his expectations by encouraging him to take a foundation degree in science and engineering which they saw as 'technical' and in line with his perceived ability:

> because there's fierce competition for jobs in the UK. So they wanted me to do something technical, like, my father is a mechanic, and he has his own workshop. So basically that's what they wanted for me as well … something I can set up on my own, if I don't get a job and it doesn't work out.

His choices were, to some extent, modeled on those of his father who feared that his son might not be able to break into the job market.

By submerging his choices into those of his family, Dragon's construction of masculinity became more fractured and contradictory. Whilst he drew on a dominant form of masculinity in making his choices, this aspiration is maintained in the face of visible disruptions to a traditional gendered division of labour. Indeed, Dragon's sister was 'more intelligent than me' and was being groomed for something perceived as higher:

> … she is actually doing law … My dad's view of me, it's like, you know, I'm not much going to study after this … Which is why I want to do this, something technical. But with my sister she's actually got a job part-time with a solicitor's firm. So her career is well sorted out … So basically she is, I don't know how to say this, but the main child, I think. Not taking anything away from me. My parents, obviously the love is equal. But expectations for her are higher than me.

Although he is seen as the less-academic child, this does not appear to undermine his status in the family. His father encourages Dragon to follow a similar path to his own, and to fulfil the rightful role of the son. This is to earn a respectable living, support a wife and family, and become a traditional breadwinner. It does not seem to worry him that the family has higher expectations of his sister nor does it undermine his sense of becoming a man. The idea of the lone breadwinner was always a shaky one that depended upon the hidden work of others. However, given the contemporary scale of women working outside of the home it is interesting that Dragon still manages to sustain this image in the face of such rapid and widespread change.

At the other end of the spectrum, is 'John', a 20 year old man of Chinese parents. We apparently find a very different representation of choice making – one that emphasized freedom and individuality:

> I usually make decisions on my own … Just to make sure that no-one influences my judgement, I make sure it is entirely my choice.

However, John's ideal of individual choice is also enabled by a supportive social context which simultaneously places limits on his freedom of choice. Although finance is not mentioned as a key determinant of choice, it appears to play a significant role. This is suggested by the fact that he studies at the same institution as his brother and has his fees paid. He does not imagine or suggest living away from home. Rather, John is integrated into a set of expectations in his family home where his responsibility is to 'pay my way' and get a job whilst he is at university. Thus John manages to retain a strong sense of individuality whilst also living in a collective family structure. His selfhood is sustained rather than brought into question by the domestic context. It certainly did not expose the emotional risks as it did for some of the white working class men mentioned above. John was very clear that education has not changed his basic values – again, education was intrinsic to his identity.

However, his claims to individual choice making are also undercut somewhat by the lack of information and knowledge available to him. He has only a hazy awareness of the careers office where 'I think they also give you advice on what kind of careers you can pursue', and complains about a lack of warning to make choices for his degree:

> I don't think I was informed about it; it wasn't until I read the handbook, which I put away a long time ago … it was a bit short notice when we were suddenly told that we had to make our degree choices … just three weeks ago. We had a letter in our pigeonhole … most people didn't realise until the week after, and the deadline was two weeks from when it was posted so most people only had a week to fill in this form saying which courses we wanted to do …

It has been argued that such students, faced with the lack of alternatives, often depend upon forms of 'hot knowledge' gleaned from friends 'in the know' (Reay, David and Ball 2005). What is noticeable, however, is the significant number who persevered with their choices. For instance, Green Leaves, a 22 year old born in Jamaica, was tenacious in a quest for personal discovery. His choices were eclectic, enrolling on an art course, then switching to accountancy and from there to engineering. In contrast to the rational approach legitimated in official educational discourse, Green Leaves' experimental and provisional choices enabled him to search for his 'place' in a project of finding himself:

> I was trying to find my place … because to know what you really are you have to experience a lot of things to put you on the right track, because that is the person you are.

In part, Green Leaves felt this searching resulted from having choice forced upon him at too early an age before he was ready to make such life determining decisions. He was unable to cope with the personal responsibility and complained of schools forcing

> Too much choices, like … you are going to have to have in your work life, it makes it difficult for you … you want to choose but you don't want to choose because it is like someone has given you a plate of food with so much different stuff on it and you don't know what to eat. You know? So sometimes when the syllabus is set then you know this is what you have got to cover and you get it done. But teachers kept changing.

Here, the notion of choice is seen as confusing and further compromised by the fact that changing teachers curtailed his studies. Indeed, many students connected choice to the lack of resources and importance given to further education. Many of the men complained of changing teachers throughout the year which resulted in assignments not given until late in the course, putting further pressure on students. Similarly, Polak spoke of limited access to computers and teachers' time which undermined the quality of their education.

These issues highlight the tensions between hegemonic discourses of choice in educational policy and the material realities experienced by minority ethnic students. The courses set up to widen participation, such as access and foundation courses, are those that tend to be institutionally marginalized, carrying a particular kind of stigma as 'non-traditional courses' and as a result suffer from a lack of funding and resources (Burke & Jackson 2007). These material and institutional shortcomings directly undermined and contradicted the public discourses of choice and widening participation. This had a direct effect on the men's sense of identity and belonging as higher education students. It contributed to the construction of access and foundation students as being of less value than the 'proper students', in the words of one of the men (Skeggs 2004).

A class presence: middle class men

Our final group also were concerned about their positioning as access students. These students came from relatively privileged backgrounds abroad and included migrants,

asylum seekers and a few foreign students, an extremely amorphous grouping which testifies to the fact that 'diversity' is an expanding process with the continuing influx and mixing of new groups. Despite the fact that class did not have a significant meaning for many of them, their experiences reveal how the educational choices of 'ethnic minorities' are strongly classed.

Access and foundation courses could be seen as a means of getting one 'back on track'. Michael, a Portuguese/Angolan man, entered an access course as a 'fast track' into medicine after finding his grades were too low to meet the university entry requirements. 'Failure' for such men was provisional and tended to be represented as a result of trivial and external factors which left their sense of self intact. Thus Ali, from a middle class background in Iraq, blamed poor teaching for his 'A' level results while 'Jason', from Belize, stressed that his friends distracted him. It was not represented as a personal crisis or as compromising one's sense of self. Education was seen as a right, a normal part of life rather than something which had to be struggled for. Such sensibilities, we argue, are tied to middle-class subjectivities, where failure is externalized and does not indicate any kind of innate lack in the way that it can for working-class people (Reay et al. 2005).

However, this was counteracted by the realization that they might be in a 'make or break' situation – passing exams was seen as a crucial gateway to success and becoming a man. Although failure was usually associated with those 'below' them, such judgements could be turned inwards as with the foundation student 'Jason' whose family:

> … looked down on me, you know? I think they have every right to because I didn't get the grades that I should of to do my degree.

Emotional turmoil could also emerge in different contexts. For some migration resulted from human tragedies and represented a massive upheaval in experience. As a result it helped to bring about a re-evaluation of the masculine self and one's purpose in life. Indeed, for this group of men decisions were more likely to be expressed in terms of subjective fulfillment as with 'Ali' who saw education as a journey of personal exploration and development, as something that

> will complete me. My own person, I will be more confident, if I know more. The more I know, the better person I become. Other people, they think it doesn't make a difference. It's just getting them more pay.

However, he integrated this sense of a growing subjectivity into the construction of a hegemonic masculinity in which education was central to his future:

> Social status is going to be boosted a lot. Because when you finish engineering, obviously this person is an engineer. Even impresses women … This is the social aspect. And long term job employment will give me a bit because people will be impressed with a degree.

In order to mark out his future, Ali distances himself as 'this person' – an imagined and improved self seen through the eyes of others. His account highlights that educational participation is seen by many of the men as a project of becoming, aspiring to be a different kind of man, one that is respected and has social status (Burke 2006). The construction of a heterosexual masculine self is interconnected with social status, a wife and employment – the three being closely connected for Ali and many other men in the study (Burke 2007).

In a few cases, foundation courses were seen as a better option than 'A' levels, providing a solid grounding or wider range of subject choices. For instance, 'John Doe', from a mixed Sudanese-Austrian background but brought up in Saudi Arabia, used the internet to find an engineering foundation degree and was keen to get a qualification from an English university that he felt would help him to gain employment anywhere in the world. Later, he planned to do a business degree and work in hotels. This level of individual freedom and choice was enabled by his family's financial situation and contrasts sharply with earlier examples:

> Well, my father said he will support anything I plan on doing. So I told him that I wanted to go to England and go to university and he was supportive. He told me … he'll pay for the university and for anything I need.

The material underpinning of 'free' choice is quite apparent. For other students, such lavish options were not available although additional resources still served to widen choice. Thus, when 'Fritz' was not doing well at his 'A' level studies his Asian Ugandan parents encouraged and sent him abroad to study Arabic in the Middle East for a year. The choices of these interviewees were based on the family expectation of them becoming professional men such as doctors or businessmen.

While class understandings tended to have a shadowy existence, a sense of belonging to an ethnic minority was more explicit and directly impacted upon educational choices. For instance, these students were wary of what they perceived as 'white' universities and made their choices accordingly. Indeed, the criteria of what counts as a 'good choice' is culturally-specific and value-laden. It is not simply about making a rational choice that can be objectively judged as 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong'. A factor in Jason's choice of university was that 'there's a lot more diversity and cultures which is good', a point which also influenced many of the ethnic minority

students quoted earlier. 'Muse' emphasized diversity as important to his choice. He came from a wealthy background with a strong sense of entitlement but felt his position in the UK was demoted somewhat. As a result he chose a very diverse university which he perceived as more welcoming and a place capable of building communal feeling and support:

> … every different types of people can fit into this university … all the different, like, religions of peoples, you know, who had their own society … you'd have so many people all together, you know, working hard and, you know, I thought that everyone's helping each other out and everything.

Diversity was an important criterion for many of the men in their choice-making practices. However, within the context of higher education, diversity can also imply inequality. As a result of favouring diversity, many of the men chose less prestigious universities. Although some felt that an 'English' education would bolster their credentials and careers, this was tempered in practice by the fact that elite universities were not on the radar of potential choices. Middle class students from abroad could not easily re-establish themselves or translate cultural capital across countries in a straightforward way. Thus, identification as part of an 'ethnic minority' could diminish one's class power.

Conclusions

For most of the men studied here education was seen to be a vehicle for achieving an ideal form of masculine identity – although the concept of this ideal identity differed between the men. Success in life was generally linked with having a well-paid job and supporting a family through a stable heterosexual relationship in marriage. Accessing higher education was seen as a crucial mechanism to achieve these aspirations. This vision was presented as the ideal even in cases where it was at variance with the reality of their lives, for instance, if they were being supported financially by their partners and/or family – here a 'traditional' form of masculinity persisted despite being an inappropriate explanation of a lived situation. For those not (yet) in long term relationships, the image of the traditional breadwinner was especially pervasive and directly informed their educational choices. Moreover, such choices closely related to wider arguments about the economic imperatives for a highly skilled workforce. In the process they also undercut government discourses of social justice by positing a form of masculinity predicated upon the support and subordination of others – indeed, a highly skilled workforce can imply considerable inequality (Bridges 2006).

In fact, there were significant differences in the ways that masculinity impacted upon choice. Class, race and gender all affected how material, social and psychic forces combined to enable and constrain choice. For many working class and ethnic minority students choice was limited to only a handful of universities bounded by proximity, finance and knowledge. Financial support was required to complete such courses but the source of this was not always clear when the men initially embarked on their studies – other reasons were paramount. While few actually mentioned finance as a crucial issue, it certainly demarcated a perimeter within which choices had to be made and, for some, distance and travel clearly acted as a proxy for financial considerations. Of course, lack of finance would eventually catch up with the most motivated of students (Bowl 2003). Given a lack of information and knowledge students often had to be tenacious in making multiple choices. In challenging what they perceived to be institutional obstacles these students questioned the assumption that they suffered from a deficit. Indeed, forms of masculinity privileged in the institutions were tied to notions of 'standard students' (Williams 1997); the ideal young middle-class, white, male student. Such assumptions excluded many students.

Middle class ethnic minority students were able to bypass some of these issues given their greater financial resources and sense of entitlement. They took advantage of a wider range of educational choices to advance their careers and construct forms of hegemonic masculinity. In addition, some used this to separate themselves from other students less able to make choices so freely. For many of these students ethnic identifications also served to restrict their choice of university. We would concur with the view that the growth of choice benefits those best able to take advantage of a market system. The assumption of a level playing field for all cannot be sustained. As a result, social divisions are becoming more complex. Growing segregation within higher education must increasingly be placed alongside the more traditional division between higher education and the rest.

However, it does not follow that ethnic minority and working class groups are necessarily constrained by their collective context whereas middle class people are not. Rather, it is important to study the processes by which certain groups of people are able to represent themselves as 'individuals' – class, race and gender will all help to determine the success of these strategies (Giddens 1991). White middle class people, of whom there were unsurprisingly very few in our study, are generally more able to conjure the magic whereby the social production of individuality mysteriously disappears leaving the illusion of rational choice. Working class and ethnic minority students also had to contend more openly with wider forces in constructing a masculine self – the so-called 'burden of representation'.

This is not to deny the richness and depth of many further educational experiences. Access courses and foundation degrees offered students the opportunity to 'explore themselves' and widen expectations while learning new skills and knowledge. Many of them showed considerable tenacity in their educational choices and had to make sacrifices as part of re-making themselves – education became a site of personal and social struggle. These men made choices within the context of material, social and emotional factors which operated as both opportunities and constraints. This contrasts with the deficit understandings which infuse official discourses of widening participation. Thus, the assumption that choices are made by individuals stripped of their wider social context, according to a set of rational criteria clearly understood by policy makers needs to be re-assessed. Choice does not appear to be the means by which students simply overcome their 'disadvantage'. Rather, we need to view choice within the wider social fabric of students' lives that are invested with complex and contradictory formations of masculinity.

Notes

[1] The bulk of the interviews were carried out by Soile Pietiekainen

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