Network-based ambivalence and educational decision-making:
a case study of ‘non-participation’ in Higher Education

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Abstract:
Much contemporary theorising on educational decision-making starts from the premise that the process of decision-making is a deeply embedded social practice, a practice which is inextricably linked to behaviours, attitudes and dispositions which hold sway within an individual’s social network. Drawing on data from a project focusing on decision making amongst non-participants in higher education who are nonetheless ‘potentially recruitable’ to the sector, this paper utilises the sociological concept of ambivalence as a useful tool in exploring their educational decision making within a broader network-based approach. In focusing on the way in which individuals manage contradictions and tensions within their networks, and how the ways in which they manage these tensions are linked to broader structural factors, the concept provides a framework which is able to bridge social structure and individual agency. The concept of ambivalence provides a useful complement to other frameworks which focus on the degree to which forms of advantage and disadvantage are transmitted between and within different social groups and specific social contacts, and suggests a mechanism by which existing social relations are either reinforced or challenged through individual actions in the realm of education.

Key words: widening participation, educational decision-making, higher education, social networks, ambivalence
Introduction

The process of educational decision-making is often theorised as a deeply embedded social practice, inextricably linked to behaviours, attitudes and dispositions which hold sway within an individual’s social network. Empirical research informed by the theoretical approaches of writers such as Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam has focused on the degree to which forms of advantage and disadvantage are transmitted between and within specific networks, including in and through the decisions and actions of network members (eg Ball et al, 2000; Brooks, 2005; Reay et al, 2005), yet we rarely get to hear the first hand accounts of the wider membership of these networks. In our view, there is much to be gained from treating the network, rather than the individual, as the primary unit of analysis. Situating an individual’s decision-making within a nexus of first-hand accounts from those closest to them not only highlights the complexity of the decision-making process, but foregrounds the need to make analytical sense of the tensions and contradictions, as well as the moments of solidarity, which inevitably emerge when exploring social networks.

The sociological concept of ‘ambivalence’ provides a useful framework for understanding some of these complexities. Luscher (2005) states that ambivalences are rooted in the simultaneous existence of ‘polarised emotions, thoughts, volitions, social relations and structures that are considered relevant for the constitution of individual or collective identities’ (Luscher, 2005, p100) and that intergenerational relations amongst adults ‘can be socio-scientifically interpreted as the expression of ambivalences, and as efforts to manage and negotiate these fundamental ambivalences’ (Luscher, 1999).
Applying Luscher’s ideas to social interactions beyond the intergenerational alone, Connidis and McMullen (2002) use the term ‘structured ambivalence’ and argue that this is a framework which can provide ‘a bridging concept between social structure and individual action, made evident in social interaction’ (ibid, p.559). For these reasons, and although previously applied largely in the context of studies of intergenerational care-giving within families, we consider ambivalence to be a useful tool for understanding the bases for social action in the realm of educational decision-making, particularly in making sense of the reasons why individuals are on occasions able to step outside of and act against the dominant values and dispositions within their network, and yet on other occasions act in ways which reinforce those values and dispositions.

Our specific focus in this paper is on using a network-based approach to explore educational decision-making amongst a sub-group of the population who are potentially recruitable to higher education (HE). Following an introduction to our research project and its research design, we then outline the conceptual and theoretical influences on our research, and expound further on the concept of ambivalence, before applying the concept to a case study based on one of sixteen networks involved in our research. We end with some concluding thoughts about the usefulness of the concept as a tool for making sense of network-based accounts of decision-making with respect to widening participation in higher education.

The research
This paper draws on research undertaken as part of the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme initiative on widening participation in UK higher education. Our project, *Non-participation in higher education: decision-making as an embedded social practice*, explores how and in what ways (non) decision-making about higher education might be embedded within ‘networks of intimacy’ consisting of family members, friends and peers (Heath and Cleaver, 2003), and to what extent future participation in HE might be conceived as ‘within the bounds of the possible’ amongst network members. Our specific focus is on the networks of sixteen individuals whom we regard as ‘potentially recruitable’ to higher education: those whose highest level of qualification is at Level 3 or equivalent (the level of qualification which is usually the baseline for gaining entry to higher education in the UK) and who have not continued their formal education beyond Level 3 nor are currently applying to do so. This group, ostensibly consisting of ‘non-participants’, includes those who might at some point consider HE as a serious option as well as those who in all probability are unlikely to ever participate.

Our project has had two main phases. In phase one, desk research was used to analyse existing quantitative data and to review empirical, conceptual, methodological and policy literatures. We also conducted 32 interviews with key informants in the widening participation arena, operating at local, regional and national levels in the UK. The second phase has been based on a qualitative exploration of sixteen case study networks, spiralling out from sixteen ‘potentially recruitable’ individuals. Initial interviews were conducted with these individuals in order to gain an overview of their educational and career histories and a picture of their broader networks. These individuals
then nominated members of their networks - mainly family members, partners and friends - whom they felt would be prepared to participate in our research. Interviews with network members explored their own educational and career histories and their decision making in these realms, as well as their perceptions of how they might have influenced the ‘entry point’ individual. In total, we have interviewed 107 network members across sixteen networks. The final stage of the research has involved a second more detailed interview with each of the initial sixteen individuals to explore themes and issues which have emerged within their network. All of our initial contacts are resident in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, a region which includes areas with high levels of non-participation. Broader network members have been mainly clustered in the south of England, and represent a broad cross-section of the general population. (For a detailed account of our methodology and sampling strategy, see Johnston and Heath [2007].)

The sub-population with Level 3 as their current highest level of qualification is a sizeable one (around 20 per cent of the adult working population) and is an obvious target group for implementation of the recommendations of the Leitch Review that 40% of adults should by 2020 be qualified to at least Level 4 (Leitch, 2006). In policy terms, then, this is a significant group, yet a group about which little prior research has been conducted. We are interested in exploring the reasons why many adults do not continue beyond Level 3 qualifications, particularly as we enter an era when they will face increasing encouragement to consider doing so. Critically, we do not assume that individuals in this group should necessarily engage in HE, and we have become increasingly uncomfortable with the rather negative connotations of the term ‘non-participant’.
Investigating non-participation is by no means a new theme within the widening participation research literature, which often associates ‘non-participation’ with ‘barriers to participation’. Paradoxically, most existing research on barriers to participation focuses on the experiences of individuals who are, or who have been, participants in higher education - those who have managed to get into the system, even if only fleetingly. Whilst such a focus is useful in understanding the experiences of students who may have overcome potential barriers, or have subsequently dropped out for various reasons, it tells us little, if anything, about the experiences of those who have never participated at Level 4. This latter group includes not only those who fail to overcome barriers, but also those with no desire to participate in HE in the first place. This use of participants as proxies for non-participants is, then, a major flaw in much existing widening participation research. Gorard et al (2006) refer to this as the problem of ‘missing comparators’, arising in part as a consequence of ‘the difficulty of identifying and then including students who choose not to participate in post-compulsory education’ (p.146). We have sought specifically to target this group.

Network-based decision-making and the concept of ambivalence

We conceive of networks of intimacy as sites of varying forms of social, cultural and economic capital, providing a critical context within which individuals' thinking about HE is embedded and co-constructed across the life course. In conceiving of networks in this way, we draw on a rich tradition of work within the sociology of education which has theorized the ways in which decision-making can be construed as a socially embedded
practice. Bourdieu’s work on habitus and the transmission of forms of capital stands as a critical benchmark in this respect (eg Bourdieu, 1976; 1986). According to Bourdieu, the internalization of values, dispositions and expectations which are dominant within the particular social groups to which individuals belong result in those individuals learning what to expect out of life, how likely they are to succeed in different projects, and how others will respond to them if they behave in particular ways. These dispositions are formed not only by the specific habitus of the family but also by the objective chances of the class to which the individual belongs. As such, habitus shapes future actions, disposing individuals towards following certain courses of action, regarding certain types of behaviour as ‘normal’, and so on. In Bourdieu’s terms, habitus is the key to cultural reproduction because it is central to generating and regulating the practices that make up social life.

More recently, the writings of Coleman (eg Coleman, 1988) and Putnam (2000) have also been used to explore the degree to which forms of social capital embedded within families and communities affect the ability of individuals to participate and be included within civic society, including in the sphere of education. Putnam places rather more emphasis than Bourdieu on the possibilities for change and social mobility afforded by access to certain types of social capital. He defines social capital as ‘connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (2000: 19) and goes on to draw attention to the distinction between ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital. The former refers to the values of solidarity, mutual reinforcement, support and specific forms of reciprocation associated with homogeneous groups, whilst the latter refers to more diffuse and indirect forms of linkage.
and reciprocation between and within groups. According to Putnam, access to bridging capital has the potential to facilitate social mobility and the promotion of social inclusion and civic engagement, whereas bonding capital tends to reproduce existing inequalities. Putnam’s work suggests, then, that it is possible for individuals to break free from the constraints of their upbringing and social class background and thus to engineer a change in their habitus through the broadening of their social networks.

Inevitably, concepts associated with social network analysis are important to our research, including ideas concerning the nature of inter-personal ties (Granovetter, 1973 and 1983; Bott, 1957) and the importance of ‘network value’ in shedding light on the social context in which educational decision-making is embedded. Prefiguring Putnam’s conceptualisation of bonding versus bridging capital, Granovetter (1973) famously highlights ‘the strength of weak ties’ and, conversely, ‘the weakness of strong ties’. He identifies the strength of interpersonal ties as being dependent on factors such as ‘emotional intensity’, ‘mutual confiding’ and ‘reciprocal services’ (1973). He further suggests that a focus on ‘strong ties’ is associated with analyses of bounded small groups, characterised primarily by the density of relationships (who knows who) and relative lack of weaker ties to other (non-familial) groups and communities. In contrast, ‘weak ties provide people with access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circle’ (Granovetter, 1983, p.209). From this perspective, the potential to create bridges beyond one’s immediate bounded network is critical to understanding processes of social reproduction and change, suggesting that instability within a network might in itself facilitate the bridging process by causing individuals to reach out beyond their familiar (including familial) associations.
Relationships between and within cross-generational networks are of course a common theme within the family studies literature. Family researchers have variously drawn on the language of solidarity on the one hand and conflict on the other to characterise the nature of these relationships, the former associated with a more consensual view of intergenerational relations, the latter with a more critical approach (Bengtson et al, 2002). Luscher (1998; 1999; 2005) contests the mutual exclusion implied by these polarised positions, and has proposed the concept of ‘intergenerational ambivalence’, which takes into account both perspectives. He uses the term to capture the simultaneous existence of ‘polarised emotions, thoughts, volitions, social relations and structures that are considered relevant for the constitution of individual or collective identities’ (Luscher, 2005, p100). According to Luscher, ambivalence can result in irreconcilable polarizations which will continue for as long as an individual remains within a certain field of action, and which individuals may be able to cope with ‘in more or less competent, productive ways’ (ibid, p.101), but which can also be a spur to action.

In pursuing these ideas further, Luscher (2005) has created a heuristic model for categorizing different forms of ambivalence within families and the extent to which they result in accommodation or change. His model is based on (i) convergence or divergence in relation to ‘the subjective dimension’ of ambivalence, ie the degree to which different family members share similar outlooks and values; and (ii) reproduction or innovation in relation to ‘the structural-institutional dimension’ of ambivalence, ie the degree to which family members preserve traditional social forms or embrace change. Luscher considers the interplay between these two dimensions and proposes ‘four basic modes of experiencing and dealing with intergenerational ambivalences’ (ibid: 106). 

Solidarity is
based on a convergence of outlook alongside a desire to reproduce traditional social forms: ‘the maxim of action can be characterized as “to preserve consensually”’ (ibid: 106). *Emancipation* is based on a convergence of outlook alongside a desire to embrace change: ‘This general setting contains a certain amount of direct, common purpose pursued by efforts “to mature reciprocally”’ (ibid). *Captivation* is based on a divergence of outlook alongside the reluctant reproduction of traditional social forms: ‘the guiding maxim here is to “conserve reluctantly”’ (ibid). Finally, *atomization* is based on a divergence of outlook alongside a desire to embrace change: ‘the concept expresses the fragmentation of the family unit into its smallest components, specifically individual family member who “separate conflictingly”. Apart from the unalterable fact that family members are parents and children, they otherwise have very little in common’ (ibid).

Each of these modes of dealing with intergenerational ambivalence has implications for the inherent stability of an individual’s network. Networks where individuals experience solidarity and captivation may remain bounded and relatively static, whereas those where individuals experience emancipation or atomisation are more likely to be inherently unstable and to include weak(er) ties.

Luscher’s model relates to intergenerational family relationships. Connidis and McMullen (2002) build on Luscher’s work but apply the concept more generally, in particular through emphasizing the structural contexts of *all* social relationships. They argue that ambivalence is ‘conceptualised better as a feature of structured sets of social relations’ and that ‘the contradictions and paradoxes of socially structured relations are reproduced in interpersonal relationships’ (p.559). In their view, individuals experience ambivalence when social structures constrain their ability to exercise individual agency in
the negotiation of interpersonal relationships, and that this ambivalence then becomes ‘a
catalyst for social action’, either to reproduce the existing social order or to bring about
change: ‘When framed this way, ambivalence can be a bridging concept between social
structure and individual action, made evident in social interaction’ (ibid, p.559). Connidis
and McMullen’s conceptualization of ‘structured ambivalence’ foregrounds not only
conflict within and across generations as an essential aspect of all social interaction but
also acknowledges that broader conflicts over resources within wider society – linked to
various forms of social stratification - impact on the ability of different individuals to
resolve ambivalence:

(A)mbivalence is created by the contradictions and paradoxes that are imbedded
(sic) in sets of structured social relations (eg class, age, race, ethnicity, gender)
through which opportunities, rights and privileges are differentially distributed.
.. Managing ambivalence in daily life shapes the very social structures that
produce ambivalence in the first place, through either reproduction of the
existing order or its transformation (ibid, p565).

Importantly, then, they argue that ambivalence is a feature of all social relationships, but
differential access to resources within networks will influence the degree to which
ambivalence can be satisfactorily resolved by an individual. Some individuals, for
example, are able to mobilise a range of resources in order to distance themselves
(including geographically) from their closest ties (eg Luscher’s ‘atomisation’), whereas
others, through constraint, remain dependent upon them (eg Luscher’s ‘captivation’).
Connidis and McMullen’s conceptualisation of ambivalence acknowledges that network-based relationships may not only be centrally implicated in processes of individual decision-making, but that they also have the potential to play a role in reinforcing or challenging the broader social order through providing an impetus for action. For example, decisions made by children as to whether to stay on at 16 or 18, or whether to return to study as an adult may be firmly rooted in socially structured inter-generational ambivalence. Confounding network-based expectations may be a way of managing ambivalence, but may simultaneously serve to reproduce or challenge existing inequalities. This then is a very useful framework for considering the extent to which the influences and resources represented within any given network may allow for intergenerational continuity and/or change. Moreover, it is a framework which highlights how differences based on structural inequalities between individuals may impact upon processes of network formation and/or dissolution, and how the management of ambivalence will lead some individuals to deliberately broaden the basis of their social network through accessing bridging capital/weak ties, whilst leading others to consolidate their bonding capital/strong ties.

We now turn to one of our sixteen case study networks. The network is that of ‘Lorraine Smith’, a 48 year old woman from a working class background who has recently moved to the South of England with her male partner. Our focus is on Lorraine’s educational and career decision making and her perceptions of the potential value to her of engaging in higher education at this stage in her life. After introducing Lorraine and her network, we then seek to understand Lorraine’s decision making as, to some extent, an expression of her management of ambivalence within the network. Lorraine’s
experiences are by no means unusual amongst our sample, and we could have chosen any one of our networks to make similar points. For the purposes of illustrating the usefulness of the concept of ambivalence, however, a detailed case study conveys the complexity of educational decision-making rather better than a comparison across a number of different networks.

Case study: ‘Lorraine Smith’ and her network

Lorraine nominated five family members, all of whom agreed to participate in our research: her retired parents, Jean and Patrick, both in their seventies; her younger sister Julie; and Lorraine’s two children, Cathy, 26, and Paul, 24. Most of the other fifteen networks included in our research involve a combination of family members and friends, whilst a few consist only of friends. In Lorraine’s case, her choice of family members reflected the ‘thinness’ of her network; she did not appear to have many close friends, and had recently lost touch with her former best friend. Despite poor family relationships, she nonetheless regarded her closest relatives to have been the most significant influences on her educational decision-making. Her partner is absent from the nominated network, not because he is uninfluential, but because he chose not to participate in the research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Network position</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Living arrangements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lorraine</td>
<td>Entry point person</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>First interview: looking for work; second interview: legal secretary</td>
<td>Cohabits with male partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>Lorraine’s father</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Retired engineer</td>
<td>Lives with wife Jean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>Lorraine’s mother</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Retired administrator</td>
<td>Lives with husband Patrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Lorraine’s sister</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Coach driver</td>
<td>Lives with husband and two teenage sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Lorraine’s</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Banking sector</td>
<td>Lives with husband and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lorraine’s current highest qualification is a Level 3 BTEC in Business and Finance, which she gained in her early 30s as a way of proving to herself that she was capable of academic success. This simple statement masks a complex relationship to her formal schooling, which she feels let her down badly. The combined impact of personal illness and a family bereavement at seven led to Lorraine falling behind in primary school, culminating in failure to pass the 11+ examination for entry to grammar school and as a result being allocated to the local secondary modern school. Following comprehensivisation a year later, Lorraine’s school was merged with the local grammar school and the new school was split into two streams corresponding to the two former schools. There was some possibility of movement into the more academic stream, but Lorraine was not deemed sufficiently competent to do so, and was thus denied the opportunity to take the more academically-orientated Ordinary Level General Certificate in Education (GCE ‘O’ Levels). Exacerbated by further ill health from age 13 and a poor attendance record, she left school at 16 with a clutch of CSE passes (the lower status Certificate in Secondary Education). This had a profound impact on Lorraine, and she spoke with passion in both interviews about her feeling that she had been rendered ‘a second class citizen’, lacking in the opportunities available to better educated school leavers. Consequently, on leaving school Lorraine signed up for secretarial college, followed by a succession of secretarial appointments.
Network-based dispositions towards education

There are a number of similarities in Lorraine’s story and the stories told by the other members of her network which point to the embedded nature of Lorraine’s own trajectory through the formal education system. Despite their different generational positioning and the different policy regimes which they experienced during their formal schooling, Lorraine’s various family members share some very similar dispositions towards education, captured well in a comment made by Lorraine’s mother Jean: ‘I didn't expect them to set the world on fire, we're not a clever clogs family, but no, we're a pretty average family, I s'pose’. This sense of being ‘pretty average’ pervades the network, even though Jean attended grammar school and Lorraine’s daughter Cathy has a degree.

A dominant disposition which is shared across the network is one of education as a struggle. Relatedly, any tangible achievements within the network are viewed as being almost entirely attributable to hard work rather than any inherent ability, bringing to mind Bourdieu’s observations on the working class educational ‘plodder’ whose achievements are devalued as the product of effort rather than flair, whilst the achievements of middle class children are treated as ‘natural gifts’ rather than ‘social gifts’ (Bourdieu, 1976). Even Cathy, the family’s first generation entrant to higher education, shares these views, describing herself as ‘not naturally that smart’, and by her grandmother as ‘having to work hard to get to university, she wasn’t a clever clogs’.

These shared dispositions go some way towards understanding Lorraine’s disengagement from formal education and her subsequent early labour market entry, a trajectory which she shared with her parents and her sister, who all left school at the first
opportunity with minimal or no formal qualifications. However, there is more to the story than ‘merely’ a tale of restricted opportunities, low expectations and battered self-confidence, and in the next section we focus on the importance of intergenerational ambivalence for understanding some of the actions taken by Lorraine, highlighting some of the ways in which her attempts to manage ambivalence have at different times either closed down or opened up opportunities for her in the sphere of education.

*The management of ambivalence*

Lorraine readily admits to having very poor relationships with her parents, exacerbated by rivalry in relation to her sister Julie. Listening to Lorraine’s parents both pouring unequivocal praise on Julie and directing unveiled criticisms at Lorraine confirms this rivalry to be well grounded. Using Luscher’s heuristic model for categorizing different modes of experiencing and dealing with intergenerational ambivalences, Lorraine’s relationship with her parents for most of her life could be best characterized in terms of ‘captivation’. Through her actions she has reproduced many of the values and structural relations of her family, even though she has felt that she has shared little in common with them. For example, for most of her life she has remained geographically close to her family, her parents have been important influences in the lives of her children, and her employment history mirrors that of her mother’s, moving through a series of unrelated jobs and putting the needs of her family above any sense of ‘career’. More recently, though, she has managed her ambivalence through ‘atomisation’, most dramatically through moving a considerable geographical distance from all of her family, including

17
her children, reflecting the way in which Lorraine is now much more confident about
forging an independent path for herself.

Lorraine situates the origins of her troubled relationship with her parents in their
inadequate support in relation to two key events: a family bereavement at the age of
seven and a physical disability which affected her as a teenager. Lorraine describes
herself as having been very rebellious and angry during these years. She argues that
schooling became ‘irrelevant’, exacerbated by not being allowed to take GCEs, and that
she only attended ‘when I felt like it’. Lorraine’s disability during this time was not
mentioned by any of her family members. Rather, it was stated by her parents as well as
by her sister that Lorraine had squandered her educational ability through her rebellion
and through not working hard enough. Consequently, Lorraine left school at 16 and, in
compliance with her family’s expectations (albeit through lack of alternative options),
trained as a secretary.

This particular course of action served to reproduce certain structural aspects of
her family habitus, at the same time as her personal values were becoming ever more
divergent from those of her family. This culminated in Lorraine being thrown out of the
family home at age 17. Both of her parents provide graphic accounts of this time in
Lorraine’s life which substantiate Lorraine’s account of the traumas of this period.
Significantly, Lorraine believes that her early departure and subsequent homelessness led
directly to her early marriage, out of gratitude rather than love, to a man who had at the
time provided her with a roof over her head. This was an unhappy marriage and after
eighteen years Lorraine left him with her two children, then in their teens. Lorraine still
blames her mother for the circumstances surrounding her marriage and they continue to
have a very poor relationship, a situation which is again borne out in interviews with both Lorraine’s parents and her sister.

Lorraine describes her former husband as a very controlling man, with ‘strict expectations of how home life should be’. She talked of having felt increasingly trapped in her marriage, and highlights how her ambivalence towards her husband eventually provided the basis for social action in the form of her decision to study for a BTEC in Business and Finance. Lorraine described this decision as a bid for freedom and independence, as well as an opportunity to prove herself educationally. Indeed, gaining the BTEC qualification represented a turning point in her life, giving her the confidence ‘to believe I was clever and to apply for better jobs… it definitely took away that second class citizen feel and gave me more options.’ On completing her BTEC she even considered doing a degree. However, ‘I was still a wife and mother and that’s when I was going through a divorce as well so it wasn’t the right circumstances’.

The divorce was a traumatic, but ultimately empowering, experience for Lorraine, and she describes the period after the divorce as the best time of her life, a time during which she did a lot of maturing. Her recent geographical relocation has had a further liberating effect on Lorraine, and has facilitated her shift, in Luscher’s terms, from ‘captivation’ to ‘atomization’. Since meeting her new partner, she has been able to step back from her family ties. She admits that her relocation is part of an ongoing rebellion against her mother and insists that she feels no obligation to provide care to her mother; that is her sister’s job.

*Wither higher education?*
Lorraine’s parents, her sister, and Lorraine herself have followed life course trajectories which are strongly characterised by traditional, standardised biographies, based on early family formation, early labour market entry, and gendered occupational pathways. Lorraine’s daughter Cathy has benefited from the current policy emphasis on widening participation in higher education and obtained a degree from a new university. However, in many respects Cathy’s current situation reflects the standardized biographies of her older female relatives, as at 26 she is married with a baby son and is working in a part-time job unrelated to her degree. Cathy herself noted that some of her closest relatives were not convinced she was cut out for university. Her subsequent inability to ‘use’ her degree is a source of some disquiet within the network, providing evidence to Cathy’s aunt, grandmother and brother of the futility of the widening participation vision, especially for ‘the averagely intelligent’ as opposed to ‘the clever ones’. Aware of the diminishing returns to individual graduates within a mass higher education system, they feel that a better policy would be to encourage only top students to attend in order to maximize the benefits of a degree-level education.

Lorraine remains proud of her daughter’s educational achievements, and feels that her own experience of returning to education was significant in influencing Cathy’s determination to get a degree. Nonetheless, Lorraine has her own misgivings about Cathy’s situation:

Well, she’s become her mum, hasn’t she; apart that she got her education first… I feel quite sad that she’s following the route… now she’s gone the
classic female route of house, family and have a job to pay the mortgage – I hope it’s what she really wants.

Lorraine feels that Cathy, who challenged the dominant family habitus through achieving an unprecedented level of educational success, is now conforming to ‘the classic female route’ whilst Lorraine feels herself to be increasingly operating against the grain of her family’s expectations. Reflecting on whether she, Lorraine, would now consider studying for a degree, she demonstrates a degree of instrumentalism in her perceptions of the potential worth to her of Level 4 qualifications at this stage in her life; as she doesn’t wish to gain a better job, a degree would be wasted on her. Importantly, neither does she feel any longer that she needs to prove anything to herself by undertaking further study – gaining her BTEC as an adult had already served that function for her. And in her current relationship she is experiencing a new confidence: ‘I’ve never felt more comfortable, relaxed and capable than I do when I’m with him… it’s a complete revelation… All the things that I want the confidence to do, he can make me do it.’ At a stage in her life when she feels that she has finally made the break from the expectations of her family, she is perfectly content to simply get on with enjoying her new life. To Lorraine, it makes no sense whatsoever to even consider returning to formal study – it is an irrelevance.

**Discussion and conclusions**

An emphasis on educational decision-making as a practice embedded in networks rather than as an individualized process has been extremely useful in developing our
understanding of contemporary decision-making regarding participation in HE. An intergenerational perspective has also shed light on processes of both continuity and change within networks, helping us to understand present day decisions in the broader context of family/network histories, the transmission of network-wide dispositions alongside acts of individual agency, and broader reactions to those individual acts of agency (Giele and Elder, 1998). Specifically, the concept of ambivalence has proved to be very useful for developing a nuanced understanding of some of the processes by which continuity and change are achieved within networks. Partly, its value lies in making sense of the contradictions and tensions that are integral to social interactions within networks, and the ways in which different strategies for the management of ambivalence can result in either reproduction or innovation, providing a catalyst for actions or inactions which are not always in the best interests of those initiating those actions.

In Lorraine’s case, for example, rebelling against school, leaving home at 17 and then rushing into early marriage was clearly not in her longer term interests, although at the time it seemed to her to offer some resolution to the ambivalence she was experiencing in her relationships. In echoes of the arguments of Willis (1977) concerning the way in which working class young men served to reproduce their structural disadvantage through their own actions, we might also claim that it was – at least in part - through Lorraine’s own acts of agency that her structural position was reproduced, even at the same time as she believed her actions to be liberating. The management of ambivalence can also propel individuals in directions which challenge structural divisions and inequalities, as observed in Lorraine’s decision to return to study in her early thirties in response to her unhappy marriage. Indeed, many of the key decisions made by
Lorraine in relation to education have been linked to the quality of her personal relationships, and have had consequences for the ongoing nature of those relationships. This is a recurring pattern in relation to many of the other networks involved in our research, where decisions to either leave or return to study have often been in response to ambivalence.

In conclusion, we believe that the concept of ambivalence is a useful addition to the analytical toolkit of researchers interested in exploring educational decision-making. In providing a framework which is able to bridge social structure and individual agency, it is a useful complement to other dominant frameworks which focus on the degree to which forms of advantage and disadvantage are transmitted between and within different social networks. In particular, it suggests a specific mechanism by which existing social relations are either reinforced or challenged through individual actions. Whilst not suggesting that this is the only mechanism by which this is done, it is nonetheless a potentially important mechanism and, we would argue, deserves further consideration by educational researchers.

References


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i For a full list of working papers, see the project website: www.education.soton.ac.uk/nphe

ii We have also sought to apply this concept to understanding gendered processes of decision making; see Fuller et al, 2007.

iii All names used in the case study are pseudonyms.

iv Lorraine’s cohort at school were the last to sit the 11+ examination. Under the tripartite system of education enshrined within the 1944 Education Act, this examination was the means by which pupils were allocated to either the selective grammar school, the secondary modern school or the technical school.