Conference: Critical perspectives on agency and social justice in Transitions and Career Development

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Type of proposal: Paper

Title: ‘I feel that I could go anywhere now, anywhere in the world...’ – mobility and agency in graduate career paths

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Abstract:

This paper will draw on an ongoing research project which explores the interrelation of career and migration pathways of higher education students from the UK island communities of Orkney and Shetland. Considering the role of mobility in career development, the paper will demonstrate that students classically define their own mobility in terms of their own agency, and where they lack mobility it is perceived primarily as a lack of confidence. However, the paper will explore the narratives of the young people to deconstruct the notion of agency in terms of mobility, demonstrating how a range of structural factors impact on the lived experiences of students’ mobility. The importance of critical perspectives on career development which recognise that student’s self-portrayal of migration choice and migration confidence may conceal wider structural inequalities is identified.

Keywords: Mobility, Migration, Social Justice, Career, Confidence

Relation to the conference theme:

The paper explores the relationship of perceived agency to enacted patterns of mobility and the underpinning structural factors.

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework:

Aims and objectives

This paper draws on an ongoing PhD research project. The aim of the project is to identify how living in a remote island community prior to entering higher education impacts on students’ higher education choices and subsequent career journeys. The focus of the research project is on higher education students from the island communities of Orkney and Shetland (in the UK).

Theoretical framework

This project draws on Hodkinson’s notion of careership (Hodkinson, 2008) and the wider sociological perspective of Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). These perspectives offer a way of conceptualising the structure / agency debate, identifying how our backgrounds influence our ‘horizons for action’ and the potential range and ways in which we may make decisions, but do not
The choices we make within these ‘horizons’. Drawing on Bourdieu the project utilises concepts of habitus in relation to geographical space.

The project also draws on the growing literature related to the spatial and mobilities turns in the social sciences (for example Urry 2000, Massey 2005). These perspectives challenge objectivist understandings of geographical space, identifying how geographical space is not just a ‘backdrop’ but is an ‘agentic player’ which impacts on our lives (Gieryn, 2000). Places are imbued with meaning through the ways in which space is practiced, represented and lived (Lefebvre, 1991). People produce and reproduce spaces including domestic spaces – such as practices of home-making. Different places offer different possibilities and Soja’s (2010) concept of ‘spatial justice’ raises awareness of the way inequality has a spatial component – with differential distributions of goods, services, housing and so on. Places therefore are an intrinsic part of our lives. Where we live and how we live in our places offers certain physical environments as well as access to different social environments and opportunities. Therefore rather than place being less relevant in the modern ‘global’ world, these perspectives argue for the continuing importance of space and place.

How the spaces that we live in influence our habitus, and what this means for choices of career and migration is a core underpinning of this project. Considering how students choose (or don’t choose) the places they come to live in is also critical. Exploring mobility patterns and experiences, the project draws on notions of capitals that enable mobility – broadly conceptualised in terms of ‘mobility capital’ (Corbett, 2007; Kauffmann et al 2004).

Applying these theoretical perspectives to two specific communities – the Orkney and Shetland islands – this project seeks to understand what effect living in these communities prior to entry to higher education may have on the university and post-graduation pathways of students. Is geography an ‘agentic player’ in the game? How might the spatial habitus of Orkney and Shetland impact on young people’s decision making?

Methods/methodology

The project utilises a methodology based on longitudinal qualitative interviewing. An initial survey was used to engage potential participants in the project and generate a sampling frame. This survey was circulated via local press (including the local papers and radio stations) and through social media. All students who completed the survey and met the inclusion criteria for the project were contacted and invited for interview. This resulted in a total sample size of 23 final year full time undergraduate students who had been domiciled in Orkney or Shetland prior to entering higher education. 14 of these students were from Orkney, and 9 from Shetland. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with the students shortly before graduation. The same cohort were surveyed six months after graduation to identify any changes in their circumstances and then interviewed again a year after graduation. The first interview explored students’ experience and background before entering higher education, their choices to enter higher education and their experience of higher education and their plans for graduation. The second interviews focused on their experience of transition into the working world (or into post-graduate study) and the ways their ideas about their career paths had changed over this time. The role of place was a theme in both interviews, including perceptions about the influence of their time in Orkney or Shetland, their migration routes and their plans for migration in the future. Interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify key themes.
Outcomes/ expected results

Preliminary results from the first phase of the study show that geographical location is an important consideration for choice of university of students. Choices depend on a range of socio-cultural factors, with ‘familiarity’ of location a key theme (although exactly which locations are ‘familiar’ depend on personal context). Results also show ‘confidence’ as a key theme, with increased confidence an outcome of university study for most. This includes ‘confidence’ in terms of mobility, and the ability to move and live in different places. Despite this growth in confidence, the results show the actual geographical destinations of students are, once again, not completely ‘free’ with a range of socio-cultural factors influencing the choices students make.

References


