Home and away: risk, familiarity and the multiple geographies of the HE experience

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Introduction

Within the existing Higher Education (HE) literature there is an acknowledgement that the proximity of Higher Education institutions (HEIs) in relation to the location of the students ‘home’, plays a critical role in the choice process for working class students. For example, working class students tend to access local post-1992 universities, institutions which they feel cater for their needs and for people ‘like them’ (Reay et al., 2001, Ball et al., 2000). Such decisions are based upon a need to reduce the financial implications of moving away from home, but also negate the perceived negative implications of operating within culturally alien academic and social environments. On the other hand middle class students appear more willing and able to move away to university given that their choices are much less constrained.

With reference to research conducted as part of our ESRC/TLRP project into the socio-cultural and learning experiences of undergraduate students in four different HEIs, this paper looks further into these issues of location and proximity, addressing their importance in terms of the choice process, but also in terms of how they condition the HE experience. We show how the
geographies of home and university are critical to the ongoing constitution of the identities of working class undergraduates and discuss the stable as well as changing relationship between ‘home’ and university as spatial resources. In so doing the paper highlights the way in which working class students invest in the familiar in order to avert the dangers associated with this risk taking experience. We also show how the riskiness of the HE experience is negotiated through relational practices of belonging and support, resulting in forms of socio-spatial compartmentalisation, but also shifting boundaries of identification.

**Risk, the HE experience and ‘the local’**

Encounters with ‘risk’ are increasingly a central aspect of everyday life, dominating daily decisions, trajectories and social relations (Beck, 1992). However, this sense of risk, both in its experiential and perceived forms, is not encountered by all in the same way or to the same extent. Threats to the body, to the pocket and to the ontological security of an individual (Giddens, 1984), are unevenly distributed on the basis of class, ‘race’ and gender and also vary across space. In terms of class, those positioned by their working class-ness are unable to so easily avert the daily threats which face them as well as being at a disadvantage in seizing opportunities, due to a relative inability to accrue and employ what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as dominant forms of economic, social and cultural capital. This is not to say that the working classes do not navigate the systems and environments in which they find themselves, through their own tactics and ruses (de Certeau, 1984), but that they are positioned in an “…inherently riskier position [than the] relatively ‘protected’ middle class” (Archer and Hutchings, 2000:569).

In terms of the HE experience, the ‘choice’ making process is saturated with perceptions of risk taking and insecurity (Archer and Hutchings, 2000). Indeed, the idea that working class students actually have an open choice in the same manner as middle class entrants has been challenged in recognition of the interplay of power and constraint (Ball et al., 2002). The risks, costs and sacrifices involved in entering HE come in a variety of forms
including financial, emotional, temporal, career/aspiration related risks, social sacrifices and the dangers of entering into an unfamiliar cultural world whilst breaking established bonds with familiar places and familiar people. However, decisions made by working class students do not end with a successful offer. Individuals continue to actively negotiate the terms of their own identity as they move between and within the contexts of home and university.

The notion of home and of ‘the local’ is recognised here as a spatial resource upon which individuals draw to make sense of their everyday life. Rather than being seen as a fixed territory with clear boundaries, it is regarded as both a material and imagined realm which is subject to reproduction and retranslation through spatial practices. By highlighting the productive capacities of space and the spatial practices of individuals (Massey, 2005) we wish to emphasise that the experiences and identities of working class students in this study are actively routed through, rather than passively rooted in particular spaces and places including ‘the university’ and ‘the home’ (Clifford, 1997). However, this is not to lessen the importance of strong geographical ties to specific places, and their influence upon classed identities. Indeed, it is recognised that the mobility of individuals and attachment to place is critically conditioned by socio-economic positioning and therefore in the case of working class students is often restricted both socially and spatially (Nash, 2000).

Methodology

The wider project investigates the experiences of undergraduates, from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic groups and age groups, studying a range of subject areas in four different HEIs. These include an FE college in the north of England, where students study foundation degrees (Eastern College), a post-1992 university in the north of England, (Northern University), a pre-1992 civic university in the midlands, (Midlands University) and a high status university in the south of England (Southern University). Initially we conducted a questionnaire survey at these institutions before
conducting one to one interviews with middle class and working class students before focussing in on a series of one to one interviews with working class students. In total there are 27 case study students: 3 at Eastern College, 8 at Northern University, 7 at Midlands University and 9 at Southern University. It is to three of these accounts that we mostly refer here.

At Northern University we refer to Sarah, a young white Law student who has now completed her 3 year course. She was born in Northern city, but spent nearly all her life in the village of Bunton in a rural area 80 miles north of Northern University. Sarah’s father is a police constable and her mother works in a flour mill. At this same university we also refer to the account of Mary, another white Law student now at the end of her 2nd year. Mary was born and grew up in an area of Northern City. Her father is a metal worker and her mother does not work due to long-term illness. She lives with her mum, dad, 2 sisters and 1 brother and has done so since she started her course. And at Midlands University we refer to the story of Bradley, a Chemistry student now finishing his 3rd year of a four year course. He was born and grew up in the town of Newbridge, 40 miles south of Midlands University. Bradley’s father is a fork lift driver and his mother works in telesales. These accounts illustrate the classed based experience of negotiating identities and risk taking which, to different extents, span across geographical locations. They illuminate that while each student lives at various physical distances from their ‘home’, connections to home are maintained and adjusted in order to help them fit into a new academic, social and cultural world and to avert the risks associated with a movement into, (certainly in terms of Midlands and to some extent Northern University) middle class educational environments.

**Initial concerns and locational choice**

Neither Bradley nor Sarah came into HE directly from their A levels, both took a year out in paid employment. Although it wasn’t a common route for those from her home village, Sarah knew she wanted to go to university the following year and always had her heart set on studying Law and used this
year to save up for university. Bradley on the other hand was much less sure about continuing, mainly because of his negative experiences of school which informed both his expectations of HE and his attitude towards those in authority who had previously dented his confidence. While Sarah had always planned to study at university this did not mean that she wasn’t also cautious about engaging with HE, particularly as this meant that she would have to move away from home. Sarah emphasises the riskiness of what she was about to embark upon, including giving up a familiar environment and a secure and regular income working as a librarian at her old school:

Sarah: I did have a little bit of cold feet once I was given that temporary position during my gap year. It was sort of do I really want to go because I’m on good money here, I know what I’m doing, I’m familiar where I am. Or do I take the chance of going away to a place I don’t really know any more…and risk three years.

Along with the concerns Bradley brought with him from his previous formal educational experience, he also speaks of a sense of apprehension in terms of having to physically move away to start his course. For him, going to university did not serve the purpose of killing two birds with one stone by gaining a degree and living somewhere new (as it seems to be for many of the middle class students). Rather, the focus was on obtaining a well recognised Chemistry degree which would enable him to secure decent future prospects. The idea of moving to attend university was not an aspect of the experience he was particularly relishing.

Bradley: I was probably a bit more apprehensive about it [moving away] than looking forward to it because I wasn’t the sort of person that wanted to just get away from home, just for the sake of it…

These concerns were also compounded by a lack of knowledge or cultural capital relating to what the experience of university would actually involve, both academically and socially. Apart from Sarah, whose older sister had attended Northern University before her, the students here were the first in their family to enter into HE and therefore lacked the information sources and networks often taken for granted. For Bradley, once he had realised that Midlands University had an established reputation (which wasn’t apparent at
first), the issue of his own class identity was another aspect of the university experience which caused a sense of anxiety:

Bradley: I did think it would be quite snobby, that there would be a lot of posh people and not really getting the time of day from people.

Locational choice can be seen as one of the major tactics employed by these students in order to minimise the damage of these perceived risks. Unlike Mary, who chose to attend the university in her home city, neither Bradley nor Sarah enrolled on degrees within their home town. However, this wasn’t really an option for them. For Sarah, Northern University was one of the closest HEIs, along with a couple of other regional possibilities, coming as she does from a remote rural area. And for Bradley, while there is an HEI in Newbridge, even with his apparently limited knowledge of the differences between HEIs, it wasn’t considered to be of a good enough academic standing to warrant attending. Given these constraints, it is clear that all these students chose to attend universities which they considered to be relatively local.

For Sarah, although this involved moving a short distance from her family home in Bunton, Northern City was somewhere which she admitted did “feel a bit like home”, somewhere she had spent her early years and where her a number of her relatives still remained. The fact that she could move in with her grandparents, something her sister had done before her, offered her the comfort of the familiar and a cheaper alternative to halls of residence or private accommodation. As with Mary and Bradley it meant that she could take full advantage of the opportunity presented to her to go to university, something which her parents’ generation had been unable to do.

Sarah: I looked at the student halls but realised that I would not be able to afford it and live and not be able to worry about my degree. I wanted to go and be able to focus on my degree totally without having to worry about where my next pay cheque was coming from or will my electricity be getting shut off.

For Mary the decision to ‘stay local’ was even more apparent. Attending the post-1992 university within her home city, allowed her to continue to live with
her parents whilst studying in order to potentially become a solicitor. Although she expressed some regret at not moving into the halls of residence and felt as if she was missing out on a more authentic and socially engaged ‘uni experience’, her choice between two local post 1992 universities (Northern and Nortonia) within 30 minutes of each other was based upon financial considerations and a strong attachment to her locality. As she put it: “I just didn’t really want to move away from the area to be honest with you”. Her choice of Northern over Nortonia was also determined by her level confidence in her won ability to achieve the necessary entry requirements. These factors held greater weight in this decision making processes for Mary than the fact that her social life would be much more restricted.

Going to a relatively local university offset some of the concerns these students had about coming to university in the first place, such as Sarah’s worries that taking up her law degree was a gamble, Bradley’s concern about the sort of people that went to university and Mary’s worries about how she would cope financially. However, the importance of proximity to the familiar did not end with that initial locational decision. Throughout the course of these students’ university experience, proximity but also importantly connections to the familiar continued to remain relevant and figure highly in the on going negotiation of risk, identity and belonging. Indeed this connectivity can be seen not only in the case of Mary who lived very close to her university, but also for Sarah and Bradley, in spite of and because of their distance from home.

**Connections to the familiar**

Being ‘close enough’ to home figured heavily in Bradley’s decision to come to Midlands and was related to his motivations for studying at this level in the first place. Embarking on a university degree did not mean that he necessarily had to or indeed wanted to break his close ties with home, in particular, his friends and family. These connections were something which he continued to value and rely upon given that the basis for coming to
university was not necessarily to start afresh or to purposefully pursue new social avenues.

Bradley:...because most of my friends I knew are back home and my family as well, and I'm quite close to my parents so I didn’t want to go across the other side of the country to escape like most people do, I just wanted to stay close.

As Bradley suggests, for many students at Midlands, coming to university and moving away form home was part of an unquestioned right of passage where as one white, female, middle class student put it (PDB) “it wasn’t an option not to go”. For such students the ‘uni experience’ is viewed as part of a broader preparation for life, through an environment which allows them to develop into ‘well-rounded’ adults – academically as well as socially and culturally (Crozier et al., 2007) A key aspect of this life stage is freedom from the constraints of home and family life. As one white, male, middle class Chemistry student at Midlands University stressed, beginning university marks the beginning of an escape from home and family life: (MD) “I mean I enjoyed it straightaway and I enjoyed the freedom it gave you as well, you know, you can just do what you want, when you want.”

This is not to say that these case study students did not value some sense of independence, but this didn’t dominate their motivations to study or their experiences. Far from being relieved to be free from home or wishing to abandon these social networks, all three of these students maintained these relationships as integral elements of their social lives. For Sarah, living with her grandparents and living locally to other relatives meant she could simultaneously have access to the support needed from her family, which she clearly valued (especially during the first year of her course during which she become very homesick), whilst experiencing a certain degree of independence. The university experience offered Sarah something of a half-way house somewhere between freedom and reliance.

Sarah:Well I had family connections here, so that was always good. It was close enough for me to go home but to be independent at the same time.
Bradley’s and Mary’s continuing attachment to home, can certainly not be explained away through some romantic vision of these localities. Indeed they were both quite forthright in their often disparaging descriptions of these areas. For instance Bradley identifies Newbridge as unsafe and dangerous, somewhere he and his friends would find themselves caught up in trouble on a regular basis. Mary also speaks of her neighbourhood in Northern City in the following terms:

Mary: It’s just you know, not a very nice area and most of the people are, well obviously not everyone but like its just got a bad reputation in general, it’s just horrible.

As Reay and Lucey (2000) recognise, young people from working class areas often have a love/hate relationship with their neighbourhoods. On one hand they recognise the very real social and economic problems which exist, but they also express a sense of fondness due to routine practices of belonging and identification, the proximity of friends and family and the sedimentation of a strong and defensive attachment to place. These connections are still valued because of who represents that place and because of who still remains there – those people with whom they have grown up with and those who act as a vital support system in a period of change and adjustment. Maintaining these connections is one way in which these students protect their own identities, avoid damaging exposure and particularly in the case of Bradley, operating within an established middle class institution, is a way of offsetting exclusionary encounters and maintaining his self worth (Charlesworth et al., 2006).

One of the main ways in which Bradley maintains this link with home is through frequent trips back to Newbridge. In his first and second year this seems to be especially important, although by the third year this had become less significant as we discuss below. Whilst many students stay in the city on weekends as well as for weeks and sometimes months at a time, Bradley used this time, if he didn’t have to work on his intensive Chemistry course, to travel home to see his parents and to go out with friends from school. Bradley’s relationship with his family is still as strong whilst at university
largely because they are seen as the people who will look out for him in case anything at university goes wrong. He spoke of both his parents as people who would go to great lengths, to protect their son. This relationship is not only maintained through regular visits but also by other means such as daily telephone calls:

Bradley: I speak to my mum every night, I ring mum and that because she likes to know I'm alright and that. Em, but like I suppose I've got closer to them because I know that if I had a problem here that they would help me sort that out.

For Bradley and for Sarah, even though they physically moved away, the family was not substituted upon arrival at university by other systems of support. This is not to say that neither of these students developed close and significant friendships in this new environment, but that the family remained an important source of support, reliance and friendship. Sarah discussed how, during her first year at university, she was very homesick, even though northern city was her ‘second home’. In order to cope with these feelings she describes how her friends she established at first and the academic staff at the university were helpful, but also that she could rely on those family members living in the area to support her during these early days, as well as her parents whom she described as being very close to.

Sarah: My friends have always been there, I’ve been quite lucky having the family so close, I mean I’ve got family members dotted all around the area. But I’m very lucky with the support structure I’ve got that it hasn’t actually fallen out yet.

In the experience of many middle class students at both universities, they continue to rely upon their parents, particularly in terms of access into HE, financial backing, academic support and careers advice. On the other hand it is recognised by many working class students that their families and in particular their parents are often ill equipped to help on an academic level given their own academic inexperience, thus maintaining as Crozier (2000) shows in the case of the school experience, a separation between the educational environment and the home. In Bradley’s words: “…they find it hard to listen because they don’t really understand. That’s their words: ‘we don’t understand’”. While they may not be able to assist their children in this
way, it is also the case that they are willing and able to provide more of an emotional support system and a stable sense of identification.

Mary shows in her account that while her parents were less than supportive of her choice to go to university in the first place, favouring a move into immediate full time employment, they do offer support in other ways. In particular for Mary it was clear that she had a strong social relationship with her mother, so much so that she often goes out with her mother and her friends together on the same occasion. Whilst she couldn’t discuss work matters with her parents, they remained an anchor which allowed her to maintain some kind of control for herself. These networks therefore do not result in the transmission of high status or dominant cultural capital but a form of support and friendship.

**Consequences and compartmentalisation**

This is not to say that the importance of the family in the lives of these working class students was viewed as solely beneficial, these appear to be reciprocal relationships whereby the students also have responsibilities to their families. While this illustrates a sense of duty and loyalty to home, on some occasions this was actually resented. For instance Mary expressed annoyance at the inability of her family to understand her needs and priorities as a student, Bradley spoke of having to look after his mum when his dad fell ill and Sarah’s commitment to her grandparents restricted her social life and had serious effects upon her academic progress. This highlights an emerging compartmentalisation of these students lives, which while beneficial in reducing the threat of various risks, has consequences for their integration into the culture of their respective universities and influences their behaviours as learners.

Even for Mary, who has not had to risk moving away from home, she has not become involved in the life of the university as she might have done. Given her financial concerns she decided not to move into the halls of residences in Northern City but stay at home with her parents. It is clear that there are many benefits for Mary in terms of the support structure her family provide, however
it is also clear that by settling on these living arrangements she feels that she has somehow ‘missed out’ of the university experience as well as compromising her ability to get progress academically because of the often difficult conditions in which she has to work at home.

Mary: To be honest with you I do regret not moving out in some aspects because like my house has only three bedrooms and like there are six people in it so it is very cramped and you can’t get any work done at all, I have to come here to do work most of the time unless I manage to get everyone out of the house, but that’s not very convenient in that respect, but other than that it’s all right I suppose.

For Sarah her working environment at her grandparents can be unsuitable and there may be a lack of understanding of what is required for her to embark on her degree programme successfully. In recent months family responsibilities have begun to take over her day to day activities as her relationship with her grandparents has evolved, particularly with the recent development of the illness of both of granddad and then her nan. During this period her course has clearly taken a back seat. She has now had to move back home to Bunton with her parents for the remaining months of her degree. The original decision to ‘play it safe’ in terms of location and then accommodation have it seems led to a very dis-jointed form of learning and academic engagement. This has not only effected her ability to spend enough time devoted to her studies but has also influenced her ‘social life’ at university, which she admits herself “has pretty much died”.

Sarah:....even if I’ve rung and told her I’m not going to be in at a certain time she’ll still pace up and down so when I was out I was constantly looking at the clock to see if I was going to be late which didn’t help matters but now with them being in the nursing home, I’ve just not bothered going out, I’ve just been staying in the house.

While the institutional culture of Midlands University means that the difficulties of ‘fitting in’ are lessened and sometimes negated due to practices of ‘drawing in’ and acculturation, in Bradley’s case there is a clear resistance to this, valuing the support system which he has developed at home rather than, for example, immersing himself in the formal social life of the university. For
Bradley, being at this university means he had the option to both socialise and learn in ways he feels comfortable with, resulting in self-selective integration. As he puts it:

Bradley: I feel involved with my own social life but I’m not really bothered about the massive cliques, it doesn’t really bother me. I’d rather just spend the time how I want to.

In this sense, particularly for the first half of his undergraduate experience, Bradley lived two very separate lives. He, for example, spoke of two very different sets of friends at home and at university, who engaged in different forms of conversation, different social activities and acted in very different ways. These two sets of friends were never introduced to each other. Neither have any of his friends from back home or family been to university; as a consequence discussion of academic matters or even university experiences rarely took place beyond the confines of his life at Midlands University.

**Shifting comfort zones**

Whilst it is clear that the classed positionings of students in HE define their relations to risk, the university and home, it is also the case that these relations do not remain static or stable over the course of their respective degree programmes. The students considered here both retain some forms of strong links to ‘home’ and to familiar places through forms of contact, resistance to change and socio-spatial compartmentalisation, but they are also open to transformation through changing conceptions of self and of others around them.

During the course of Bradley’s degree, his connections with home and with his social circles beyond university have changed. While he still retains a strong sense of identity based around his working class background, for instance he told his parents “don’t be stupid” when they told him they were worried that he would “end up being really snobby” and attacked those who marked him out as different because of his accent, he is also very conscious of the way in which his friendship groups have shifted. His relationship with his family remains as strong as ever, yet his visits home have become less
frequent as he developed a group of friends, including his girlfriend, who are seen as coming from different class backgrounds to himself yet are also people with whom he feels happy and comfortable. The sense that Bradley was risking something, some part of himself by entering into new social networks has certainly lessened over time as his friends at home became less important to him and he began to realise what he now valued in his social circles.

Bradley: I don't really see a lot of them. I do certain times but not that often really. I do probably one of them, whose like quite nice and I get on with quite well, but most of the time I try to stay away from them really cos I spend most of my time here now anyway, I've got mates here, so I don't really care.

The gender relations involved in these shifting social circles are also certainly significant. As his new relationships developed with his university friends, in particular his girlfriend, it is clear that he began to see his male friends from home as a threat. This was especially the case in regard to one of his friends from back home whom he regarded as someone who would “…sleep with your girlfriend and then try and be friends with you afterwards, which he does do to people, he’s that sort of person”.

Others things have also changed for Bradley during this period. Whilst he was initially concerned about the location of the university he wanted to attend, towards the end of his degree such concerns appear to have considerably lessened in importance. He has achieved very high grades during his time at Midlands University, and expects to gain a first in his four year degree and then apply for a PhD studentship. When asked about which university he would be interested in applying to he mentioned a number in the south east of England. However, this selection is not just based on the proximity of HEIs to home anymore, but also on the reputation and prestige associated with these institutions. These include some of the most ‘high status’ HEIs in the country – institutions that Bradley wouldn’t have even considered three year ago. With a more clearly defined career path mapped out and an increased sense of what he is capable of, Bradley comments:
Bradley: Yeah, I think it will be like quite good because I want to sort of try and move to a different university when I graduate and that kind of thing is the sort of thing I need on my CV for people to like notice rather than just sort of stand me out a bit from people that don’t… I mean I don’t really care any more. I think I would rather go somewhere I know that would help me in the future rather than just staying close to home.

His growing confidence over the period of his degree, his growing interest and passion for the subject and an emerging and shifting sense of attachment to people and places, seems to have enabled him to step a bit further beyond his geographical comfort zone – but not too far - it is interesting to note that he has mentioned that one of these universities in particular might be prioritised as it borders onto his home county.

Summary

This paper has illustrated, with reference to three case examples, the risks and insecurities encountered by working class students as they enter into and begin to progress through the HE system. The experience of these students differs on the basis of personal history, individual circumstance and the type of university attended. However it is also clear that their relations to risk and insecurity is reproduced through their classed identities and the geographies of home and university. Not only does this class positioning influence decisions taken throughout the university experience, it facilitates a particular set of social relations, particularly in terms of dependence and independence and also conditions patterns of integration into respective HEIs.

Physical proximity remains significant in the decision making process for these students as they look to avert the risks of the HE experience, however what seems more important is connections to the familiar which do not always require a physical nearness. Given personal situations, attachments to home are given expression in different ways with different consequences. While for Mary this meant actually living in the city where her university is based, for Bradley and Sarah this meant maintaining, but also adjusting connections to the familiar through the university experience.
We have also seen how the students’ relationship to conceptions of home are both routed through place, particularly in terms of their social support networks, but also routed through their experience of university as identities and relationships shift through new encounters and experiences. While the seemingly bounded cultural ties of these working class students are set firmly within rooted conceptions of home, it is also certainly the case, particularly for those students who have physically moved away from home that notions of belonging and identities are the product not only of these roots, but simultaneously the spatial and social routes taken through their engagement with higher education. In this sense the identities should be seen as finished products but contingent and the result of on-going negotiations.

While for all students the student life, is one full of anxiety adjustment and change, it appears that for working class students in our study, dealing with risk is a process which continues far beyond the initial decision to come to university as they constantly attempt to navigate through the unfamiliar, but increasingly recognizable terrain of higher education. Whilst Beck (1992) argues that modern society is defined by the threat of perceived risks which touches the lives and decisions of all, regardless of class, this paper has shown that for the working class students presented here, more so than middle class, they seek forms of protection, security and re-assurance in coping with processes of dis-placement and dis-continuity.

References


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