Perceived Parental Influence on Students’ Dispositions to Study Further Mathematics and the Mediation of Familial Capital

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Abstract

There is a growing concern about students’ enrollment in mathematically demanding courses in Higher Education (HE). Students’ dispositions towards mathematics influence their decisions to choose advanced mathematics at school and to pursue further studies in mathematically demanding courses in HE. The present study aims to investigate what factors affect students’ dispositions to study further mathematics and the role of parental aspirations in particular. This study involves an exploration of the way parental aspirations are perceived by six adolescent students and their perceptions are triangulated against their parents’ through a diverse set of individual students’ and parents’ interviews. We sought to explore how parents use their economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) for their children's education and what are the parenting practices through which they transfer different forms of capital to their children. We found that parental influence on students’ habitus and dispositions towards mathematics is subtle and mainly subconscious. We argue that family inculcates students’ habitus which orientates them towards studies in HE. This familial habitus is shared amongst family members but it is largely subconscious, thus parental influence on students’ dispositions is not articulated by students nor by their parents. Thus we conceptualise parental influence as a form of ‘symbolic violence’ which is ‘misrecognised’ after Bourdieu (1980). What is evident in the narratives of the students and their parents is the mediation of familial capital and the pedagogic work accomplished by the family at an earlier stage of their educational career.
Background literature

The problem of students dropping out of mathematics, especially advanced mathematics, has become one of the major contemporary concerns of educators, parents, and politicians about mathematics education (Ma, 2001). A considerable number of studies have investigated the role that parents play in their children’s mathematical learning. There is a large body of literature emphasising the importance of parental aspirations and their impact on students’ attainment and attitudes to mathematics (Fan & Chen, 2001; Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001; Aunola, Nurmi, Lerkkanen & Puttonen, 2003). Parental aspirations and parents’ attitudes towards mathematics have been identified as having a significant impact on students’ participation in advanced level mathematics and students’ achievement in mathematics (Ma, 2001). Previous research results also suggest that parental involvement has a significant impact on students’ mathematics achievement and attitudes towards mathematics (Campbell & Mandel, 1990; Cao, Bishop & Forgasz, 2006).

It is generally well documented that higher family socioeconomic status (SES) is related to higher educational expectations for the offspring (Wentzel, 1998). Brooks (2003) argues that various studies of educational choice have outlined what have been called the ‘class strategies of middle-class parents: attempts to achieve a class fit between the habitus of home and institution’ (Ball & Vincent, 2001: p.86 cited in Brooks, 2003). In her own research Brooks (2003) demonstrates considerable variety in the ways in which young people from working-class backgrounds made educational choices and approached points of transition; her study suggests that an equal degree of diversity may be apparent within the middle-class. Brooks (2003) also notes considerable differences in the extent to which families were involved in the decision-making process and in their knowledge about HE, generally, and the relative status of institutions and subjects, more specifically.

Reay, Davies, David and Ball (2001) argue that there are class inequalities involved in making decisions about higher education. According to Reay et al. (2001) the inequalities arise from lack of information and general perplexity and confusion about post-compulsory
education among working class families. They note that “while more working-class and minority students are entering university, for the most part they are entering different universities to their middle-class counterparts” (p.858). The role of parents as holders of crucial information on the educational system, what Bourdieu refers to as ‘informational capital’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) might explain the differences noted between different social groups.

Theoretical framework

The concepts of habitus and cultural capital, suggested by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) have become prominent for investigating and understanding social inequalities among social groups and crucial for understanding parents’ practices and involvement in educational contexts (Levine-Rasky, 2009). Lareau and Weininger (2004) provide a review of the literature on cultural capital and refer to its different operationalisations by various researchers. The notion of “parental cultural capital” surfaces in their literature review. For example McDonough used the concept of cultural capital in a qualitative study of influences on students’ college choice process:

For McDonough cultural capital comprises the “first-hand” knowledge that parents have of the college admission process, particularly knowledge that they do not get from schools (e.g. detailed understanding of the significance of SAT scores, the possibility of raising SAT scores through tutoring [...] as well as the initiative to secure private tutors). (Lareau & Weininger, 2004: p.121)

According to Reay (1998) Bourdieu has recognized the importance of the family as a site of social and cultural reproduction. “In recent work he discusses the practical and symbolic work undertaken in families; work which falls more particularly to women, who are responsible for maintaining relationships” (Bourdieu, 1996: p.22, cited in Reay, 1998). In the The Forms of Capital Bourdieu writes:

It is because the cultural capital that is effectively transmitted within the family itself depends not only on the quantity of cultural capital, itself accumulated by spending time, that the domestic group possess, but also on the usable time (particularly in the form of mother’s free time) available to it. (Bourdieu, 1986: p.253).
Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction posits that the acquisition of cultural capital and consequent educational success depend on the cultural capital passed down by the family, which in turn is largely depended on social class. Cultural capital is comprised of “linguistic and cultural competence”. Bourdieu (1973) writes:

The educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture (p.80).

Bourdieu (1996) argues that family “functions in habitus as a classificatory scheme and a principle of the constructions of the social world” (p.21). Bourdieu (1996) also considers belonging to a ‘normal family’ a privilege, and this privilege is one of the major conditions of the accumulation and transmission of economic and cultural capital.

The family plays a decisive role in the maintenance of the social order, through social as well as biological reproduction, i.e. reproduction of the structure of the social space and social conditions. It is one of the key sites of the accumulation of capital in its different forms and its transmission between the generations (Bourdieu, 1996: p.23).

Bourdieu (1986) has defined capital as those resources whose distributions define the social structure and whose deployment figures centrally in the reproduction of that structure. Such resources are not just economic, but also social and cultural. ‘Economic’ capital consists of financial stock and income and may be institutionalized in forms of inheritance. ‘Social’ capital includes social networks and identities of individuals as member of social groups, which provide ‘connections’ as assets. ‘Cultural’ capital consists of a large number of types of cultural knowledge and possessions including educational credentials. Even though in introducing the concept of capital, Bourdieu did not focus on school-family interactions, he points out the importance of class and social reproduction through the educational system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The analysis and interpretation of the data relies heavily on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. In particular, we utilise his concepts of habitus, economic, social and cultural capital to explore parental influence on students’ dispositions towards mathematics.

According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) parental influence on habitus is the pedagogic work accomplished by the family. "Pedagogic work accomplished by the family is a
function of the distance between the habitus it tends to inculcate, and the habitus inculcated by all previous forms of pedagogic work" (ibid, p.72). Bourdieu (1977) argues that a person’s individual history is constitutive of habitus, but so also is the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of: "The habitus acquired in the family is at the basis of the structuring of school experiences” (Bourdieu, 1977). We conceptualise students’ dispositions towards mathematics as part of their habitus and we sought to explore if students’ dispositions towards mathematics were informed by the habitus their family has inculcated.

**Methodology**

This study explores perceived parental influence on students’ dispositions to study further mathematics in HE through a multiple case studies methodology. The data come from a PhD study which investigates adolescent students’ dispositions for studies in Higher Education. In depth interviews were conducted with six students who are attending public upper secondary schools (lyceums) in Cyprus at the end of the process of completing the university entry form. Students were interviewed twice over a period of one year and further interviews were carried out with one of the parents of each student. The students’ interviews were triangulated against their parents’ interviews; this provided a basis for grounding the interpretation of students’ perceptions of parental influence and dispositions to study further mathematics and allowed us to explore how parental aspirations were mediated by the family’s capital. Bourdieu’s theoretical framework was adopted as a theoretical lens for analysing the data. The concepts coined by Bourdieu (1980): practice, field, capital and habitus are used as theoretical tools to explore perceived parental influence on students’ dispositions to study further mathematics.

**Findings from students’ interviews**

Preliminary data analysis indicates that students ‘deny’ their parents’ influence on their dispositions towards mathematics. The majority of students who participated in this study claim “It’s my choice” and deny their parents’ influence on their dispositions to study further mathematics in HE, nevertheless they draw on their parents’ capital to form their dispositions
towards mathematics. They benefit from expensive private tutorials (economic capital) and visit their parents’ workplace before making their career choice (social capital). Most of them are preparing for university by acquiring educational credentials e.g. GCE in mathematics (cultural capital). We argue that these are instances of the economic, social and cultural capital offered by their parents. For the rest of this paper, we will draw on two case studies of students and their parents to illustrate our findings. Charalambos is a male student who aspires to study Civil Engineering and Christina is a female student who aspires to study Accountancy.

Interestingly, both students argue that their parents’ did not influence their decision making for future studies in HE, but they claim that “it is their choice”.

**Charalambos:** She [my mum] lets me choose on my own but she will tell me her opinion. Or I might tell her about my choices and she will say yeah that’s good.

**Interviewer:** Did she try to encourage you, or guide you towards a certain direction?

**Charalambos:** No, no. I took my own initiative so she didn’t.

**Interviewer:** Have you discussed with your parents about your choices?

**Christina:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Do they agree with your choices?

**Christina:** Yes they agree, they gave me the freedom to decide what I want.

Despite the fact that they deny their parents’ influence on their decision making for future studies, they refer to their parents’ economic, social and cultural capital quite explicitly. In terms of finances they both seem to be thinking to study abroad drawing on the economic capital of the family.

**Charalambos:** I think if I want to go to England they will help me financially. Or if I go to Greece, they won’t tell me stay in Cyprus because of finances. I think they will let me do what I want.

**Christina:** They let me free if I want to go abroad, they will support me there is no problem. This helps me because I don’t have to think that I might ‘overcharge’ them financially. They let me free. And they are fair, in the same way they helped my sisters they will help me as well. So I
don’t feel bad if I ‘cost’ them more financially, because my sisters stayed in Cyprus. I will be the only one who will go to England. But they said it’s up to me to decide what I want.

Notably, when they were uncertain about their choices for future studies they both turned to their parents’ social capital and networks; these were either colleagues from work or members of the extended family.

**Charalambos:** Yeah I asked some people, and they said Civil Engineering is better.

**Interviewer:** Who did you ask?

**Charalambos:** Family, friends, people who know.

**Interviewer:** Who said that it is good to combine Law with Chartered Accountant?

**Christina:** Lots of people from my mum’s work. And two cousins of mine who are both working as Chartered Accountants. They heard at the office that it’s very ‘strong’.

Interestingly, both students seem to accumulate cultural capital by attending private tutorials in order to obtain educational credentials (e.g. GCE in Maths) which will give them access to HE.

**Charalambos:** It depends, if I didn’t have the GCE I would do something else. Either go to England for a year and then get in the university or...

**Interviewer:** You mean for a foundation year?

**Charalambos:** Yeah if I didn’t have the GCE. Because now I can get in any British university.

**Christina:** I started tutorials for Elementary [level] to see how it’s like. I had heard about Accountancy before I started doing accountancy at school, when I was at gymnasium [lower secondary school].

Surprisingly, they both seem to have a “feel for the game” as Bourdieu (1980) calls it and have chosen elite universities for their studies.

**Charalambos:** Yeah I saw a few. I will put Imperial first and then some lower [ranking] universities. I think Imperial is the first.

**Interviewer:** Imperial? Yeah it’s one of the best universities in the UK.
Charalambos: *I think it's the third, but in these courses it is the first.*

Christina: *So I prefer going to England. The university that has accepted me is one of the top 10 universities of the UK.*

We have reported similar findings from the pilot study of this PhD project elsewhere (Kleanthous & Williams, 2009). We found that students often ‘deny’ their parents’ influence on their dispositions to study mathematically-demanding courses in HE. Nevertheless, they refer to their family’s capital in all its forms (economic, social and cultural) as mediators of parental influence. We note that there are some overlaps between the three forms of capital, for example the economic capital of the family is utilised for paying for private tutorials, which will then result to the accumulation of cultural capital in the form of educational credentials. The diagram in figure 1 illustrates graphically the mediation of familial capital on students’ perceptions of parental influence and the relationship between different forms of capital.

**Figure 1.** Bourdieu’s theoretical framework and the mediation of familial capital
Findings from parents’ interviews

For the main PhD study we have also interviewed the parents of these students over the phone or in person in one case. We report here same data from Charalambos’s mum’s interview, Sotiroula and Christina’s father Andreas. We found that although perceived parental influence on students’ dispositions towards mathematics is mainly subconscious for the students, their parents appear to be more aware of their parenting practices and utilization of their economic, social and cultural capital for the enhancement of their children’s education. They explicitly refer to supporting financially their children’s future studies in HE (economic capital), asking people they know about certain courses (social capital) and helping their children with their homework in mathematics drawing on their own educational background (cultural capital). However the parents also ‘denied’ their influence on their children’s final decision making about future studies in mathematically demanding courses in HE.

Both of the parents told us that they did not influence their child’s decision making for future studies in HE but it was the student’s autonomous decision:

**Interviewer:** How come he has decided to study Civil Engineering? Whose idea was it?

**Sotiroula:** His own. It wasn’t...

**Interviewer:** He likes it?

**Sotiroula:** Yeah he likes it, because Charalambos is inclined towards mathematics a lot, he likes these [subjects] rather than theories. He just told us, and we said there is no problem, he can follow any studies he wants.

**Interviewer:** What did you say? How did you try to advise her when she couldn’t make up her mind?

**Andreas:** What did I personally say to advise her? Both me and her mother said she should do what she wants. They are both good occupations, she should be a good student at whatever she chooses to do. She should be good at the occupation she wants. Both of these jobs have good
career opportunities. You should love what you do for a living. We didn’t influence her, we didn’t say “study law or study economics”.

Nevertheless, they refer to the utilization of the economic capital of the family for supporting their children’s studies and for paying for private tutorials:

Sotiroula: I told him he can go anywhere he wants. Charalambos was a bit skeptical about England because of the cost but I told him don’t think about it. For me either you go to England or Greece it’s the same [cost]. In Cyprus it will definitely be more economical. You will be staying at home, you will have a car to drive to the university but don’t worry about the finances. You should study what you want.

Interviewer: How did you try to help your children achieve their goals for studying at university?

Andreas: Well firstly, with financial support. Fortunately we can borrow money due to our job. With some general advice, what they should be careful about.

Both parents also seem to draw on their ‘connections’, their social capital as Bourdieu (1986) defines it to help their children make up their mind for future studies in HE. Their social capital consists of either members of the extended family, or professional career advisors:

Interviewer: I think last year he told me that he was thinking to study Law in the UK.

Sotiroula: It’s just that my brother told him, Charalambos being a lawyer is a good job. But at the end he didn’t... He said he didn’t want to influence him, we don’t have a shortage, if you like the occupation... But at the end he told me that he doesn’t want to, he didn’t even include it in his choices.

Andreas: Sure. What we did was, the teachers we knew who advise about choosing subjects...

Interviewer: Career advisors?

Andreas: Yeah career advisors, we talked to a lady we knew. We didn’t talk to her, we took Christina to this lady and they talked about some questions she had. And at school, she talked to the career advisor at school about some questions she had. So it’s her decision.
Levine-Rasky (2009) points out that being a member of the parents’ association (PA) is a way of enriching parents’ social capital and connections with the school. Unsurprisingly, both parents were members of the PA for many years:

_Sotiroula:_ I was a member of the Parents Association since kindergarten and I was there for all the events they had.

_Interviewer:_ Are you a member of the Parents’ Association?

_Andreas:_ I was for a decade at primary school, from my first daughter to the last. Later on at gymnasium and lyceum I didn’t participate.

It should be noted that none of these parents was a holder of a university degree (cultural capital), but they drew on their educational background to help their children with their mathematics homework when needed:

_Interviewer:_ Did you help Charalambos with his homework at all?

_Sotiroula:_ Especially Charalambos, I only helped him for the first 3 months at Year A in primary school [reception]. After that Xaralambos wanted me to check his assignments until the third grade of primary school. [...]. I checked his homework and he would wake up in the morning and checked again himself. I didn’t help him at all!

_Interviewer:_ Now that he is older?

_Sotiroula:_ Not at all, I can’t help him now. But he doesn’t need me.

_Interviewer:_ When she is having some problems at school with her homework, can you help her?

_Andreas:_ Look until gymnasium we could. Now at lyceum, very few things, almost not at all. She doesn’t ask us to help her now because we have only graduated from gymnasium. With our knowledge and with the change of the educational system... She doesn’t ask us herself, anyway for all her advanced subjects and for anything else she needs we send her to tutorials.

Although, both students and their parents seem to ‘deny’ parental influence on their dispositions to study mathematically-demanding courses in HE there were some instances in the data where the influence of older siblings was evident.

_Interviewer:_ Your older siblings?
**Charalambos:** They followed practical [stream of subjects] but ok... My sister is a Mechanical Engineer, it is a bit relevant. My brother has graduated from the ‘Army School’ he followed practical [stream of subjects] but his studies are not relevant.

**Interviewer:** When you made your subject choices did they influence you to choose advanced mathematics?

**Charalambos:** No they didn’t influence me, I don’t know if I was influenced when I was younger unconsciously because they had chosen Advanced mathematics.

**Interviewer:** Who has influenced him more?

**Sotiroula:** He was more influenced by his older brother. Not about his studies, more about his school subjects. And Charalambos is also inclined to those subjects, he doesn’t like theories.

**Christina:** I asked them [my sisters] when I was thinking what options to put down for the University of Cyprus and because they had some classmates they said Economics is a ‘stronger’ degree. They said I should put down Economics first and then Business Administration. Economics is more general.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that Christina being the youngest child of the family, has been influenced by her older sisters at all?

**Andreas:** Yes, yes. She told us once that if her sisters hadn’t studied Mathematics and Computer Science she could have studied those two subjects. Mathematics and Computer Science are her favourite subjects.

The influence of older siblings could be signaling the inculcation of a familial *habitus*, which these students share with their siblings. This *family habitus* is the result of the pedagogic work accomplished by the family according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990).

In conclusion we note some contradictions in the parents’ interviews which indicate the subconscious effect of parental influence on students’ dispositions. Although parents themselves ‘deny’ their influence on their children’s dispositions and decision making for future studies in HE, they seem to approve of their choices because these are the ‘right’ choices. Charalambos’s mum Sotiroula explains how she approves of her son studying Civil Engineering by referring to her workplace and colleagues (social capital):
Interviewer: When he was about to make his choices, did you advise him at all?

Sotiroula: He completed the university entry form and he said, mum do you want to see what I have chosen? And I said I will see it, I don’t have any problem with that. Since you have decided about these and you think this is what you like what can I say?

Interviewer: You didn’t encourage him to include any specific studies?

Sotiroula: No because I liked these studies too.

Interviewer: Civil Engineering?

Sotiroula: I will tell you. At my work, Public Constructions we deal with Civil Engineers, technicians. And you know it is part of my job’s nature to work with these people.

What is more interesting is that by the end of the interview she refers to her efforts to ‘plant’ an idea in Charalambos’s and her other children’s mind, that of studying at university. This seems to be a shared idea in their extended family, a shared familial habitus.

Interviewer: I guess you wanted him to study at university?

Sotiroula: Definitely.

Interviewer: Did you tell him that when he was younger?

Sotiroula: From a very young age (laughs). […] I believe that every parent wants if possible to see his kid educated, with a good job. I ‘plant’ this to my kids from an early age. And because we are many here, one was influenced by the other.

Interviewer: Many cousins?

Sotiroula: Yeah when my sister’s kids passed at the university, they [my kids] were influenced. They would say I will study too, why shouldn’t I pass as well? And then her brother passes, say Helen, she will say my brother passed why shouldn’t I study as well? They are influenced. I believe it’s the environment you live in, the family.

Lastly, with regards to mathematics Christina’s father explains that although some things are left unsaid children ‘get the message’:

Andreas: Sometimes you don’t need to say something to your child, she might hear it when you say [express] your opinion somewhere else. […] Our daughter knows our love about mathematics. But we haven’t influenced her on this issue.
Discussion

This paper attempts to understand perceived parental influence on higher education choice in practice by drawing on two case studies of students and their parents engaged in the choice process. Bourdieu’s conceptual tools were deployed in order to understand the practice of HE decision making amongst these adolescent students. Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and capital were used as theoretical tools to analyse students’ decision making practices and perceptions of parental influence. We found that parental influence is subtle and often ‘denied’ by the students but students ‘admit’ drawing on their parents’ capital to make their choices for future studies in HE, thus we argue that familial capital mediates parental influence.

We found that familial capital in its different forms is used in various ways by families. A common pattern in the data was utilising the economic capital of the family for private tutorials and overseas studies. The enactment of the social capital of the family was mediated by visits in the parents’ workplace. This experience gave the students an idea of how their preferred choice of studies is used in industry and helped them make up their mind. This finding adds further support to Brooks (2003) findings who has showed that parents influenced their children’s understanding of the HE market not necessarily on the basis of their achieved class position or their own HE experience, but on the basis of their contact with graduates within the workplace. It should be noted that as far as cultural capital is concerned, these students’ parents hadn’t attended university; nevertheless they are considered to be middle-class families in the Cypriot cultural context.

This paradox finding aligns with the literature which supports the existence of middle-class fragments and cautions against overgeneralisations regarding middle-class parents’ practices. Brooks (2003) argues that ‘similar social class classification may mask considerable disparities between parents in their first-hand knowledge of the nature and impact of HE hierarchies’ (p.288). Reay (1998) points out that class makes a significant difference not just in terms of inter-class differences but also in terms of intra-class difference and cultural capital differs between different fragments of the middle classes. Although most of the students and parents
included in the sample are middle-class students there were still some evident differences between them in terms of cultural capital and their “feel for the game”. Some parents who had been to university aspire higher educational achievements for their children, like master’s and doctorates.

A plausible explanation why students and their parents ‘deny’ parental influence on their children’s decision making for future studies in HE could be the subconscious effect of the *habitus* the family has inculcated. We found some evidence that students share the same familial habitus with their older siblings and members of the extended family e.g. their cousins in their dispositions to study in HE although parents were not dictating towards studies in HE. This aligns with Reay’s (1998) argument which refers to middle-class parents’ ‘taken for granted expectations’ embedded in middle-class family processes where the expectation of going to university does not need to be articulated. “Familial habitus results in a tendency for young people to acquire expectations which are adjusted to what is acceptable ‘for people like us’” (p.526). Thus middle class students consider going to university something ‘people like us’ do (Bourdieu, 1980).

Reay (1998) argues that in making decisions about higher education students have to negotiate increasingly complex, differentiated educational fields. “For the 18-year-old, family, school, peer group and the wider community all have an impact on choice making” (p.520). In this study we tried to address Reay’s (1998) urge for investigating the notion of familial habitus and its relation to decision making for HE studies in greater depth. “It would seem fruitful to explore the influence of the *familial habitus* that family members share and to examine how different family habituses inform higher education choice-making” (Reay, 1998: p.527). At the same time other factors might influence students’ decision making for future studies in HE, within their peer group and their social class in addition to the family. “Higher education choice making needs to be analysed in relation to all of these influencing fields within which students are differentially positioned” (ibid, p.528). This study only focuses on the impact of parental influence but we acknowledge that other factors could be equally influential on students’ dispositions.
Bourdieu views the dispositions, which make up habitus, as the products of opportunities and constraints framing the individual’s earlier life experiences (Reay, 2004). A person’s individual history is constitutive of habitus, but so also is the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of. Bourdieu (1977) argues that:

The habitus acquired in the family underlies the structuring of school experiences (in particular the reception and assimilation of the specifically pedagogic message) and the habitus transform by schooling, itself diversified, in turn underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences (e.g the reception and assimilation of the messages of the culture industry or work experiences) and so on from structuring to restructuring. (p.87)

We consider habitus to be a particularly useful concept for analyzing and discussing this phenomenon of subconscious parental influence on students’ dispositions. We found that students share a similar habitus with their older siblings and cousins, a familial habitus which positively disposes them for future studies in HE. Nevertheless, neither students nor their parents were aware of this shared familial habitus, as their constant denial of parental influence during their interviews indicates. The subconscious effect of parental influence on students’ habitus leads us to conceptualise parental influence as symbolic violence which is ‘misrecognised’. Bourdieu argues that symbolic violence is at the heart or every social relationship. He has defined symbolic violence as ‘the gentle invisible form of violence, which is never recognized as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen’ (p.192). Bourdieu further elaborates on symbolic violence:

Symbolic violence...is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity [...] I call misrecognition the fact of recognizing a violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: p.167-168).

We argue that students’ choices of future studies in HE are not really “their choices” as they assert because they are imposed gently and ‘violently’ by their parents. On the other side, of the parents, the denial of their influence on their offspring’s choices reinforces their power and their position in the family field as ‘heads’ of the family, whether they recognize this or not. The parents are probably not conscious of this phenomenon because it is ideologically transmitted below the level of consciousness: this makes the value of their capital even greater.
Conclusion

In this study we investigated students’ dispositions to study further mathematics in the field of HE as part of their habitus and we found that parental influence on habitus is largely subconscious. Nevertheless, students’ choices of subjects and courses in HE are informed by the habitus their family has inculcated. In conclusion we highlight the subconscious effect of familial habitus and the mediation of familial capital on students’ decision making for HE studies. We suggest that parental influence is a form of ‘symbolic violence’ and the denial of parental influence by the students and their parents a ‘misrecognition’. Thus students’ perceptions of parental influence might not correspond to their parents’ actual aspirations or influence, which remain hidden but are all the more powerful because they are relatively invisible. We have illustrated in this paper how parental influence is mediated by the economic and socio-cultural capital of the family. Apparently the way parents communicate their aspirations to their children still deserves to be further investigated.

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