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Social mobility in the slipstream: first-generation students' narratives of university participation and family

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, increasing research attention has been devoted to “first-generation” or “first-in-family” university students. For a sizeable cohort of students there is still little or no family tradition of supporting new university entrants into, and few expectations of, the novel and unfamiliar territory of university life and work. Contextualised by UK policy concerns over limited widening participation and social mobility, we extend current research on first-generation university students with an enhanced focus on family and home. Drawing on extended narratives from eight first-generation students, this paper explores the extent to which these students can have a “slipstream” effect back upon the home, on their siblings and, in some instances, on their parents. Informed by understandings of family learning and social learning theory, the concept of familial role-modelling is used to consider the transmission of learning within the family. With familial cultures of learning a key driver for young people’s ambitions and aspirations, by focusing on the under-researched links between home, family, and university, we stress the importance of further exploring the experiences of first-generation students. This, we argue, is necessary for individual universities, the HE sector, and government to better acknowledge and address.

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Social mobility; first-generation students; widening participation; higher education/university; family learning; role models

Introduction

In recent years, increasing research attention has been devoted to “first-generation” or “first-in-family” students with focus on their expectations and opportunities (O’Shea, Stone, Delahunty, & May, 2018), family capital (Gofen, 2009; O’Shea, 2015) and class boundaries and habitus (Lehmann, 2009). For a sizeable cohort of students there is still little or no family tradition of supporting new university entrants into, and few expectations of, the novel and unfamiliar territory of university life and work (Thomas, 2002; Waite, 2013). Though definitions of this cohort vary (O’Shea, 2016; Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013), first-generation students are generally determined as those where “neither parent has had access to university education and completed a degree” (Thomas & Quinn, 2006, p. 50). As family and friends are critical in shaping the perceptions of young adults who are potentially recruitable to higher education (HE), these students and their familial and social networks warrant greater consideration. As Brown

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(2009) articulates, those who identify with entrants to HE, those who are “people like me” in terms of education, social and employment background, can influence decision-making between and within generations.

Researchers of contemporary HE have signalled how university participation can reverberate within the family home (O’Shea, 2015; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010), promoting a culture of learning among, and encouraging the educational aspirations of, others. Our interest lies in the extent to which those who are first-generation university students have a “slipstream” effect back upon their home environment, on siblings and, in some instances, on parents. Contextualised by UK policy concerns over limited widening participation and social mobility (Department for Education (DfE), 2017), we extend current research on first-generation university students with a focus on family and home. We couch this in terms of family learning in its broadest sense before drawing on Giddens and Pierson’s (1998) discursive consciousness and Bandura’s (2001) concept of agentic perspective to explore what happens within families with a first child at university. Informed by social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 2001) we then use the concept of familial role-modelling to consider the transmission of learning within the family.

We take these conceptual ideas forward through the extended narratives of eight university undergraduate students in terms of perceived influence, or not, on the aspirations of their immediate family. Using students’ narratives of family, we discuss participation in HE in relation to perceived distinct and diffuse influence on other family members, siblings, and parents. Analysis of students’ agentic perspectives highlights the impacts, possibilities and constraints of students’ class and gender positioning, as well as family place and role. Responding to the entrenched discourse that constructs this group as being “at risk” in relation to their studies (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013), we highlight the relatively untapped potential they can offer for role-modelling learner identities within the family home. With familial cultures of learning a key driver for young people’s ambitions and aspirations, by focusing on the under-researched links between home, family, and university, we stress the importance of further exploring the experiences of first-generation students. This, we argue, is necessary for individual universities, the HE sector, and government to better acknowledge and address.

Context: higher education, “non-traditional” students and social mobility

Central to contemporary transformations in UK HE has been the dramatic growth in student numbers (DfE, 2016). With a shift from an “elite” to a “mass” education system, the structure, purpose, social and economic role of HE have all undergone significant change (BIS 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 1998). This process of HE expansion, and increasing use of participation targets, has led to a different, more heterogeneous, composition of students in terms of previous education, social and family background, gender, age, life situation, motivation to study, and current and future occupational profiles (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Thomas & Quinn, 2006). Despite these radical changes and the HE sector’s and individual universities’ commitment to widening participation (WP) (Bowes, Thomas, Peck, & Nathwani, 2013), research is clear: the UK’s expansion of HE has benefited young people from richer backgrounds far more than those from less well-off families (Blanden, Gregg, & Machin, 2005). Concerned with

this trajectory, The Office for Fair Access (OFFA, now called the Office for Students, (OFS)) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) developed a national strategy for access and student success in HE, with the laudable vision “that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed” (BIS, 2014, p. 7; DfE, 2017).

This expansion of HE, participation of “non-traditional” students, and the national strategy of access and student retention, have been partly encouraged by policy makers’ longstanding commitment to increasing social mobility. Though a deeply contested concept, most especially in relation to education (Brown, Reay, & Vincent, 2013), social mobility is considered a means to address social inequalities and exclusion (Payne, 2012), has risen up the policy agenda and become embedded in contemporary political discourse:

Social mobility is the outcome that the Government wishes to see: a society becoming less stratified by socio-economic class. Widening participation to higher education helps to increase social mobility but does not achieve it on its own: employers, schools, colleges, communities and the Government all have roles to play, too. (BIS, 2014, p. 6)

Certainly in terms of rhetoric and emphasis, the interest in social mobility has been generated forcefully by governments (Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and DfE, 2011; HMG 2012; DfE, 2017) and the current Conservative Government remains committed to improving “relative intergenerational mobility”, and achieving this through the transformation of families, with special emphasis on education (BIS, 2015; DfE, 2017; May, 2016) at all levels.

Intergenerational mobility measures the degree to which people’s social and economic status changes between generations. It is seen, not least by the UK Government, as a measure of the equality of life opportunities, reflecting the extent to which parents influence the success of their children in later life (Nunn, Johnson, Monro, Bickerstaffe, & Kelsey, 2007). Such mobility is enabled to a varying and debatable extent by “cultural capital”, in this case, through HE (Aldridge, 2003; Giddens, 2007). Blanden et al. (2005) maintain that intergenerational links in Britain are particularly strong and conservative, meaning that current policy commitment and development may be insufficient for the task at hand; young people’s life chances are still intricately tied to those of their parents (Brown, 2013). This is certainly the case when comparisons are made at the international level with relatively low levels of intergenerational mobility in countries including France and the USA in contrast to the higher mobility of Australia, Canada and the Nordic countries (O’Shea, 2016; OECD, 2010).

Intergenerational mobility inevitably focuses on the family as an important transmitter and limiter of educational level and aspiration. Research has shown that the home-learning environment is critical in developing social, cognitive and behavioural outcomes with learning from and by interaction with peers and family important and potentially transformative. In particular, an individual’s “economy of experience” (Brown and Hasketh, 2004) linked to parental level and field of study (Kraaykamp, Tolsma, & Wolbers, 2013) is of significance for reaching a “higher” level of education (and employability). This has become both more relevant and contentious with increased participation in HE (Brown, 2013). Symmetry between parents and siblings is becoming more apparent when it comes to intergenerational transmission of educational level and field of study (Kraaykamp et al., 2013). The entry,

transition and socialisation of young people into the undergraduate student experience can be a complex process, with beliefs and actions about student learning and roles commonly based on past personal and familial educational histories (Baer, 2008; Ball, Davies, David, Reay, & Davies, 2002; Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012). This brings to the fore our conceptual framing of family learning, discursive consciousness, and role-modelling.

Conceptual framing: family learning, discursive consciousness, and role modelling

Over the past 20 years in the UK, the traditionally private sphere of the family has been repositioned as a thoroughly public space (Fairclough, 2000) ripe for numerous policy interventions. Although interest of policymakers in the relationship between parents and children is not new (Rose, 1989), it was the New Labour Government (1997–2007) that precipitated and legitimised a more direct and far reaching role for the state in regard to family and parenting (Daly, 2010) with both pushed to the forefront of various policy initiatives. This stemmed, in part, from a “social investment perspective” which views improvement to children’s upbringing and education as a way of reducing future costs through early intervention (Esping-Andersen, 2002), with current policy emphasis focusing on the early years in this regard (DfE, 2017). Following the “third way approach” (Giddens, 1998), families and communities have increasingly been viewed as crucial in making “suitable” active citizens (Marandet & Wainwright, 2016).

Family learning is a wide-ranging area and refers to activities that contribute to a culture of learning in the family (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) 2013). As Alexander and Clyne (1995, p. 132) maintain: “Families are the main context of learning for most people. Learning within the family is usually more lasting and influential than any other. Family life provides a foundation and context for all learning” (see also Cole, 2011). However, there is a paucity of empirical research to support these claims (BIS, 2012). As Franz (2009, p. n.p.) makes clear in her review, while there are instances of particular “learning interactions”, learning between the generations commonly “just happens incidentally”. Moreover, while family has become a key area for state intervention, and parents’ participation in their children’s education eagerly appraised (Bertaux & Thompson, 2006; Marandet & Wainwright, 2016), attention has been placed on dependent children in formal primary and secondary education sectors, with little on HE and the less immediate influence of family learning in later adolescence (Brooks, 2003, 2004). Recent work by O’Shea (2015), O’Shea et al. (2018) and Gofen (2009) are significant exceptions and we add to this literature to focus on potential familial transformations from first-generation university students. How first-generation students present themselves to others in the family home, engaging with its discursive and material construction, is important for understanding their potential slipstream effect. Adding to existing Bourdieusian appraisals of family capital and first-generation student habitus we are interested in the transmission of learning through students’ agentic perspectives and attendant discursive consciousness: “what actors are able to say, or to give verbal expression to, about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action” (Giddens, 1984, p. 374).

As a theoretical point of departure, Giddens’ (1984) well-rehearsed ideas on structure-agency are central. Using a circular, recursive, notion of human actions as both

constrained and enabled by structures, the ability of an agent to consciously alter his or her place in the social structure is referred to as “reflexivity”, and recognises actors as having situated knowledge (Giddens & Pierson, 1998). Reflexivity has come to mean an act of self-reference where self-examination entails the capacity of an individual to recognise forces of socialisation and shift her or his place in a particular organisational structure. For Giddens, actors are not inherently predisposed to sustained reasoning or existential reflection on the meaning of their conduct from moment to moment in everyday life, rather, “discursive consciousness” emerges at critical times, expected or unexpected. In these circumstances, actors mobilise their efforts and focus their thoughts on responses to problems that will diminish their anxiety and, ultimately, bring about social change (Giddens & Pierson, 1998).

Here we are interested in intra-generational learning, where siblings notice, influence and learn from each other to develop discursive consciousness in relation to university ambitions. We concentrate on the transmission of attitudes, beliefs and practices and modelling of behaviours within, and at times across, a generation, taking a lead from social learning theory and familial role-modelling. Social learning theory has been used to focus attention on how children observe and model behaviours of usually significant and influential others. In relation to HE, these ideas inform considerable work on parental influence on their children’s education trajectories. Here we re-focus on sibling “modelling”, directed by an agentic perspective (Bandura, 1995, 2001).

Social learning theorists argue that, to promote effective modelling, a role model must ensure that four conditions exist: attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977). That is to say, Bandura’s “vicarious learning” (1962, 1977) works through familial role-modelling where learning occurs through observing the actions of others in the family, and its effectiveness depends upon how well such role models can support the learning of others. Following Bandura (1962), the “vicarious learner” must first pay attention to the role model: attention is a critical factor in this kind of learning. Support from a role model – “trusted other”– is important, not least because they are able to share concerns about their own lack of confidence and how common it is to have difficulties in particular areas.

Our supposition here is that, where there are low levels of attention between the learner and the role model this is more likely to result in weak family learning. In contrast, high levels of attention and identification can result in strong family learning. We are interested in the modelling that takes place within families and the identification that takes place not least through the discursive consciousness within the family of a first-generation child at university.

With this conceptual framing, we argue that further consideration be given to the family context within which first-generation students are located, and the potential familial “slipstream” effect they can generate. By this we mean perceptions of the impression left “behind” on family members and within the home space that first-generation students have transitioned “out of” or away from with the move to HE. This adds to what O’Shea (2015) refers to in her analysis of capital flows between university and home as the “ripple” effect on the family. Moreover, while recent policy and rhetoric have focused on individualising with emphasis on personal rather than state responsibility, we argue that university students should not be understood solely in terms of their own agentic practice, learning trajectories, and future economic participation. Rather, through

more thorough consideration of family context and wider structural positioning, and with awareness of potential impact of HE participation on identities and aspirations, we can begin to see potential of familial role-modelling and collective agency.

Methodology: the first-generation students project

This paper is based on a year-long project at a London-based campus university which explored the transition by, and learning needs and experiences of, first-generation students. Expanding Thomas and Quinn's (2006) definition, we refer to those students who are the first in their immediate family (parents, siblings, and children) to undertake a degree programme at university. Funding was obtained from the University with the view that the research would improve student experience and retention.

By way of context, in 2016 the University's student population was 12,000 with 63% being undergraduates. Under the University's definition, the widening participation cohort for 2015–16 was 40% of the undergraduate home student population. The University has a central WP Unit whose target groups include students with little or no family history of HE, notably those in the six west London boroughs and their low participation neighbourhoods. Specific strategies aimed at increasing the number of first-generation students include on-campus activities (HE awareness visits [Year 6 – Year 13], master classes [Year 11 – Year 13], subject taster days [Year 6 – Year 13], Summer schools [Year 8 – Year 13] and careers fairs [Year 10]) and off-campus activities (HE advice talks for students, parents and community groups, preparation HE workshops, attendance at parents and options evenings). For current students, there are career-mentoring opportunities,¹ a WP student-ambassador programme, and a Headstart programme.² Additionally, the university funds research focusing on this student cohort, with WP keenly tied to the University's Strategic Plan and imperative of enhancing student experience.

This study was informed by a biographical approach and, drawing on student learning narratives, focuses on the lived experiences of being at university. As Moen (2006, p. 56) articulates, “[a]s we make our way through life, we have continuous experiences and dialogic interactions both with our surrounding world and with ourselves”. The surrounding world we focus on here is the university and family and we explore this interaction by way of seeking the narratives of students at differing points in their studies. In so doing, the research attempted to support these students, with outputs including recommendations for change, and the production of films in conjunction with participants for use across the university and beyond.

This paper is based on one-off narrative style depth interviews with eight first-generation students – four men and four women – who crossed different university departments and were at various stages of undergraduate learning, and of various ages, as highlighted in Table 1. All students self-identified as either working class or “mixed” working and middle class. Contact was made through an email directed across the student cohort but aimed at those who were first-generation. Volunteer students were then approached directly, and individual interviews arranged. Informed consent was sought from all students before taking part in interviews, which lasted up to 1 hour and were digitally recorded. The participants were given a choice of location in which to be interviewed and, as a result, interviews took place in classrooms or office locations

Table 1. Details of interviewed students.

	Interviewee (pseudonyms used)	University stage, subject	Age	M/F
1.	Alison	Level 1: Politics and history	22	f
2.	Bea	Level 3: Biosciences	25	f
3.	Carol	Level 1: Biomedical science	18	f
4.	Chris	Level 1: Physics	19	m
5.	Darrel	Level 1: Biosciences	19	m
6.	John	Level 3: Social work	36	m
7.	Manit	Level 1: Biomedical science	19	m
8.	Paula	Level 1: Sciences	21	f

within campus. Each interview was transcribed and we employed an inductive hermeneutic approach (Thomas, 2006) focusing on narratives of university-family to generate key themes in relation to the research objectives. This, coupled with our theoretical interest in familial role-modelling, led us towards students' descriptions of their family life, and clear demarcations emerged between those who described a distinct or diffuse effect on their families of their participation in HE. These student narratives enabled us to capture the diversity of students' familial situations while exploring disparities and similarities in university participation within these family units, encouraging family-learning accounts to emerge. As we argue through our analysis, this research adds to our understanding of how education is transmitted within the home to siblings and parents. In what follows, we explore this by drawing on extended narratives of these eight interviewed students with gender, class, and family place and role, woven through and teased out in our analyses.

Findings: student narratives of distinct and diffuse family effects

Distinct effect

Among the group of students where a distinctive effect of HE participation on family members is marked, narratives focus on the direction taken, and the role they play, or will play, in the family. Alison, the oldest of four children, has three younger brothers aged sixteen, fifteen, and seven. She describes how they see her:

Alison: *I think they ... see me different to the way my mum sees me, because she's not in education. I don't know why, but I can sort of develop... motivation, to help them more. I can explore their options of going to university with them. I think all three are growing up now seeing that there are more options out there for them than just going to college and just doing a vocational course. I think one of them has the potential to go to university; university is definitely an option for him. He's quite good at science, he does motor engineering, and for part of his course he's an apprentice at Vauxhall. They have told him that once he finishes school, he can go on and finish his apprenticeship and be a car technician. And I'm sort of saying to him, like, "Why? Why do you want to be an apprentice, and be a car technician, when you can go to university and do motor sport engineering? Why fix cars when you can make cars?" I said to him, "You can do aviation and pilot training, and ... fly planes." At school you don't hear about the things you can go on and do. So I think my influence from going to university is sort of changing them.*

This excerpt represents a very direct and distinct intervention by Alison. In terms of role modelling, Alison has become an educational role model to her siblings as she has superseded

her mothers' educational achievement and knowledge. This has given her both the cultural capital and personal ability to directly challenge her brother's perceptions and his school's trajectory for him. In Bandura's (1977) terms, she has caught her brother's attention and developed motivation through encouraging educational choices and aspirations towards university. As the eldest sibling, she seems to see herself as being the role model tasked with offering support and encouragement to her younger brothers.

In the extract below John, too, describes his intention to push and shape his brother, through being an "academic role model", and potential future direct help and intervention:

John: *My mum's a single-parent, we're a working class family ... a pretty modest background. We live above a shop, you know, a council estate home.*

Interviewer (I): *Any brothers or sisters?*

John: *I have one younger brother. I'd probably class myself as really academic – I'm not trying to sound big headed, it's just what I enjoy. So, from about Year 9, Year 10, [aged] fourteen or fifteen, I've kind of always been pushed towards being academic. So, when I got the chance to make choices, it was fairly natural. I really wanted this. I suppose my brother will now have to do a degree as well [laughs]. He's much cleverer than I am. I'll probably give him a lot of help because it's now part of my experience. It will make it a hell of a lot easier for him than it was for me when I came.*

The distinct effect that John describes here is primarily based on being "seen" at university. Echoing findings by Gofen (2009), participation in HE will motivate his brother to reproduce John's own choices; his modelling will ease the way for his sibling's entry. This is likely in terms of both structural barriers and the discursive and border practices that can keep potential "non-traditional" entrants at a distance (Lehmann, 2009; Reay et al., 2010). The role model can aid the vicarious learner to build their knowledge of HE.

Bea describes the cohesive bond between her twin sisters, but also the influence of her father and wider family, in the form of grandparents. There is a strong sense of social collaboration, at least by some of her family, of attentiveness to what Bea is doing at university and motivation to follow her:

Bea: *We're a really mixed bag. My dad's family is quite, erm, middle class, and then my mum's family is completely the opposite. So we've got, like, at one end of the family, for example, I've just found out my 17 year-old cousin is pregnant and, at the other end, they are all quite well educated and have good jobs.*

I: *Do you have siblings?*

Bea: *I have two sisters, and they're twins. They're 17, but they haven't decided about university yet. They're just now going into sixth form. They've both got a few offers to different sixth forms, quite good ones too. So once they've done that, and they've got A-levels, they'll see what they want to do then. At the moment, I can imagine one of them definitely being better in college and doing a course towards a career, maybe the other one is thinking more about university. But I don't know if they'll split up, though, because they've mainly stayed together.*

I: *Do they ask you much about university?*

Bea: *Yes, they do. I get regular phone calls asking how I am. They're always asking questions about people I've met and things I've been doing. I have always been quite motivated in my*

education. Their perception of me is of a goody-goody girl, always reading and always quiet – and now I've got to stick to that to keep them happy.

I: So they expect that you're working hard and doing well in your studies?

Bea: I know that my grandparents do, definitely. I don't think they realise there's, umm, a social side too.

I: So do you tell them?

Bea: No (laughter)

I: And your sisters?

Bea: Well, I think they understand a bit more! And they look at university as more of an option for them now. They have definitely followed me with the sort of schools they've applied to. So I think that they'd probably ask me and find out more about it.

Here, Bea describes her family "sides" in terms of educational success and implies educational expectation from her "middle class" father's family. Parental influence in shaping HE expectations and choices has been widely appraised, though it is often mothers more active in this "educational work" (Brooks, 2003; David, Ball, Davies, & Reay, 2003). Through Bea's experience, it is the educational expectations shaped through her parents' class status that suggests her father's role as a more critical driver (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 1999; Brooks, 2004). Moreover, Bea also has strong personal motivation towards her education and her desire to undertake a university degree is driven by her self-identifying as academically high achieving (Brooks, 2003). In terms of slipstream effect, this is translated to siblings with Bea's last comments pointing to role-modelling behaviour.

For Paula, it is not just her brother who is contemplating university qualifications, but her mother too:

I: Your brother is twelve, is he interested in university?

Paula: We're quite a sporting family, Mum plays netball, Dad does marathons. So they're all quite interested to see the facilities and what they offer. I do ask him [brother] if he's going to go to Uni, but he says he doesn't know. It's either that or he'll go into the army like my dad. He's interested in my experiences, in what I'm doing. I tell him about the lab sessions we have, then he gets really excited because, obviously, it's in a lab and it's like sciencey stuff. He does listen a lot, for sure, and he does ask a lot of questions, so I reckon he's thinking about it. Oh, I should say that my mother is going, is re-taking one of her GCSEs so she can do her A-levels and go to Uni.

I: What is she planning to do?

Paula: She's trying to do occupational therapy, or be a physio. When she was looking for a job, something just popped up. She suddenly said she'd like occupational therapy, checked how much people like that earn, and said, "Oh that's amazing!" I said, "Well, yeah, you can do that. You can always go back to college get you're A-levels." She goes, "Yeah, yeah," she's quite worried about money. Then I was able to tell her about maybe getting a bursary from the NHS. Then she really was interested.

These extracts from Paula give a sense of educational conversation and interest within the family with discussion about university spaces of learning and recreation.

Paula articulates a distinct influence on her mother's engagement in education and potential drive for HE. In Bandura's terms, this indicates direct intervention, attentiveness, and motivation, with the possibilities of a direct impact.

Drawing together these first four student narratives, other than John, who articulated a more latent influence on his brother's potential participation in HE, the examples come from female students. Research on relationships within the family has found it is normally women, most especially mothers, who provide the emotional support for their children's educational knowledge and experience (O'Brien, 2007; Reay, 1998). In our examples here, it was female students that provided this support to their siblings and, in the one instance, their mother, through transmission of knowledge and aspirational provocation. Given that our students were not living in the family home, this was not a daily activity as articulated in the literature on educational emotion work, yet points to emotion work via support at a distance. Though interventions only go as far as talking and encouraging siblings and parents, rather than having the ability to offer material resources, this highlights the strong emotional support necessary in raising familial aspirations and offering practical guidance. The gendering of these narratives of sibling support warrant further attention as they potentially add to existing understandings of how gender inequities are recreated through the emotional care work of education.

Diffuse effect

In this section, four students narrate the more diffuse effect their participation in HE has had on their families. Carol, an 18-year old Biomedical Science student, describes her family as "very working class" and who "really do work hard for what they want." Her mother is a nursery nurse who "made her way up", and she has two siblings and two "half-siblings". Her family has been supportive of her progress towards university, but see it as "a place that very intelligent people go!" Unlike the extracts above, Carol is less interventional and simply hopeful that her sister will follow in her footsteps:

Carol: *None of my family so far have gone to university. I think I've kind of inherited their feeling that, you know, you have to be very good to get into university. And if you're not good enough, then don't bother! So my family do think of university as something they couldn't reach themselves. Even though they've worked hard, and gained qualifications and other things, they'd probably see university as something very high up.*

I: *You spoke about your younger sister wanting to go to university.*

Carol: *I don't know. Maybe. She does ask me what university is like, and she always asks about coming to visit me. She works full time at a job herself now. Before that, she was all "Oh, I don't know if I'm smart enough to go to university." And I'm like, "Well, if you have a passion and you know what you want to do, then of course you can go to university." I think maybe in some ways I've given her a boost, to maybe do it herself. So hopefully.*

What Carol describes is a familial lack of knowledge of, and self-confidence for, HE and university participation. Family working-class status, location and cultural capital combine to assert a sense of "strangeness" in (Reay et al., 2010), and not fitting with, the HE system. This sense of being an "outsider" reproduces a more diffuse family learning effect with initial limited slipstream effect.

This long extract from Darrell's interview paints a strong picture, in his own words, of a "dysfunctional family" and his own troubled youth, with little social collaboration and meaningful interaction, and where expectations of him were low:

Darrel: *My mum and step-father divorced when I was 15 ... My mum loves me to pieces, you know, and she's proud of me whatever I do. But in terms of encouragement? No, she's not really made that way... I think my life was secondary to theirs, really. ... My family unit is completely dysfunctional.*

I: *How does your mum feel about you doing a degree and being here at university?*

Darrel: *I think my mum's proud. But, you know, I could be working in the glue factory and she'd be proud of me. ... I think she was actually very surprised that I would do something like come to university, but I think she always believed that I could do anything. She probably perceives me as being quite sorted and I've probably let her believe that. I left home when my parents got divorced. My mum hasn't, no my parents haven't, had any input in any decision I've made since I was fifteen, sixteen years old. I talk to my brothers and sisters, of course, but they are going their own ways.*

I: *Has university impacted upon your family at all?*

Darrel: *I think it probably has. I think the expectations of my extended family were probably quite low. I was in trouble with the police and, you know, I think they probably expected that I wouldn't amount to much, really. I suppose that their expectation was locally focused, expecting that I'd go work in the factory down the road. I think my family are proud of me but they won't necessarily follow what I have done.*

With parental aspirations for their children found to be a strong and significant link to children's attainment (Clark, 2007), Darrell has struggled against, and overcome, lack of parental support (Soria & Stebleton, 2012), breaking his familial cycle of limited educational aspiration. Class looms large in Darrell's excerpt in terms of familial background and "local focus" of expectations. Though he describes the pride of his mother, the effect of his participation in HE on the remainder of his family can be described as diffuse at this point.

In these final two extracts, we see that these students may well have cohesive family units but conditions for family learning are low. The impression here is that Chris's brother will apply to university not so much from role-modelling as from peer relations and a lack of imagination for other options.

I: *Before you started, did you have perceptions of university?*

Chris: *Not really. My parents, my grandparents, none of them have been to university. I'm the oldest of my brothers, and my cousins too, so I am the first in family in at least three generations. I don't know of anyone before that who went either, so it was definitely a new thing for everybody! We lived in a very rural area, we don't come across students much. It's an hour on the train to Leeds, Lancaster and two to Liverpool, Manchester, York. So it's a very rural area, you're not going to get a university anywhere nearby where we are. So, no, I had not got a clue.*

I: *Were your friends also applying to university?*

Chris: *My year group certainly applied to university. I didn't really fit in the same way a lot of people did at school. ...*

I: *So your brother has applied?*

Chris: *I think Dave would have always gone, he's my brother, purely because he couldn't think of what else he would do with himself! We are very much the generation where it's the done thing, that if you're of academic standard then you will go, yeah. I think Mum and Dad thought it's probably a good thing to go to university.*

Chris's parents display limited cultural capital leading towards HE and so rather than being the motivators for Chris's own participation, he appears persuaded by peers and more general societal expectations for continuing his education. Moreover, this translates into a diffuse effect on his sibling and wider family members and limited family role-modelling.

In the final extract, Manit's family seem socially cohesive although the sense is that the effect on his brother, at least currently, is low:

Manit: *The thing is, neither of my parents is fully educated. My dad didn't do anything near his O-levels, he left school at the age of thirteen. My mum did an access course in something, and left half-way through, so she's the most educated. It's been so long for them both that they don't know anything about university or school, and they just hear things from other people. My education was so broken up, my GCSEs were split up, my A-levels weren't at the best school. If I tell them I have an exam, they're like, "Okay, just do it!" I don't bother explaining it to them, because they just tell me to get on with it.*

I: *What about your brother?*

Manit: *He's now twelve. He's very clever for his age and he's happy that I've left home [laughs]. He gets all the attention now from my parents, he gets to do what ever he wants around the house. Because I'm the only one controlling what he does! If he eats too much, watches too many cartoons, doesn't do his homework, it's me that tells him off. But when I'm at Uni he's kind of happy that he's free.*

Manit's experiences are closely linked to his parents' education and knowledge of HE, a key driver of aspirations for university (Galotti & Mark, 1994). HE participation makes unspoken demands on non-traditional students to move away from class-based practices that have framed their earlier experiences (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2013). Breaking the intergenerational cycle of educational inheritance involves day-to-day family life that prioritises education through non-material resources (Gofen, 2009). Here, support for Manit and Chris – both material and non-material – from their families has been limited. This in turn reproduces a rather ambiguous and diffuse family-learning position, with neither demonstrating direct role-modelling towards siblings, nor little sense of vicarious learning, and thus little slipstream effect.

Conclusions

The narrations of self and family from the eight students considered here, their reflective educational biographies, and their orientations towards the present and future, form an important addition to the broader body of work into the analysis of first-generation university students that now exists. Our research has highlighted contextual differences in reflections among respondents, with attention focused on accounts of familial "slipstream". This focus on familial slipstream is a useful one for unpacking the experiences of first-generation students in ways that have hitherto been underexplored and important

conclusions can be drawn which highlight the potential for working with first-generation students and their families in HE.

While there is growing research on parental involvement in educational choices and influence on educational aspirations (Vincent, 2017), there has been only cursory recognition of the effect students can have on their own families and the familial support such students can offer. As Gofen (2009) exclaims, significant interrelationships between siblings have been all but ignored yet older siblings, in particular, can take a significant family role. In our research, while some students presented a sensed responsibility for their siblings' future educational plans and aspirations with the student themselves agentic in transforming siblings' expectations, others were just "hopeful" that siblings would be encouraged to follow in their footsteps. In all narratives though we see that students are interacting with their respective environments in ways that both react to the broad university system and act agentially within the terms of their family structure (Giddens & Pierson, 1998).

Students' HE knowledge is still deeply situated within the familial context, and for many potential students, universities are still considered privileged space. Yet, as Giddens's ideas entreat, individuals are reflexive allowing discursive knowledge to emerge and be translated to others. Drawing on the concepts of discursive consciousness (Giddens & Pierson, 1998) and vicarious learning (Bandura, 1962, 1977) provides a framework through which we can view the dynamic and reciprocal relations between the student and their multiple environments linking university participation and family support. In relation to educational role-modelling, we have highlighted, through a consideration of parenting, class position and gender, the impact first-generation students can have on their families, both siblings and parents. This is not a smooth process and university identities and aspirations are not easily modelled: in Bandura's terms, not always directly attended to, retained, supported and reproduced within the family home. Familial biographies both shape initial HE orientations and the reproduction of university identities (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014). While the entrenched discourse about first-generation students may construct them as "at risk" of attrition (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013) and therefore as "risky" students, the narratives presented here provide a counter to this, acknowledging the potential they can offer in terms of widening participation and support among under-represented groups.

This potential of university first-generation students as familial role models is highlighted in our research and is most effective if support can be offered to the "vicarious learner" to ensure their attention to and inclusion within HE. For this to have impact, the student needs to move from detached role model to active mentor to help other family members navigate HE (Spengen, 2013). This is important for a number of reasons. While current neoliberal-led government thinking constructs social mobility as highly individual or personal, we suggest this does not recognise potential "slipstream" effects highlighted here. And rather than a single focus on the downward intergenerational transmission of educational aspiration and social mobility, future work needs to explore the intra-generational impact between siblings, and the possibilities of upward transmission of educational ambition. In addition, universities need to engage more thoroughly with the families – parents and siblings – of their students, becoming sites for learning interaction, experience and role-modelling based on the family unit, however it is configured. As O'Shea (2015) has highlighted, the separation between university and

home currently limits this possibility and, we would add, inhibits the possibilities of HE to many first-generation students. How we conceptualise these students needs to change, with them and their families reimagined as a key resource for family learning, social mobility and university practice.

Notes

1. The mentoring programme is career focused and draws on experienced professionals from private and public sector employers. Home UK Level 2 and 3 undergraduates from WP backgrounds and under-represented ethnic minorities are eligible to apply.
2. HeadStart is a week-long induction programme designed for first year Widening Participation students who start their academic courses at the University. The aim of the week is to help prepare students with important academic skills needed for independent study as well as aid their transition into university. Analysis has shown that HeadStarters are more likely to progress to Level 2 than those eligible students who chose not to attend the week.

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