The role of cultural capital theory in explaining the absence from UK higher education of refugees and other non-traditional students

Jacqueline Stevenson and John Willott, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK

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Introduction
Accurate statistics on the number, educational background and entry into Higher Education (HE) of refugees are notoriously difficult to determine: the qualifications possessed by refugees are not collated and, since they are classified as home students, there is no means of calculating the number of current or former refugees in the UK HE system (Peach and Henson, 2006). Those studies that have been undertaken show that many refugees are both highly qualified and have experience of working in skilled, professional employment: Aldridge and Waddington’s survey of asylum seekers found that 85% had some education or training qualifications with 80% being in paid employment before coming to the UK (2001).

Despite these high level skills and qualifications, many refugees are unemployed or underemployed. The British Medical Association database has over 1000 refugee doctors registered with only 69 in employment (Medical News Today, 2004), whilst there are over 200 refugee teachers on the National Refugee Teacher’s Database (Refugees into Teaching 2008). This situation has led Shiferaw and Hagos to comment that ‘qualified professional (refugees) with managerial and administrative backgrounds are the most disadvantaged group in terms of routes to employment’ (2002, pp.9). In an attempt to re-establish their lives, many refugees apply to HE Institutions. Yet whilst aspiration to access UK higher education is high amongst refugees (Stevenson and Willott, 2007) their applications are often unsuccessful.

In this paper we explore the anomaly between the high educational achievement and aspiration of refugees and their failure to access higher education through the lens of cultural capital theory.

Access to Higher Education: the socio-economic perspective
The failure of many from ‘widening participation’ backgrounds to access HE has often been attributed to these students being from the ‘working-classes’. Documentation from the DfES is riddled with reference to class distinctions and the impact of class (Department for Education and Skills, 2005), whilst the government's national Aimhigher programme was originally set up to target children from working-class backgrounds. Although patterns of access are slowly changing, young people living in some prosperous areas are still 6 times more likely to access HE than those living in areas of disadvantage (HEFCE, 2006). Explanations for these differences are varied. Archer and Hutchings found that young people from working-class backgrounds ‘constructed HE as inherently risky, demanding great investment and costs, and yielding uncertain returns’ (2000, pp.569). Others deliberately exclude themselves from HE through fear of getting ‘above themselves’ (Archer and Leathwood, 2003).
However this does not resolve the anomaly of why some groups are over-represented in HE, particularly when these groups have a disproportionate lower socio-economic profile. For example, minority ethnic (ME) students on full-time degree courses are more likely to be the children of parents from lower socio-economic classes compared with all students (Connor, Tyers et al., 2004). In direct contrast, many refugees are middle class but remain unrepresented in the HE population. Consequently socio-economic or class position of individuals cannot be the only, or necessarily the most significant, determinant of educational attainment.

**Access to Higher Education: the cultural capital perspective**

Originally theorised by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977), owning or lacking cultural capital has been identified as a crucial axis of social inequality. Rather than analysing societies in terms of classes, Bourdieu used the concept of *field* - a social arena in which people manoeuvre and struggle in pursuit of desirable resources or *capital*, of which there are three forms: economic (money and command over economic resources such as property), social (resources based on group membership and relationships) and cultural (the linguistic and cultural competence required to access dominant systems, academic rewards and higher status in society) (Bourdieu, 1986). For Bourdieu, cultural capital theory explained how the social structures of a host society perpetuated themselves and how social class was reproduced through the acquisition, accumulation and inter-generational transmission of cultural capital.

There are manifest examples of how cultural capital is mobilised to maintain educational inequality. For example, parents who wish to ‘buy’ into good state schools use cultural capital to decode the local housing market, making judgements about the state of the market up to ten years into the future (Reay and Lucey, 2003) and ‘seek out extensive and detailed ‘cold’ knowledge [e.g. examination results or league tables]’ to supplement knowledge gain through the ‘grapevine’ (Ball and Vincent, 1998, pp.392). In addition, the possession of a certain level of cultural capital can enable further acquisition. For example, in Hong Kong, middle-class social reproduction is increasingly tied to the acquisition of formal academic credentials and, since educational opportunities for all social groups has expanded, many families are electing to either emigrate or educate their children abroad to enable them to obtain a more valuable type of cultural capital in the form of a ‘Western’ university degree (Waters, 2006). Cultural capital is not just activated by individuals however. UK educational policy, including parental involvement schemes and initiatives such as the Gifted and Talented programme, also mobilise cultural capital and consequently perpetuate educational inequalities (Reay, 2004a). Cultural capital theory also helps identify why, having overcome initial barriers to accessing HE, many students subsequently leave. Issues include making the ‘wrong’ choice of course, the feeling of isolation or hostility in academic culture and a lack of preparedness for the style of learning (Connor, Tyers et al., 2004). In addition, since cultural (and other) capital is highly context specific, the capital required to access the HE institution is often different from that required to stay there, so that those who are most successful in transferring between different domains are those who have multiple cultural identities and are ‘successful cultural code switchers’ (Campbell, 2000, pp.37).

Individuals may have many different cultural identities relating to different aspects of their life. These are both intertwined and cumulative layers. The immediate cultural context determines which layer is relevant at any particular time, so that the main aspects of culture may have more significance in one circumstance than another. In addition, identities can be reworked into hybrid cultures, shown in research with specific UK-born
ethnic and religious groups where ‘individuals...may change their cultural identity in a new cultural context, or may have developed the ability to move between different cultural contexts without losing their sense of individual identity’ (Campbell, 2000, pp.31). Refugees are also required to acquire or create new single or multiple social and cultural identities. However, the difference is that ‘unlike their migrant counterparts who are pulled by opportunities, refugees are pushed by circumstance’ (Shiferaw and Hagos, 2002, pp.15).

Many refugees are struggling with the aftermath of their experiences. Separation from family and community, experience of trauma and displacement, poor acculturation and loss of socio-economic status all impact on their psychological well-being and adjustment (Sundquist, Bayard-Burfield et al., 2000). This has great significance since, as Jodeyr notes, for refugees, ‘there are no familiar cues and symbols...they have difficulties in coming to terms with their lower status and this creates many internal conflicts’ (2003, pp.206). This is particularly true for professional refugees whose identities tend to be primarily embedded in the world of paid employment, whilst loss of professional status and/or unemployment undermines or threatens self-identity (Stevenson and Willott, 2006). For these refugees, ‘cultural adaptation becomes one of the essential survival skills’ (Campbell, 2000, pp.36) to the extent that, on receiving right to remain in the UK, many apply to higher education.

The study
The research conducted for this study1 was designed to identify the gap between the aspiration of refugees and their access to higher education, and to inform the development of an accredited training module which would provide them with increased study and employability skills and so facilitate their access to higher education or skilled employment. Thirty one refugees2, from 18 countries took part in the research. Primarily aged 30-50 years most had already participated in some aspect of HE in their home countries. Some had HE qualifications, including post-graduate (particularly in the healthcare or education professions) and some had achieved very high status within their profession (headteacher, consultant surgeon). Other had not completed their studies due to war, political upheaval or other trauma. Most were currently unemployed or working in low-paid unskilled jobs but all wished to resume work within their profession or similar employment. All spoke intermediate level English, though not all had English language qualifications.

Hour-long semi-structured interviews were held with all participants. Those who subsequently undertook the training were interviewed for a second time and completed both a piece of reflective writing and a semi-structured questionnaire, designed to identify how they felt about the previous high ‘professional’ and current low status.

Findings
All respondents talked at length about the impact unemployment had on their self-esteem describing themselves as ‘ashamed’, ‘depressed’, and ‘useless’. They felt they had lost status in their own eyes and those of their families; they missed the self-esteem that came from being successfully professionally employed and the confidence they had felt at working in an environment they were trained to work in. Those who were working were in low paid, low skilled employment with little or no connection to their previous employment. All bar one (who was happy working part time) spoke of how unhappy they felt that, despite lengthy post graduate training and years of work experience, they were now forced to start climbing the professional ladder from the bottom.
I come from a culture where getting money for doing nothing is shameful and I have been working hard all my life, now I’ve got stuck in a situation where I am treated as if useless and all the work I have done is worthless (Rita, doctor).

The majority had already investigated the possibility of accessing HE as a ‘fast track’ to regaining economic, social and professional status. This included those who wished to gain a first degree; those needing to gain specific HE qualifications to practice in the UK, those wanting to retrain and some, particularly those who had been unemployed the longest, wanting to gain a postgraduate qualifications to help them gain an edge in a competitive employment market. They were highly motivated and aspirational and were prepared to try anything that would enable them to re-gain professional and personal status and standing.

The most important thing is to just work. What is important isn’t the choice of job and what you choose. It’s the principle of working, of being able to contribute to the country, to support yourself (Nahid, accountant)

However, the majority had failed to obtain places on courses. The few who had been made provisional offers had been given stringent conditions and none felt that these conditions were achievable (at least in the short to medium term). They found this rejection, and the barriers which prevented them from being successful, exceptionally difficult to understand.

I was a manager you know, an important job. I had lots of people working for me, a good house and my family. But then I came here and I became a nothing (Jean-Philippe, company director)

Whilst these refugees possessed cultural capital that originated in their homeland (they were highly qualified, multi-lingual, experienced, articulate, motivated and resourceful, and had achieved social and economic success in their home countries) they now found that their current cultural capital was of little or no worth.

It is widely recognised that cultural capital can be repeatedly transformed as a consequence of new experiences, with old forms adapting and new ones being introduced (Bourdieu, 1986; Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003; Waters, 2006). For forced migrants cultural capital is called upon to shape response to trauma, facilitate new social and psychological growth, enable integration into existing systems and regain what has been lost (Weine, Ware et al., 2004). This holds particularly true for embodied and institutionalised cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, pp.47).

**Embodied** cultural capital (embodied in the individual) is a process which begins in early childhood and is the result of investment by parents or other key individuals and includes linguistic capital (the mastery of language). Many of the refugees in this study were multi-lingual but didn’t speak English on arrival in the UK. This reflects findings from other research – for example in a 2003 survey over 50% of some refugee groups had no English skills (Kirk, 2004). Recognising that inadequate language skills prevent refugee integration into all aspects of life, to date, all refugees and asylum seekers have been eligible for free English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) provision. However, in practice this provision has been consistently inadequate and there has been a significant lack of English language provision for professional or vocational development (Griffiths, 2003). This situation has worsened as, since August 2007, the Learning and Skills Council no longer funds basic ESOL classes for asylum seekers.
The refugees in our study were acutely aware of the need to acquire effective English language skills.

I’ll do anything at the moment. Practise, practise, practise. I can’t do anything until I can speak English. I’ll take any job (Mira, teacher)

However, they also found that learning English per se was not sufficient; rather they needed to obtain specific English language qualifications (normally an IELTS³ score of level 6 or above) to access HE. Many were frustrated that HEIs demanded IELTS rather than alternative qualifications since not only do IELTS courses not attract Learning and Skills Council funding, making them prohibitively expensive, but there are over 40 English language qualifications listed by UCAS (the University and Colleges Admissions Service) which HEIs could choose to accept but often don’t.

Embodied cultural capital also encompasses ‘long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body’ (Bourdieu, 1986, pp.243) acquired over time and heavily influenced by family and includes ways of behaving, communicating with and relating to others (not just linguistically), and knowledge. Once again, these may hold different ‘value’ in the UK than in the refugees’ homelands. Some of the refugees in the study (particularly the women) talked at length about how hard they found it to be assertive and ‘sell themselves’ when applying for jobs or places on HE courses. They saw this as a peculiarly British characteristic and one which they did not possess.

I’ve heard a lot of people saying things like: what are you giving to the job? Everybody tells me to prepare for such questions. That seems out of context. If you are to do a job good you are to work hard. That is all (Rita, doctor)

Others were aware that their non-verbal communication skills and ways of behaving and relating to others were both different and inappropriate:

I want to learn about bedside manner, I know it will be different here from where I trained. I want to get it right, to communicate properly. That’s what makes a successful doctor (Ammar, doctor)

In addition, these refugees also lacked knowledge of UK educational system, including their rights and entitlements to access HE, and did not understand the relative ‘status’ of different HEIs and courses available (many had come from places where there might be only one HEI in the whole country). This meant that they had been unable to challenge wrongly given information, or had wasted time acquiring qualifications that proved worthless. They were particularly critical of university admissions staff who were often ill-informed about the rights and entitlements of refugees.

I was (wrongly) advised I should wait three years even after getting refugee status before applying to university. I therefore went to work in a factory (Nahid, accountant)

The refugees in our study also talked about their frustration at the lack of recognition of their institutional cultural capital - their academic credentials or educational qualifications. Overseas qualifications are often not understood or accepted by UK HEIs. Bloch’s questionnaire survey (2002) demonstrated quantitatively what a number of studies undertaken for the Learning and Skills Councils have revealed qualitatively – that many refugees are highly qualified but these qualifications are not recognised, hence have no value as cultural capital (Phillimore and Goodson, 2001; Goodson and Phillimore, 2005). Many of the refugees in our study had fled without possessions and commented on the lack of institutional procedures to deal with insufficient evidence of qualifications or assessment of prior experiential learning.
They always want you to show them papers, documents. But it is not easy for us. We came with nothing. How do we get these things? We can’t go back (Marianne, teacher)

Others who did have certificates talked about the over-reliance of HE admissions on the UK NARIC system of qualification translation. They found it frustrating that they were forced to pay for their overseas qualifications to be converted to show UK equivalence before HEIs would even consider their applications. On receipt of these certificates of conversion many also found that their degrees had been ‘downgraded’ and were worth just two years of a UK degree.

**Conclusion**

The current Higher Education Funding Council for England strategic plans states that ‘we cannot afford to waste talent simply because of a reluctance to foster it. That means continuing to reach out to those for whom HE seems beyond reach...’ (HEFCE, 2007, pp.9). In reality there is a direct correlation between an individual’s cultural capital and the likelihood of becoming, and remaining, a student in UK higher education. This is true of students from working-class backgrounds and indigenous ethnic minority students as well as refugees. Whilst refugees do possess cultural capital, they often possess ‘cultural capital in the wrong currency’ (Reay and Lucey, 2003, pp.138). As long as HEIs continue to demand that refugees possess specific and non-negotiable cultural capital then, as identified by Bourdieu more than thirty years ago, educational inequalities will continue to be perpetuated. This will mean that plans to ‘ensure that everyone with the potential to benefit from HE has the opportunity to do so, whatever their background and whenever they need it’ (HEFCE, 2007, pp.25) will remain little more than rhetoric.

**References**


Archer L and Hutchings M (2000) ""Bettering yourself"? Discourses of risk, cost and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21, 4, pp.555 - 574


**Notes**

1 part funded by Aimhigher and part by the Leeds Equal Development Partnership
2 of these, some were former refugees or asylum seekers and two were skilled migrants
3 International English Language Testing System
4 The UK NARIC is the National Agency for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the official information provider on the comparability of international qualifications

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