HOL08168 “‘You are going to go somewhere!’ The power of conferred identity status on ‘disadvantaged’ students and their mobility to University”

The centrality of identity in life choices for rural young people cannot be underestimated (Wyn, Stokes, & Stafford, 1998). In any ‘choice’ young people make about higher education, there is a subtle interplay of individual agency, circumstance and social structure (Thomson et al., 2002). In a four year study of young rural women from small towns in Victoria that moved to Melbourne for tertiary education, I found that ‘deciding’ to access university education is not one made alone. I will trace the evidence of the symbolic power of what I call a ‘conferred identity’ that has built up over time in their identity narratives. In this paper, I will demonstrate how three participants drew on their stories of themselves that their teachers and parents, and in some cases, other students, conferred onto them as identity markers. They came to understand that they were the ‘smart girls who would leave’ as early as grade 5. They understood from their teachers and parents that they would be leaving their small towns, and thus began preparing early for the move. This paper will demonstrate how such preparation over time and the accrual of conferring identity moments built ‘emotional capital’ (Reay, 2004b).

Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1992) will be reappropriated here and utilised to explain the transferring power of conferred identity and mobility. Drawing on narratives about themselves moving from the rural to university, the women name the key conferring identity moments that they use as emotional capital to enable them to move against statistical indicators.

Bourdieu (1990, 1992) situates people within what he calls a habitus, the relational space (or space of relations) where we learn to be ourselves. Although admitting his term went ‘hand in glove with vagueness and indeterminacy’ (1990, p. 77), Bourdieu was committed to study the social practices that constitute individuals, their ways of thinking, feeling and acting (Bourdieu, 1992). Bourdieu argues that these ‘dispositions’ generate our practices, perceptions and attitudes, and are inculcated within us over time through our life history. Our agency then, our ability to act, is informed by a relationship between our incorporated history and our context or circumstances.

Introduction

For feminist theorists, it was Bourdieu’s commitment to seeing people as complex and relational that enables placing experience at the centre of social analysis without attributing it an essential status (McNay, 2004b). In other words, our habitus is not our identity (McLeod, 2005), although it certainly informs the ways we speak about ourselves and how we explain our ‘identity’ to ourselves and to others. It is durable, but also generative and transposable, depending on our access to capital (Bourdieu, 1992).
My research concern has been at the intersection of habitus, access to capital, identity and mobility, particularly where this complex amalgam of influence interacts with underrepresented young people and their mobility towards higher education opportunities. Within Australian higher education, mobility is an ontological absolute for a rural young person— that is, in order to access it, one has to identify as ‘someone who will move.’ Kenway’s (2006) insightful reading of Australian higher education policy as ‘traveller’s tales’ is very apt for this discussion. Universities in Australia are mostly located in our cities. Rural young people, long recognized as an equity group in Australia, in most cases must move away from home in order to pursue higher education. They must be ‘emancipated from space’ in order to be ‘world citizens’ (Kenway, 2006). Mobility and habitus are interconnected and related, indeed, but the young person must also narrate themselves, in identity terms, as one who is ‘going somewhere.’

There is little doubt that our habitus plays a crucial role in our ability to move. Personal and family relationships help or hinder our mobility and they work very differently for women and men (Brooks, 2003). For Bourdieu, however, the interplay between habitus and mobility was contingent upon access to capital. Indeed, according to Bourdieu, our social origins give us differing forms of capital that we ‘cash in’ to become upwardly mobile, and education is the primary vehicle for this to happen.

Opposed to Marx’s ‘one-dimensional’ reading of capital, Bourdieu reappropriates Marx’s sense of economic/labour exchange to envelop the word in the variegated sense that capital is lived and embodied. Economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital are Bourdieu’s signature concepts and include, among other things, cultural models, our access to and value of language, knowledge about courses and careers, socially conditioned predisposition to adapt oneself to those models, access to the arts, a sense of being ‘at home’ in school and school settings (Bourdieu, Passeron, de Saint Martin, Baudelot, & Vincent, 1994). Bourdieu believed that our access to capital depended on a myriad of factors, but was filtered through the structural constraints of class. Reay (2004b) further develops Bourdieu’s concept of capital into the emotional realm, arguing for the evidence of ‘emotional capital’ in the realm of
educational achievement.

Bourdieu argued that in order to have symbolic power, a system must contain two vital parts—those that believe in the legitimacy of its power, and those who wield it (Bourdieu, 1992). In schools, the symbolic power is bestowed on teachers who assess students with grades, but also who claim naming rights, labeling students as ‘bright’ or ‘not bright,’ as ‘good at school’ or ‘not good at school,’ as ‘headed for university’ or ‘staying at home.’ It will be argued that the symbolic power of conferred identity status works powerfully in small rural schools not only because of its tighter networks of people, but also because so much is at stake. Further, those who move up to the ranks of ‘the top’ are imbued with family investment in them as people and their education, which enables a strong presence of emotional capital.

Christie: Being the smart girl in school who is expected to leave

Christie narrates herself as a student through Milksville P-12 as being ‘real quick in class… I was the one who did well in school,’ and was often asked by the teachers to help other students. Her description of herself at school was ‘always a good girl. I hated getting yelled at and so I deliberately made sure that I didn’t get yelled at’ (November, 2004).

Christie is comfortable with her school’s classification as ‘disadvantaged somewhat.’ Christie is quick to point out the school has some excellent features: there are good teachers, the school has a musical or an Eisteddford every year, there is a brand new welding/metalworks facility. However, generally, for a school to be the place to familiarise kids with options, like going on a tour of Melbourne University in year 9 and having a science class there once a year, the school was disadvantaged in that it just couldn’t make opportunities for its students like that. In year 12, we spent the full day in the labs at Melbourne, but just for that to happen, we spent 3 hours on the bus to get there and 3 hours on the bus to get home…and that was only those of us who saw uni as an option. Options and opportunities for kids outside of Milksville are severely limited (September, 2006).

Figure 1 is her response to my question Was school a good experience for you? as she showed me photographs of her rural school. She answers the question, but then projects herself back to Speech night and imagines herself thinking about her future at
university. University was inevitable, she thinks, but the fact that she had to leave Milksville to go to university dawned on her much later in her schooling. This idea was a painful one. She does not narrate herself escaping her hometown. Rather, she understands herself as one who goes reluctantly because she is the ‘smart one.’ Her identity has been conferred onto her as the most outstanding student in Milksville.

You know all the teachers, and they know you.  
I mean, my maths teacher in year 12 taught my dad,  
which was crazy.  
Dad didn’t go to uni, he finished year 12  
but failed, he didn’t pass his HSC.  
Actually, my maths teacher is the one who failed him.  
She was glad when at least  
one of us passed.  

Speech night  
was embarrassing.  
I won 5 out of the 8 awards!  
Including Dux  
And Best All-Arounder.  
It was more like,  
‘Christie has done it again,’ type thing.  
Individually I could have gotten them,  
but to get all of them,  
it was embarrassing.

I think the kind of things I always imagined myself being,  
a vet or a nurse,  
prime minister…  
all those things would have required me  
to go to uni.  
So I guess it was a case that this is what I wanted to do  
so I’ll go to uni.  
Probably from year 9 or 10 it kind of clicked that  
I would definitely go to uni.  
It was probably something that teachers didn’t really talk about it until year 10 or 11,  
but my marks were always pretty good  
and the encouragement was  
to go to uni.  
It didn’t click that  
uni meant leaving.  

Figure 1: Leaving Milksville is expected of the highest achiever, November, 2004
Christie understood university as inevitable. It was an expected part of her role as ‘the smart girl.’ Further, she had ambition to ‘being a vet or a nurse, prime minister.’ While she did not want to leave, she felt she had little choice. If she had not gone to university, she feared the lack of job opportunities in Milkville—jobs that she clearly identify as ‘not for her’ because of her conferred identity status and the emotional capital it has enabled. She reflects on the experience of her friends who remained: they are ‘doing all the girl jobs. One of my best friends is a hairdresser. One is a sales assistant’ (November, focus group, 2004).

Christie narrates her old friends as having made a choice ‘doing what a lot of society would see as shitty jobs… at the end of the day, it’s their decision that they’ve made.’ I believe there is more to it, and I challenge Christie’s statement. Figure 2 is a snippet of our conversation.

**Figure 2: Parents, choice, and imagining university as an option, September 2006**

Christie’s insightful comment about being ‘smart’ is compelling as it is a central question about young people and the matrix of agency, desire, and imagined possibilities. In order for a young person in a small town to imagine herself as smart, she has to have others who confer onto her the descriptor ‘smart,’ she has to experience success in school. However, that is not all. She also needs either her
parents or another trusted adult to encourage her to imagine herself leaving her small town. Christie’s cyclic, causal argument is well documented in studies about access, equity and education (Allard, 2005; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, 1979; Kenway, 1998; R. Teese, 2000; R. V. Teese, 1995).

Ellie and her teachers and parents conferring identity

Throughout high school, but particularly in years 11 and 12, three teachers befriend Ellie and fuel her desire to leave Seaside and move to Melbourne to study music. Figure 3 demonstrates why the music portable has such happy memories for Ellie.

![Figure 3: Learning to be a uni student (and a music teacher) by drinking coffee, November 2004](image)

Tim, Bob, and Rena, all teachers based in the music portable, befriend Ellie and encourage her to pursue university. She attributes much of her vocational ambition to them. She had ‘intelligent conversations with them about music and other things…it is because of them that I’m going to study music education’ (October, 2004). Later at a focus group in November of 2004, Ellie mentions them again: ‘Did anyone here have teachers or mentors tell you that you actually needed to get out of the town you grew up in? Like my music teachers started working on me early. You’ve got to get out of Seaside! If you stay, you won’t fulfil your potential.’

Over the years of the study, Ellie refers to them often. She is still in relationship with them, and catches up with them regularly when she is in Seaside. Now, however, her
relationship with them is as a colleague. When she went on her teaching rounds, she found a coffee machine in the staff room, and knew she had been trained well. She says, ‘I went into Rainey High School the other day and yep, there was a coffee machine in there. Yeah, teachers really like their coffee. I’ve been well prepared’ (email correspondence, March, 2007).

She also recognises that without her parents and their support, she might not have come to Melbourne. Even though it was hard for her parents to see her leave, they, ‘wanted me out of there. They didn’t want me to get caught up in that trap. There is just nothing for people like me there’ (November, 2004). In 2007, when I asked her why she made it to uni and her rural female peers did not, she reiterated her parents’ influence. She wrote this the day following the interview. I have created a visual text in Figure 4 constructing the transcription poem around each of her ‘reasons,’ changing nothing she has written but form.

```
I made it to uni because
I needed to get out of Seaside –
it wasn’t offering me anything that
would have sustained me long-term, and as it was,
my soul already felt crushed and
the hope of escape to university
got me through Year 12.

I made it to uni because
my parents had been able to invest
in my education financially
and with their time
and they wanted to follow this investment through
to its fruit-bearing end.
My dad’s work gave him extra money
to pay for my accommodation,
but his job grade is higher than Joe Blow’s and so
it’s exceptional for employers in Seaside to offer this help.

I made it to uni because
I’d been dreaming university dreams
since the end of Year 10 and because
teachers at school
took the time to feed those dreams,
to whet my appetite for culture and ideas, and
to sustain my love of learning.
```

Figure 4: Ellie responded to my question, "Why did you get to Uni," after thinking about it a few days and writing her response, May 2007

Brenda Holt, AARE Conference Page 7 December, 2008
Ellie’s ‘university dreams’ have been ‘fed’ by both her parents and her teachers in a way that nurtured its inevitability. She notes the financial sacrifice her parents have made to send her to university, and is well aware that moving to Melbourne would have been impossible without their commitment.

Alice and the power of conferred identity
Alice’s dad went to university to become a teacher, and her older sister, Beatrice, went to the same university and stayed in the same college as he did. Alice believes that for both her and her sister, going to university was inevitable. ‘We were smart, we were all smart girls, and well, it’s not like we were not going to further our education. I wanted to. It wasn’t something that was forced on me, I wanted to go.’ However, Alice chose not to follow in her father’s or her sister’s footsteps, and go to the same university they did. Instead, she wanted to be different and aim for the ‘best’ university. She wanted to be ‘right in the centre of all the action. I guessed if I was going to move, I would go all out. Go straight to the city’ (November 2004, focus group).

Alice grew up loving school. She can remember going to kinder and how much fun it was. She remembers Mrs. Gordon, her kinder teacher, who ‘was really nice.’ When Alice moved on to school, she seemed to always have a sibling to pick up from kinder and her relationship with Mrs. Gordon continued and deepened. Throughout Alice’s school career, Mrs. Gordon would comment about her growth and her academic development, making her feel connected and appreciated.

At school, Alice again had a positive experience. ‘It was fun. Once again, I know that I was a much quieter and shier kid at primary school, but was always good, the teachers said. I liked it because I was friends with the teachers. That always helps because you try to impress them’ (September, 2004). Alice credits her teachers with inspiring her to work hard at school. On the other hand, she acknowledges that without their positive feedback and friendship, she might not have liked school as much as she did, nor would she have achieved as highly. She also believes that they encouraged her to leave Forestville.
In 2004, she talked about not wanting to ‘get caught up in’ the things so many of her female peers in Forestville were doing. Her teachers encouraged her to ‘just get out and explore the world, they were always encouraging me to go somewhere. Else.’ Therefore, Alice felt exotic to her peers. Since she was in grade 5, she knew she would be leaving Forestville, and narrates herself as thinking over that plan to leave at least three times during her schooling.

\[\text{When I was in primary school, about grade 5, I started thinking, “What am I going to do? I’m going to university. I’m going to be so smart!” In the middle of high school, I thought, “I’ll go to uni, that will be so cool.” By year 12, I was like, “I’m not going to defer—I want to go straight to uni. I don’t want a holiday or a full-time job” (September, 2004)\]

**Who tells traveller’s tales?**

Bourdieu’s argument (1992) that our habitus is generative and transportable, depending on our access to capital, is a powerful lens to view these identity narratives. Within the narratives, the participants drew on a number of significant forms of capital. Emotional and cultural capital carried the narratives. Each participant drew on cultural models of being a ‘good student’ and was regularly affirmed in that role at school and at university. She had two supportive parents who were involved in her educational experience and plans for the future. She believed she was a strong, resilient person with goals and the ability to meet them. Further, she believed she was ‘going somewhere.’ She knew what she wanted to ‘be’ and followed that vision to Melbourne.

First, let us consider what the visual texts tell us about who tells ‘traveller’s tales’ (Kenway, 2006) and how narratives combine to propel a young person forward, to give them a sense of agency. Although each narrative is differentiated and unique, common themes in the participants’ accounts of the convergence of mobility, identity and agency offer tremendous insight into the move of an under-represented young person to university.

**Being a smart girl: identity matters**

Alice’s experience as a ‘smart girl’ in school was similar to the other participants in the study: she had good relationships with her teachers, she was a ‘good girl,’ and she started planning to leave town for university at a very early age, in her case, grade 5.
Bourdieu’s *homo academicis*—those who have adapted to the language of teaching (Bourdieu, 1988; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979) rise to the fore.

Identity stories about achievement in schooling are powerful throughout the data stories. Each participant identified as being singled out at school and labelled *smart* or *quick* or *going somewhere*, their teachers’ ‘legitimate model’ in Bourdieurian terms. Their designation as serious players in the education game came early in their schooling; the young women were able to adapt themselves to competing and moving to the top of the class. As early as in grade 5, teachers conferred this identity upon these girls, and it both sticks and acts as social capital for the women to exchange as a later ‘ticket out of town’. Early in their schooling, they each began planning that they would someday leave their geographical origins. Only Christie does not see herself as somehow exotic to her rural geography, although she knows that the top student must leave, too.

‘Always’ mobile
Feeling exotic in a small town enabled a sense of mobility. All but Christie felt early on that they were ‘always’ going, that a move was ‘inevitable’ in order to be themselves. Ellie sums up most of the participants’ feelings when she says she ‘would’ve died if I had stayed in Seaside, just because of the kind of person I am.’ Feeling exotic to their hometowns precipitated an identity story that propelled them to find a place where they would fit.

Each of them came to university planning to ‘be’ something. Having identified early as ‘smart’ and ‘leaving,’ they began planning their careers, sometimes from as early as grade 5. Christie, unsure of her chosen vocation when leaving Milksville, ‘always imagined’ herself being something that would require her to leave for university: *a vet or a nurse, prime minister*. When leaving her towns, Ellie imagined herself as a musician, and later, once surrounded by elite musicians, as a music teacher. Alice pictured herself as a scientist. This was true for all participants.

A more potent agency
There is also a ‘something-extra’ at work in moving from the rural, something like determination or focus, commonly understood as agency. However, I believe that for
each of these women, that something-extra, whatever it is, works alongside a ‘smart’ identity. Coupled together, this contributes to a potent agency to move. It is a subjective sense of control, of being able to plan, of naming. It is the ability to weave a cohesive narrative of the self in a way that the author is the protagonist, fully in charge of her life. This surfaced early on, as I trawled through the data stories. Each of them spoke of their plans to come to university, as if there was no question that they would achieve their goals. Christie, the most reluctant leaver, knew she would ‘definitely’ go to uni from year 9 or 10. Ellie felt she had already been ‘gutsy’ in her move to the city, and thus I really feel that doing something gutsy empowers you to do more gutsy things. For each and every participant, there is no doubt in the future and in their ability to realize their goals.

Throughout this paper, I have been aware that using the term ‘identity’ is problematic and contentious. However, I have been unable to find another word to go in its place, one that adequately describes the way these young women understand themselves. Identity matters to the way young people imagine themselves in education and into their futures. For each participant, identity is a powerful, under-the-skin story through which she explains who she was and is, and why she came to university and is propelled by a deep sense of knowing—an outcome of years of emotional capital built up over time by others.

Supporting networks

We have also seen in this paper tangible examples of the power of supportive networks and the way they work as emotional capital. A young person does not choose university without support from those who contribute to her identity-making narrative as a smart and university-bound individual. Ellie’s story of her music teachers welcoming her as a colleague and teaching her to drink coffee in preparation for Melbourne is a powerful example of supportive networks that propel young people toward ‘choosing’ higher education. Alice spoke of her teachers ‘always encouraging me to go somewhere else,’ and her father and sister encouraged her to follow in their footsteps. The impact of teachers on student identities is profound.

Not every participant had parents who had gone to university, yet the support these parents provided was no less potent. Christie’s parents fully supported the inevitably
of her move to university because they witnessed her academic ability and saw nothing for her on the farm. These supportive networks were central to each of the participants’ ability to move from the rural and adapt to life in the city at university.

Each participant felt she belonged at university, echoing a Bourdieurian sense of one’s place—‘one’s relationship to the world and one’s proper place within it’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 474). Feeling and assuming a sense of belonging at university allowed each young woman to adjust to being in a strange place so culturally different to where she grew up. The data stories demonstrate a sense of active and directed choice to access higher education. Parents, teachers, siblings and other family members were involved in these choices in each and every case. Each young woman narrates herself as the choice-maker, in control of her destiny and direction, and following her own life-course. Ironically the ‘choices’ of their rural female friends are also understood within this framework.

Policy-makers in higher education must address the importance of helping young people from under-represented areas to imagine education ‘for them’ at a much earlier age than Year 12 and thus be enabled to make a ‘choice for university.’ It is not an Open Day or a University Prospectus that draw under-represented students to university. It is the long-term identity narratives that position education and its importance in their imagined futures. We must start with particular people in particular schools and build a presence of the university option. We must also help teachers better understand their role in building an educational identity.

**Conclusion**

In response to the obvious statistical discrepancies in the widening gap of those who go to university and those who do not, the Commonwealth has attached their limited funding to the universities with a mandate to increase access. While there is little doubt that some of these special access programs provide opportunities for students who might not otherwise have gone to university, offering access programs alone does not open the floodgates for under-represented students at universities. In fact, this paper provides strong evidence that moving away from a small town in order to access a city-based university education involves a complex and imbricating dynamic
of family networks, schooling, teacher encouragement, and a clear idea of a post-university vocation.

Further, moving from their rural geography, according to the participants, was an inevitable result of their ambitions, career choices, and hard work. They position themselves in contrast to their female rural peers who ‘chose’ to stay home and get married, have children, or work in traditionally low-paying ‘girl jobs.’ By positioning themselves as ‘other’ to those girls, the participants would not be ‘trapped’ in their small towns or get ‘caught up in’ their affairs. Three participants say that if they had stayed in their small town, they would have ‘died.’ Although their narratives on the surface appear to be full of agency, determination, and ambition—and they no doubt are—there is much more to moving from the rural.

Identity matters: identity matters because we live in a world where access to identity narratives is at the heart of seeing opportunities. As Benhabib (1999) contends, one’s agency is the ability to weave a life story in which she is the winner and I have argued that in order to weave such a story, a young woman must have the emotional capital to do so. Our narratives that we tell about ourselves guide our actions, and those actions have consequences for our education. And of course, in so many ways, our education determines the choices we can make for our futures.

There are many questions left unresolved at the end of this paper. I have sought to position a researcher’s interpretation that introduces a more insightful social science—that mobility, identity, and education narratives are deeply intertwined and their complexity of convergence must be better addressed if policy-makers in higher education are serious about ensuring access and equity for all.
References Cited


