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'University wasn't spoken about at home, it was just assumed that we would start working...': first-in-family students, family capital and higher education participation

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Keywords

start, working, first, family, students, capital, higher, university, wasn, t, spoken, about, home, was, just, assumed, education, that, participation, we, would

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“It [university] wasn’t spoken about at home, it was just assumed that we would start working...”. First in family students, family capital and higher education participation

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Abstract

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Introduction

Globally, significant growth in the numbers of students attending university has led to changes in the demography of the student population, particularly over the last twenty years. The latest published report from the OECD (2013) indicates that in the period between 1995 and 2011, enrolments in higher education increased by an average of 20 per cent across member countries. Much of this growth relates to moves to widen participation in the higher education environment and thereby increase student representation to more realistically reflect the social make-up of countries. To assist in this process, participation targets have been established in a number of countries, including Germany, Sweden, Ireland, Finland and the United Kingdom amongst others (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Within Australia, the Review of Australian Higher Education, led by Denise Bradley (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2008), provided the basis for the previous Australian government commitment to increasing both the numbers of graduates and also, improving access for students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds. Over the last six years, educational providers in Australia have been striving to achieve the target of 40 per cent of all 25 to 34-year-olds having a bachelor level qualification or above by 2025 and increasing the numbers of students from low SES backgrounds attending university to 20 per cent by 2020.

In response to these goals, a plethora of outreach and transition strategies have been implemented in Australia and according to Koshy (2014) the numbers of low SES students recorded across all institutions in 2012 has increased with some states (Tasmania, South Australia and Queensland) already either close to or exceeding the desired 20 per cent participation. Whilst the growth in numbers of this student cohort is to be celebrated, this does not necessarily signify a truly open system of education instead stratification of choice is clear. Just as James reported in 2008, the participation of people from low SES backgrounds remains clustered in regional universities whereas in the more elite or sandstone universities known as the 'Group of Eight', participation remains below the national average. In addition, definitions of what constitutes low SES status is relatively flawed in Australia, presently the definition of this status is derived from post-code collection districts which rely on ABS data on income, educational attainment, employment status and dwelling types in 250 households within a common postcode.

The first in family cohort cuts across various demographic categories but currently no detailed or accessible national dataset exists on this group within Australia. The OECD (2012) reports that approximately half the university student population in Australia (51 per cent) is derived from first in family backgrounds (defined on parental educational levels), which is close to the OECD mean average of 53 per cent. We know that parental educational background has significant impact on the educational levels of family and dependents (Gorard, Rees, Fevre & Furlong, 1998; Harrell & Forney, 2003; Thayer, 2000; Tramonte & Willms, 2009; Wilks & Wilson, 2012). However, what is relatively unclear is how attending a university as a first in family student impacts upon the family and community of the learner. How does transitioning into this environment and enacting a student role or identity translate into the household? With the continuing requirements for higher education institutions to increase the participation of students from a diversity of backgrounds and educational biographies, this is a gap in understanding that needs to be addressed. Exploring how this movement into university is translated at a familial and community level can provide insights into how best to support this student cohort and also facilitate intergenerational educational mobility.

This article will present findings from a small qualitative study that sought to explore how newly enrolled university students, all of whom were first in their family to attend university, reflected upon their movement into this environment and how this was negotiated within the family of the learner. Building upon Bourdieu's theorisation of social and cultural capitals, the study focussed on how one group of learners, of varying ages and stages of life, narrated their motivations, expectations and experiences of university. The following section will provide both the context and the theoretical framing to this study, which will be followed by details of the methodology and research design. Based upon the themes that emerged inductively from the data, some considerations for policy and practice will be suggested.

Theoretical framework and context

First in family or first generation status is variously defined, but most definitions refer to parental education levels. Within the United States, the dependents of those with a college level education are regarded as being first in family whereas definitions in other countries assume no post compulsory schooling has occurred. Equally, blended family arrangements also mean that it is difficult to define this term relationally. For the purposes of this study, first in family was defined as being the first out of immediate family, which comprised siblings, parents, main caregivers, and children, to attend university.

The international research on this group indicates that they are collectively less likely to go to university and also, after arrival may not perform to the same level academically as their second or third generation peers. For example, within the UK, the HEFCE (2010) reported a strong correlation between low university participation rates and parental educational levels as follows:

Measures of the qualification level of adults, especially whether or not they hold a HE qualification, are important predictors of young participation rates for areas. (p25)

Similarly, within the US this student cohort is reported as less likely to achieve a degree than those who are not first in family, the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES, 2012) indicated that between 1992-2000 43 per cent of first in family students left university without a degree. **This is considerably greater than the national attrition rate for public institutions, which has been calculated at approximately 21% for first and second year students (NCES, 2014).** Whilst in Australia, 26 per cent of first in family students are reported as considering leaving university in the first year of university study, a figure that increases to 34 per cent for later year students (Coates & Ransom, 2011). **The attrition rates for the general student population in Australia varies greatly across institutions but consistently hovers around 18% of the total student population (Department of Industry, 2012).**

The range of reasons for this difference in academic outcomes and success are multifold. Thomas and Quinn (2007) explain how these students are required to do additional and often invisible 'work', which they describe as including the need to:

...perfect themselves as educated and employable; reassure the family that they have 'invested wisely'; open up the aspirations and horizons of the family and its community; represent a triumph of social egalitarianism and 'prove that everyone can make it' (p59).

Added to this may be the lack of a higher education imprint within the family or what Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) term as 'transgenerational family scripts or "inheritance codes"' (p57). For Ball et al. (2002) such codes are negotiated in relation to prior family experience of higher education and the knowledges and understanding such contact brings, including a sense of entitlement related to university attendance. Similarly, Bourdieu (1977, 1986) points to how educational success is largely determined by access to knowledges and values defined by the concepts of capital, field and habitus.

This social theorist characterises field as being social spaces that are defined by shared rules and relationships, individuals' movement and successes within these fields are governed by the capital possessed. Capital can take an economic or cultural form; the latter determined by family or social position (Bourdieu, 1986). Habitus refers to particular dispositions or ways of behaving or speaking that are negotiated by both structures and also personal biographies and conceptions of reality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Capital, field and habitus work in subtle ways to demarcate and delineate the opportunities and choices encountered by different social groups. However, it is important not to assume that individuals' lack agency and recognise instead that capitals and habituses do not work solely in a reproductive manner. Whilst Bourdieu did elevate structure over agency, other theorists have built upon Bourdieu's work and perceive these concepts in less fixed or static terms. For example, Reay (2004) suggests that habitus should be conceived of as 'multilayered' which exists at both at collective level and an individual level explaining 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' (p434).

This study sought to deeply explore how one group of first in family participants entered higher education and navigated this educational terrain in relation to extant capitals. Twenty-five students participated in qualitative interviews and were asked questions related to their motivations for attending university; the reactions from friends and family about this attendance; the ways in which university was spoken about in the home and also, the personal milestones achieved since attending. The following section provides more detail of the methodology employed before some of the key findings from the study are presented.

Methodology

This study occurred in 2013 at a regional university and was funded by a small internal university grant, the university has a student population of 24,000 on-campus students and 14 per cent of these are derived from low SES areas (based on postcode). The study targeted those first year students who had self-identified as being first in family on their enrolment form. Just over 1,500 domestic, first year undergraduate students identified as being the first to come to university and an email invitation to participate in an interview was sent to a random selection of 800 students. A total of 63 responses were received and 25 students actually participated in an interview; unfortunately three interviews were later removed as both participants were undertaking a second degree.

The remaining participants were predominately female (n=14) and the whole cohort varied in age the youngest being eighteen years and the eldest being sixty four, eleven participants were partnered, twelve had children and there were four single parents (all women). All the participants spoke English as a first language and each was enrolled as a domestic undergraduate student. Each was the first in their immediate family to attend university but three had partners who had either previously attended university or were currently attending university. One interview was conducted with a mother and daughter as both were in the first year of university. The table that follows provides details of the program each was undertaking, the pseudonym of each participant and summary demographic details.

XXXX Insert TABLE 1 here XXXX

Interviews were approximately 50 minutes in length and were deliberately open-ended to enable the participants to story their experiences in a deeply descriptive manner. As Kvale (1996) identifies, interviews: ‘... are particularly suited for studying people’s understandings of the meanings in their lived worlds’ (p105). Each interview was transcribed and then imported into NVivo 10 where line by line coding was conducted. This analysis was inductively focussed, complemented by a constant comparative method of analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Analysis incorporated ongoing reflective writing / memoing in order to deeply explore themes and concepts that emerged from data. **This was a cyclic process that required a continual ‘dipping into’ the data followed by**

reflection and writing. Interviews were read line-by-line and then coded to categories or nodes; these categories were grounded within the narratives of participants in an attempt to develop insights into the social processes that individuals operate within. By continually revisiting the data, reflectively writing and also questioning the goal is to develop both explanatory and descriptive categories.

The findings detailed in the sections that follow, focus on two of the emergent themes in the data being 1) the motivations and reactions from others around attending university and 2) the relational changes this attendance provoked amongst family members and community.

Motivations and reactions related to attending university

The stories told during interviews resounded with long-held ambitions and desires to come to university; this was the case for both the older and younger participants. David explained that it is only at this stage of his life that he feels capable of dedicating the time and focus to his learning. David described his younger school age self as a ‘*very social person so I wouldn’t have had any study done*’ compared to his self at age 32: ‘*Now, I sit down, I plan out my assessments how I want to do them; I actually dedicate time to study*’. This perception that the time was right to come to university was echoed by a further six of the participants (Elaine, Nigel, Lena, Ann, Rose and Nina). Amongst the female participants who were also mothers, there was a collective sense that attending university represented something for the self rather than others:

I’ve actually for half of my kid’s lives I actually raised them on my own... uni is just me, it’s just something else I’ve actually wanted to achieve. (Lena)

I’ve made more choices about myself and I stopped doing stuff like other people and I decided I wanted to go uni for me so I got in. (Rose)

I think the positive now is that I am older and I kind of know who I am and what I want and what I want to get out of this; I'm not just doing it because my employer's sent me to uni...I'm doing this for me.
(Elaine)

However, the wait to attend was not always an individual decision, instead considering university immediately after school was not possible for a number of the older participants. This might be because of personal circumstances but also, related to limited encouragement from family or community. For example, Nina explained how her parents, particularly her mother dissuaded her from considering attendance perpetuating the idea that university was not for the 'likes of them':

...all us girls were always just taught that our place is in the home – that's where we should be because university isn't for people like us...She [mother] says it all the time "It's not for people like us. Just don't do it".

Nina was not the only participant to refer to limited encouragement of university attendance after school; instead this was a theme in the interviews, particularly amongst the older students. Yvonne also described:

...growing up in the family that I grew up – we were very working-class. All my dad's family bar his eldest brother, they all had trades. Trades were the best thing; that's what you had to do in life because that was going to be what was going to carry everybody through.

Similarly, Tony explained how his family were concerned about the 'extreme amount of debt and that it's just a waste of money' whereas Rose's sisters were 'jealous' of the opportunity.

However, equally the positive role of family in encouraging attendance was apparent amongst participants, for example Sheila described how '...my parents want me to do it;

they want me to finish it. I sometimes think “Oh, I don’t know if I’m going to be able to finish” but yes, they want me to. I’ve got support there’. Two of the younger students explained that attending university essentially increases the standing or cultural wealth of the family. Helen’s parents are both migrants and to have a daughter attending university raises their standing within the community. Penny also described how:

‘My dad loves it. It’s great. He tells everybody “My daughter’s at uni”. Our whole family, when they found out mum was pregnant it was more like “Oh it’s going to be a screw up” that kind of thing. My mum and dad are just like “Yes, check this out”. They’re fairly stoked.’

The response from David’s parents was also an embodied one: *‘My mum cried. She was so excited. My dad did as well actually’.* The role of family is a complex one with children of older students also played a very significant role not only in terms of the decision to return to education but also providing reassurance and support as the students engaged with their studies.

I did have a really stressful semester last semester, so even though they [children] see the stressful side of it, when I was getting all my results back they were just like “That’s really good”. I do check in with them and say “Do you think that it’s a good thing to continue” and things like that. (Yvonne)

They’ll tell the teacher, you know, I’ll just go to the classroom to say “How are they getting on at school” and they’ll drop it in – “Oh mum’s at uni you know”. It’s embarrassing at times – shop-keepers they’ll tell them “My mum’s at university”. One of them did tell a whole class that I was studying environmental science; he’s going to be an environmental scientist as well, I said “No I’m not”. At least he’s got his focus now; he knows what he wants to be. (Nina)

Whilst the initial quotes from Nina and Yvonne indicated little encouragement from immediate family to attend university after school, the two quotes detailed just above indicate how both derive support from their children. In these two cases, the role of family in motivating and supporting students varied across the generations and also caused unexpected relational transformations.

Changes in relationships with others

Family and friends did not necessarily understand the institutional structures of higher education and the participants in this study pointed to a range of relational changes that occurred between themselves and others. For example, Nigel explained how his mother was *'frightened with education'* because of the costs and time involved in completing a degree; he elaborated by describing how his mother had left school early as *'she came from a very poor family so she felt that she had to work...and she was living on her own; she came from a broken family and she had to support some of her younger siblings as well'*. Once he left school, Nigel got a job in retail and *'was quite happy at the time to just settle for a life of mediocrity'* but as his confidence developed and he progressed in his career, he realised that he *'wanted more'*. Commencing university changed the dynamics in his household; where once his mother had dismissed university, Nigel explained how he was being used as a resource for his siblings:

My mother now uses me as an example for my little brother and so it's that extra tool in the house to get him to do something and even with my older brother – because we've seen the positive impact it's had on my life and they know the ins and outs – I tell them everything so they can see that it's not the scary, unknown thing anymore, it's known and it's not scary, it's wonderful. It's really changed the dynamics of the household.

Like Nigel, Natalie also reflected upon changes in family dynamics that attending university had engendered, she described the emotionality of this return culminating in telling her father on his deathbed that *'I'd have a qualification (crying) and I'd show him that I'd be someone'*. For Natalie a single parent living in social housing, the

achievement of having both herself and her daughter (Linda) attending university represented a dramatic change in how others both within and outside the family perceived herself and her children. She explained how individuals had *'put us down into a category'* based on their social circumstances but attending university was both *'my own selfish thing'* and also a way *'to show everyone that I'm not what they say'*.

Changes in relationships were also a recurring theme amongst the parents in the study as they described the impact of their movement into higher education on their children. Sam is actively trying to make going to university *'natural and all very normal'*. When asked why she is encouraging her children to attend university, Sam explained that this desire was based upon what she herself was *'getting out of university'* a learning experience she described as *'just the pure sublime'*.

These changes were sometimes manifested through conversations about learning that were occurring in the home place, participants described very different ways of speaking about learning than many had experienced growing up. For example, Ann described how she had assumed that university was only *'people who are a lot smarter or have parents who have the money to put them through uni'*. Ann continued by explaining that having experienced university first hand she realised the importance of encouraging her son: *'I've been stretching his mind I suppose in the way that what else he could be possibly doing in life.'* These dialogues were not only about what parents did on-campus but also involved changes in status (for example from parent to student), which also impacted upon relationships between family members. Elaine explained how attending university was *'paving the way for my children too'* particularly her son as she had *'...shown him my uni log-in, I've showed him Harvard referencing and things like that so he's getting something out of it'*. What is striking in these interviews is the ways in which family relationships both acted upon the students and also, how the students themselves acted on others. For example, Ann explained how it was good for both her children and her siblings to witness her attending university as they *'watch me go to uni and know that I can be there to support them as well'*. The participants are acquiring a much deeper understanding of the university experience and this capital (in various forms) is disseminated back to the household in very unique ways.

Discussion

Whilst Bourdieu refers to the fundamental role of social and cultural capital in the enactment of educational success, the interviews with students undertaken in this study point to the important role of family capital in this endeavour. The term family capital is being used to refer to the networks of social capital that exist both within the internal dynamics of the household and also, in relation to family structure. Bourdieu largely perceived social capital as existing outside of the family unit relating more to the social connections that facilitate consolidation of economic and personal gains. Bourdieu's conceptualisations of social capital is then largely reproductive, a networking that serves to legitimise the positioning of the powerful and dominant classes. Other theorists such as Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) conceive of social capital in different ways for example, Putman moves social capital away from the domain of the individual, instead pointing to its collective nature and suggesting that it is through this that mutually supportive relationships can be enacted and facilitated. Indeed defining social capital can be 'elusive' (Croll, 2004, p401) as the term has to come to mean many different things. Hence, this study draws on the concept of 'family capital' to acknowledge the powerful role played by both family members and also, the family unit in the enactment of educational aspirations.

As outlined earlier, the role played by parents in relation to the educational outcomes of children is often viewed in deficit terms; lower educational qualifications of parents apparently translating into lower educational attainment for dependents (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Thayer, 2000; Tramonte & Willms, 2009; Wilks & Wilson, 2012). However, the reciprocal relationships between parents and child have largely been ignored in the research, particularly how either can act as agents of change within the family, generating new capitals for parents, siblings and other family members. A number of the students in this study indicated that their attendance at university provided a new capital within the home; new discourses around learning emerged and the intergenerational impacts of these conversations herald benefits for all. The cultural and familial 'baggage' that first in family students arrive with is not necessarily a deficit but also an asset.

The need to develop strong social network within the university has been identified by the literature on university experience (Tinto, 1995, 2002; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) however, there is a lack of clarity regarding how the social and familial networks that exist outside the higher education environment might assist first in family students. Whilst university was initially referred to as not being for 'people like us' the 'us' being variously described as a 'blue-collar family' (Nigel) and 'low income families and families that are not high achievers' (Ann); the stories told in interviews also point to the influence that family members had on individuals' perceptions of this student role. This was not limited to the younger school leaver age group but also reflected the sentiments of older students as well. For Alan, both the realization that a 'blue collar' job was not for him and the encouragement by both his immediate and extended family in his ambitions that provided the impetus his decision to return:

For want of a better term, I sort of see where my parents and family life went and I knew that I wasn't going to be able to be a blue-collar worker all my life and I didn't want to be. Some people are cut out for that; some people love that – for me, no. I wanted to start using my brain instead of my brawn. My parents are very encouraging, always suggesting, always talking, they're great. My wife's family, they're great too.

Similarly, Ann describes how the entire family encouraged and supported her in her decision to arrive at university, the collectivity of the response providing added impetus to her decision.

I've always had the idea of university and I think it was great to have kind of like "Okay, I'm thinking about going to uni" and everyone, all my family and friends, were like "Yes, go to uni" – kind of reinforcing me. It was great to have a social support like that.

The assumption that students who are first in family are somehow lacking in the desired social capital denies the often positive influence and motivation that family members can provide. Even those who are less supportive can provide motivation, providing a

necessary catalyst for individuals to prove them wrong (Natalie) or defy expectations (Lena). Rather than focus on what people lack, better understanding is gained from focusing on strengths in order to develop ways of understanding first in family students that seek to challenge notions of access and participation. For policy makers and practitioners, recognising the cultural wealth of first in family students can both assist in their retention and acknowledge their histories and biographies in a positive sense. Universities need to actively create spaces that provide opportunities for parents, children, siblings and partners to engage with the organisation in a meaningful way, recognising that these are often the invisible assets that our learners draw upon to both motivate their learning and enact success in this environment.

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| Name | Age | Children | Gender | Program | Status |
|----------------------------------|------------|-----------------|---------------|------------------|--|
| Alan | 42 | 2 | Male | B Commerce | Partnered |
| Nigel | 26 | No | Male | B Education | Single |
| Tina | 28 | No | Female | B Science | Partnered |
| Tom | 62 | No | Male | B Commerce | Partnered |
| Nancy | 64 | No | Female | B Commerce | Single |
| David | 32 | 1 | Male | B Arts | Partnered (Partner been to university) |
| Ann | 36 | 2 | Female | B Science | Partnered |
| Elaine | 36 | 5 | Female | B Commerce | Single (Divorced) |
| Eva | 48 | 2 | Female | B Nursing | Single (Widowed) |
| Lena | 43 | 2 | Female | B Arts | Single (Divorced) |
| Natalie (interviewed with Linda) | 43 | 2 | Female | B Commerce | Single (Divorced) |
| Nina | 36 | 3 | Female | B Arts | Partnered (Partner been to university) |
| Rose | 28 | 2 | Female | B Arts | Partnered |
| Sam | 44 | 2 | Female | B Arts -Creative | Partnered (Partner been to university) |
| Sheila | 28 | 1 | Female | B Arts | Partnered |
| Yvonne | 45 | 2 | Female | B Arts | Partnered |
| Helen | 19 | No | Female | B Arts | Single |
| Linda (interviewed with Natalie) | 20 | No | Female | B Arts | Single |
| Tony | 22 | No | Male | B Science | Single |
| Carla | 22 | No | Female | B Science | Single |
| Terry | 23 | No | Male | B Eng | Single |
| Penny | 18 | No | Female | B Science | Partnered |

