Investigating ‘conflicts’ and ‘freedoms’ in the higher education environment: Unpacking the capabilities and capitals of first-in-family learners

HERDSA Conference: [RE]VALUING HIGHER EDUCATION

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Today’s Session

• Introductions

• Background to the project: Exploring first-in-family students – the who, the why and what participants said?

• Conflicts and freedoms in HE

• Unpacking the capitals and capabilities of learners

• Exploring the notion of ‘success’ for learners
Why are you here?
Growth in Student Diversity

Growth in Student Diversity

37% of 25-34 year olds in Australia now have a bachelor degree or higher.

Why First-in-Family students?

Interviewer: When was the last time you heard someone chat away about university?

John: I don’t think I have ever had anyone talk about it. University is simply not within the bounds of possibility, either culturally or economically.


...economic and cultural factors may limit the boundaries of what individuals consider possible for themselves in such a way that a decision is never taken and the agenda need never be set...

(Dyke, 2011, p. 106, emphasis added)
Definition

For the purposes of this research, first in family status has been defined as:

no-one in the immediate family of origin including siblings, children, partners or parents having previously attended a higher education institution or having completed a university degree.
Why first-in-family/ Why now?

- 51%
- 26%
- 34%
A Global Phenomenon
Why are first-in-family students regarded as being ‘at-risk’?
Why are first-in-family regarded as being ‘at-risk’?

• FiF students have to do additional and often invisible ‘work’, such as 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’ (Thomas & Quinn, 2007. p59 – emphasis added).
This research – what is different?

- Gaps in understanding about how this group enact success in this environment
- A focus on the cultural strengths and capabilities of students
- Expanding the lens of analysis to include those close to the students as well
Research Focus

This presentation is based upon research conducted via:

An Educational Strategies Development Fund (UOW) (O’Shea, 2013)

An Australian Office for Learning and Teaching Grant (O’Shea, May & Stone 2014) *Breaking the Barriers: supporting and engaging mature age first-in-family university learners and their families*

An Australian Government Teaching Fellowship (O’Shea, 2015-2016)

“Engaging Families to Engage Students”: Exploring how university outreach activities can forge productive partnerships with families to assist first in family students navigate their higher education journey.

Data collected

Since 2013:

- **Over 180 in-depth interviews** conducted with FiF students from across Australia who are intersected by various equity indicators.

- Interviews have been complemented by **online surveys with students (n= 487), family members (n= 93) and surveys from stakeholders in the field (n= 218).**
Overall perceptions of university attendance

University as not being for ‘people like us’ the ‘us’ being variously described as a ‘blue-collar family’ (Nigel, 26) and ‘low income families and families that are not high achievers’ (Ann, 36).

A sentiment echoed in some family surveys:

My husband and I have successfully raised four children however due to the costs of University we could never afford to send our children...I appreciate what Uni can do in furthering the knowledge of our children but it has always seemed only for the wealthy. (Participant #37, Mother of student daughter, 46, HSC)

That it [university] was for people that were able to afford to study (Participant #16, Mother of student daughter, 55, HSC)
Perceptions of HE attendance: What students said:

- Sense of ‘gratitude’ or ‘feeling lucky’ to have been able to attend

  This is one of the greatest experiences of my life and I'm so grateful to be a student at University. It's been my dream for so many years and it's finally coming true every day. (Respondent #133, Female, 30-40 years)

- Little sense of belonging – often belonging was signified by grades on assignments:

  I was like “Maybe I shouldn’t be here, maybe I’m just a fraud”. I was like “Oh my God”... My second assignment. When I got my marks back I think that’s when I was like “Okay, I deserve to be here just like anyone else” (Rose, 28, partnered with 2 children, B.Arts, First Year)

  ... to receive a Credit for my first Essay in years was amazing! To then recently receive a High Distinction was incredible. It’s made my self confidence sky rocket and truly believe I am cut out for University, even though I come from a family who have barely completed high school. (Respondent #3, Female, 30-40 years)
Perceptions of HE attendance: What family said …

Positive:

I felt fine when mum decided to start university (14 year old - survey)

I thought it was good ... I thought that she was going to be very busy (15 year old - survey)

Oh very proud of her, very proud and give her all the support she needs and yes, just very proud of her. (Mum - interview)

Mixed reactions:

A little sad to have her move away ... but happy that she was doing something she wanted to do (sister - survey)

Influential:

it made me want to follow in her footsteps (sister - survey)

it made me consider furthering my education (sister - survey)

I am proud that she is trying to further her education, however I do worry about her supporting herself (Mum - survey)
Unpacking the capitals of learners: Theoretical framing (O’Shea 2014; 2016)

• Strengths-based approach
• Draws upon Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth framework
• Yosso (2005) builds upon Bourdieu’s work in order to better understand the intersection of student and institutional capital.

  Traditional Bourdieuan cultural capital theory...place[s] value on a very narrow range of assets and characteristics. (Yosso, 2005, p.77).
Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Framework (2005)
Aspirational capital: individual’s ability to ‘maintain hope and dreams for the future’ despite ‘real and perceived’ obstacles (p.77) – this involves ‘nurturing a culture of possibility’ (p.78).

Resistance capital: values and dispositions used to inform oppositional behaviours.

Linguistic capital recognises the strengths of communication skills including story telling, bilingualism and the ‘ability to communicate via visual art, music or poetry’ (p.79).

Navigational capital: assists movement through social institutions and is premised upon both ‘individual agency’ and ‘social networks’.

Social capital: refers to networks that surround people providing both embodied and practical support.

Familial capital: recognises those ‘cultural knowledges nurtured among familial (kin)’ (p.79), this includes ‘extended’ family and friends.
Applying CCW to this research

CCW allowed me to:
• Deeply explore the ‘voices’ of one group of marginalized students.

• Think ‘differently’ about first-in-family student experience and to interrogate data in terms of what first-in-family individuals bring to the university environment and how these types of capitals potentially enable them to enact success.

• ‘Think alongside’ the data and identify gaps or ‘silences’ in this framework
Getting to University: Applying Community Cultural Wealth

Resistance Capital: Values, tools and dispositions used to inform oppositional behaviours

There are going to be plenty of obstacles in life and I just have to push through them to reach my goal of tertiary education. (Respondent #19, female, 30-40 years)

Aspirational Capital: ‘nurturing a culture of possibility’ despite difficulties

The reason I didn’t attend university straight out of high school was because my father didn’t believe in educating a daughter and refused to assist in any way...I could never afford to put myself through university, especially not once I had children adding to my expenses, and my husband wasn’t very supportive. I have overcome these obstacles through time. My husband and father are gone, and my children are grown. As I cannot find full time work, I qualify for more govt. assistance. (Respondent #120, female, 40-50 years)
Getting to university: Applying Community Cultural Wealth

**Navigational Capital:** assists movement through institutions even if these are intimidating or unfriendly places and spaces:

*I am independent. I can do things by myself. I have learnt that I can literally, do anything I put my mind to, I have a lot going on in my mind and it took studying at a university level to realise that I’m a lot more intelligent, creative and hard-working than I give myself credit for.* (Respondent #12, female, 21-25 years)

**Linguistic Capital:** the strengths of communication or what has been termed ‘conversations of learning’ (O’Shea et al, 2015)

*I talk frequently with my mother and grandmother about university, they have a keen interest in what I’m doing. I describe the things I have learnt and how I might use them... those conversations are far more interesting as it’s putting what I have learnt into use.* (Respondent #1, Male, 21-25 years)

**Social Capital:** Networks of embodied support that surround people

*I made a friend, who saw in me things that I didn’t see. He encouraged me to study, motivated me and supported me.* (Respondent #11, Female, 40-50 years)
Student Vignettes

• Replete with the personal

• Retaining a narrative or story avoids presenting disembodied data.

• A series of short student ‘vignettes’ presented simultaneously to add greater depth to the situation under analysis

• Destabilise the researcher’s privileged position – using individuals’ own words and ways of representing their own experiences
Two Vignettes: A flavour of the individual

• Yvette's Story
• Nick's Story
Key Capitals that emerge

• Importance of familial capital
  
  my sister, she’s been really, really quite supportive of me actually coming to uni. Although she hasn’t been able to offer me academic stuff or anything like that, she’s just gone “Well, you know, you can do this (Yvette)

• Aspirational Capital: Maintaining hope despite obstacles
  
  I guess the school of hard knocks or being knocked down in the past, it sort of makes you more resilient sort of thing (Nick)

• Navigational Capital: Assists movement through social institutions
  
  Because I was adopted and then was out of home at such a young age, I learned to just look after myself and to fend for myself (Nick)
Reflection

• How do Yvette and Nick’s stories resonate with the experiences of the student cohort at your respective universities?

• How might we better support students such as Yvette and Nick during their transition into university?

• What are some of the freedoms and tensions that these students are contending with in their studies?
Getting to university: The importance of ‘familial’ capital

What did the younger students say?

- My family did support me, in various ways. Not directly with the course content, but being patient and understanding. (Respondent#118, Male, 21-25 years)

- Family and friends are great support but it really comes down to yourself to work things out it's not just a personality thing but how you were raised to not expect handouts and to be resilient. (Respondent#158, Female, 21-25 years)

- My mother convinces me to go on with my studies and complete them on time I spoke to student support services last semester when difficulties arose, they felt I should cease my studies which just spurred me on more to keep going. (Respondent#170, Female, 21-25 years)
Getting to university: The importance of ‘familial’ capital

What did the older students say?
University attendance as a means to expand the educational futures of others in the family

“[I] wanted to be a good role model for my children - was extremely bored staying at home with both my kids at school” (Respondent# 126, Female, 40-50 years)

“I want something better for my children”. (Ally, 39 year old single mother of 2 (3, 9) (B. Psychology)

“I definitely think it’s [university] showing them [children] if you want something you’ve just got to do it; not everything is fun - you’ve just got to do the hard yards and get it done”. (Hannah, 33 year old mother of 5 (3, 5, 8, 12, 13) (B. Nursing)
Ripples throughout the family

....it [uni] was never spoken about before, was it? It was never, ever spoken about before and now, you know, “Oh what are you going to do? Are you going to leave school, are you going to go to uni? What are you going to do?” I don’t know whether she’s actually started a trend or what she has but, you know, it’s very encouraging for the up and coming nieces and nephews ... “Not only Elle can do it, you know, we can do it too” type thing.

(Elle’s Mum, Interview with Elle, 33 year old single mother of three (aged 5, 9, 11) (B. Arts)
Considering the Family
Considering the family

Wainwright and Marandet (2010) argue that when learning is brought into a household, there is potential to alter the ‘tactile fabric’ of this environment (p. 461).

BUT

Further research is required that provides space for the ‘voices’ of family members and learners to reflect on the impact of this learning within the household (Feinstein, Duckworth & Sabates, 2008).
Considering the family across the HE sector

• How are the family of learners engaged with in your university?

• In your experience, do family and community generally act as an asset or a polarising influence for first in family learners?

• Given the previous reflections could we better leverage the impact/influence of family?
Reconsidering the family….

• These families are exceptional, as the most common pattern is for children whose parents did not go to college to also have low levels of education. (Gofen, 2009, p.105)

• Consider the family capital of learners rather than regard this as a deficit – this capital is constituted by ‘non-material resources’ (p. 104) that include familial/community ‘habits, priorities, belief systems and values’ (p.106).
Family and university

• Family members provide key elements of support
  • BUT
• There exists a disconnect between the home and the university, resulting in:
  • Lack of shared understandings about university and what it entails
  • Impacts upon family conversations

(O’Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2017)
Want to know more? Eight Quick Tips for Engaging with Family

Unpacking the capabilities of students

• Focus on the individual and the ‘substantive freedoms’ (or capabilities) that enable individuals to achieve what they value (Sen, 1999, p87).

• **Capability Approach** looks beyond ‘access’ to university forcing us to consider each person’s capability to function equally in this environment, in other words their ability to not only access but also participate and succeed.

“It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom.” (Sen, 1999, pxii)
Combining Cultural Capitals and Capabilities

Broadly, these can be regarded as complementary:

- Sen’s capability approach recognises individuals as diverse and complex entities rather than making generalized assumptions about access to resources or ability to act on these.

- But it has been suggested that the role of culture has been overlooked (Bowman, 2010) in this enactment of life choices and actions.
Combining Capabilities with understandings from capital theory enables a much richer understanding of how individuals activate 'conversion factors' that provide the capability to both aspire and also succeed at university. Dual Focus: Exploring both what individuals actually do (the capabilities and freedoms they are able to access) but also recognise how access is impacted by other fundamental but often invisible factors (social, economic and cultural structures).
Conflicts: Understanding of Success

‘Success’ as normalised within university discourse is a privileged ideal, partially reliant on the possession of certain cultural and academic capitals.

*I made some Vice-Chancellor’s list which puts me in the top one percent of the whole university but all that makes we wonder is how did I get on the Chancellor’s list and what percentage is that? I don't know who a Vice-Chancellor is.* (Paz, 43, 4th year, online, single).
The FiF students in one study (O’Shea, 2017) indicated a more diverse and embodied sense of success at the culmination of their degrees:

- Success as defying the odds
- Success as a form of validation
- Embodied and emotional success*

* O’Shea, S & Delahunty, J (2018).” Getting through the day and still having a smile on my face!” How do students define success in the university learning environment? HERD special issue on Student Success (Out next month!)
Defying the odds…

Success is deeply contextualised by personal biographies and positionality.

*being able to achieve and complete all requirements of my degree to the best of my ability and achieving grades beyond what I thought were possible for myself (C04, female, 31-40, 4th year, partnered 2 children)*

*It’s about completing something that I never thought possible and the first person in my family to have a degree… (59, 5th year, online, single parent, 3 children)*
A form of validation

Success for some was tied up with being able to positively negotiate feelings of otherness – limiting the sense of being an imposter:

‘...having lecturers say, you know, like “This piece of work was so good that you should actually use it in real life, like submit that to a government committee” – that’s the best feedback that I could ever get in my life.’ (Danielle, 32, 3rd year, online, LSES, single)
Embodied notions of success

Participants repeatedly and eloquently described emotions engendered by thinking about success at university:

_success is finding something that you passionate about, could [be] easy or hard and going after it until you get it. That's success_

(A43, female, 21-25, 2nd year, refugee, single no children)

_being happy with what you're doing and being excited to wake up every day and go and enjoy what you do_

(D03, female, 21-25, 4th year, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, partnered no children)
So what?

Need to reframe what is valued in universities, shifting from a traditional focus on the emphasised graduate outcomes of wealth and professional success to consider what people themselves regard as being important.

This would support each individual’s ‘ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being’ (Sen, 1993, p. 30).
So what?

Participants clearly articulated more ‘expansive understandings of what is valuable in human lives’ (Walker, 2008, p. 270).

This opens-up understanding of what it means to be a ‘successful’ student to foreground what is meaningful for those from diverse backgrounds.
Conflicts and Freedoms: Capabilities and Capitals

Combining the lens of the Capabilities Approach with understandings of capitals allows alternative understandings of how individuals’ flourishing are enabled through learning; offering a counter narrative to meritocratic measurements of the neo-liberal university.
Practical Resources:  
www.firstinfamily.com.au

A website for students, family members and also practitioners in the field. This website was initially developed as part of an OLT Grant (O’Shea, May & Stone, 2014) and further resourced through an Australian Government Teaching Fellowship (O’Shea, 2016).
Thank you for your attention!

QUESTIONS

For further details of this and related research please see:

O’Shea, S. & Delahunty, J. (2018). *Getting through the day and still having a smile on my face!* How do students define success in the university learning environment? HERD Special Issue on Student Success

