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Ambitious and ambivalent: a biographical approach to adolescents' transition into higher education

Christodoulou Michael

PhD University of Patras

Abstract

In this article we try to shed light on the subjective side of how adolescents make their decisions to follow university studies. We argue that in analyzing decisions related to university transitions one has to take into account not only cultural and structural factors but also how these factors are inscribed in adolescents' life-world experience and are biographically organized in the narratives they forge for construing themselves and for crystallizing their ambitions. By focusing on the "transition narratives" of 70 adolescents attending General (academically oriented) and elite high schools in a de-industrialized town of Southern Greece, three types of biographical identity formation seemed to emerge related to an ambivalently shaped narrative pathway according to which adolescents plot their transition to higher education. We conclude that biographical identity construction is a powerful concept for understanding exclusions and inclusions that operate in the contemporary higher education market.

Keywords

Adolescence, Higher Education, Biographical Identity, Transition Narratives.

Introduction

There are two general trends in the sociological literature on how adolescents conceive and construct their transition to higher education. The first one revolves around what has been called Rational Action Theory (RAT) and the second stems from Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital.

For RAT theorists, adolescents' class differences in their higher education outcomes have to be accounted for in relation to primary and secondary effects triggered by their family background and their schooling experiences. By emphasizing secondary effects, RAT theorists argue that adolescents ground their decisions according to how they evaluate the possibilities of maximizing profit and minimizing cost as they opt for the different routes the educational system offers them. The primary motive of this decision-making process is conditioned by the adolescents' attempts to preserve their family's socio-professional status. Hence, the levels of their aspirations should be examined in relation to their class point of departure (Boudon 1974, 1998).

Having said that, working-class adolescents aspire to achieve those educational qualifications, which will protect them from social downgrading (that is unskilled labor or unemployment) while at the same time they seem unwilling to invest in social mobility through education due to the economic and psychological cost it entails. That is why they choose to attend vocational training schemes after high school. Similarly, middle class adolescents are obliged to obtain university diplomas of higher exchange value than those of their parents should they want to preserve the class status of their family. That is why their achievement levels remain high and why their parents have access to whatever kind of information is needed for higher education departments, by

providing social and financial assistance in order for their kids to realize their goals. As a result of the above reasoning Goldthorpe and his colleagues maintain that, however mass access to tertiary education has become, the profits from higher educational qualifications are not the same across the social classes and that, instead, while for middle-class families these qualifications function as a means for retaining their class power, a possible failure of working-class families to invest in higher education will be fatal due to the source scarcity in counterbalancing this failure (e.g. Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Goldthorpe 1987, 1996, 2007; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Gambetta 1987).

Since its reception, RAT has been the target of criticism on various grounds. Apart from its methodological individualism and voluntarism, most of this criticism focuses on RAT's limited conception in defining social class. In particular, by emphasizing income rates and employment relations in the job market, RAT theorists do not take into account intergenerationally inherited assets or property obtained outside the job market. Additionally, by downplaying cultural factors, RAT cannot account for various aspirational levels embedded in the schooling experiences of adolescents with a similar background. (Brown1995; Crompton1993; Crompton et all 2000; Devine1998; Friedman 2014).

It is the cultural grounding of the transition to higher education that the second strand of thought highlights. In particular, in high cultural capital families adolescent development is conceived of in terms of educational advancement and of cultivating cognitive and social skills, by implementing a language code similar to the school code. Furthermore, these parents are more likely to be involved with their kids' homework than working-class parents and are more enabling in making their kids experience the

school context as a place for self-esteem construction. The moral education they put forward is based on persuasion and on inhibition of satisfaction by viewing their kids' growth as something fragile in need of limits. As a result of this moral development, adolescents raised in these contexts are more likely to have made occupational decisions early in their life than their working-class peers.

On the contrary, parents with limited cultural and social capital, that is working-class families, view the development of their offspring as a "natural" growth and are unable to be involved in their kids' homework since the language code of their everyday life is incongruent with school values. Additionally, they conceive of education as an issue that must be dealt with by school authorities and their kids see school tasks as a site not for self-esteem construction but as a place for survival. In their attempt to cope with the above exclusion, working-class parents value the work ethic by stressing that their kids "are not in trouble", that they work hard and that they are good and decent people. In addition, they are more prone to feeling that they are not competent to guide their kids' life planning because they are not "experts" so they cannot handle education-related questions. Thus, they ground their sense of happiness in a "here-and-now" conception placing the burden of educational choice on their kids' shoulders. As a consequence, these adolescents tend to see university in vocational terms, that is as a means of avoiding job insecurity and seem to present a vague view regarding their university aspirations. (e.g. Hutchison 2011; Lareau 2000; Reay 2000, 2005; Reay et al 2005; Irwin and Elley 2011; Vincent & Ball 2007)

In the present article we will try to deal with the weak points of the above approaches, namely the fact that the adolescents' schooling experiences are left unexamined in RAT reasoning and that cultural capital tends to be used in deterministic terms in Bourdieu's

theory. (King 2000; Jenkins 2002:90-100). Thus, our aim is to shed light on whether and when structure or agency sets the stage in order for adolescents to decide on their university studies. In particular, our focus is on what we call "transition narratives", meaning the ways adolescents reconstruct their biographical knowledge so as to make plans for their transition to university and to process their decision making on what university department to attend. By examining the subjective and objective contexts of this decision-making process and how it is inscribed in their moral and psychic landscape, one can tap the potential variations in the expected pathways adolescents with the same structural and cultural conditionings follow.

Methodology

Our data was collected in the context of life-history research we carried out aimed at comparing narratives of adolescents attending General (academically oriented) and Peiramatika (elite) schools. We selected three schools from a de-industrialized town in Southern Greece by using criteria related not only to the social-class origin of the adolescents but also to the area the schools are located in. In particular, the social composition of the adolescents we addressed differs as follows: i) one school is located in a typical working-class neighborhood peopled by families whose members are manual workers in a large clothing factory, most of the them live in public housing projects and they share community-based feelings due to the spatial closeness of their homes which articulate their identity in local terms, ii) one mixed-class urban school located in the center of the town, composed of adolescents whose parents are salaried workers in the lower levels of the public sector, shopkeepers and some manual workers

and iii) one school (Peiramatiko) in which adolescents' parents are university teachers, doctors, architects and secondary school teachers.

Data was collected by means of the Biographical-Narrative-Interview-Method (BNIM) proposed by Wengraf (2001). The reason why we used this kind of interview concerns the fact it can tap the three levels of identity construction, that is structure, culture and biography, in relation to which adolescents make their transition decisions. In particular, by stressing the ways adolescents narrate their biographical life events in order to cohere past, present and future selves, one can examine how life-narratives are embedded in the social worlds they pass through. Self-narrations are neither created ex nihilo nor do they owe their strength to their creators but constitute a discursive mechanism for dealing with life-world experiences and for meaningfully cohering critical moments in the actors' biographies. By means of this self-narration production, one can make up a story for telling her/himself and others how he/she came to be what he/she is and how he/she wants to become (or not become). Going one step further, through this biographical reconstruction one makes claims about the kind of identity he/she aspires to construct and about the kind of person he/she wants others to view him/her as, by way of the vocabularies of motives he/she draws upon in formulating these claims (Mills 1940; Riessman 2008:ch3; Bamberg 2011).

In analyzing interview data we followed the logic of the Glaserian version of Grounded Theory (Glaser 1992, 1998, 2002) taking into account some of the principles of narrative analysis (e.g. Riessman 2002; Rosenthal 1993; Spector-Mersel 2011). In particular, after we had sketched the portraits for each of the informants, placing emphasis on the sequential order of their life experiences, through a process of abductive comparison between cases, we focused on each axis of discussion coding in

vivo informants' accounts, until we refined the core categories which summed up the codes of each thematic field (e.g. Seidman 1998; Rosenthal 2004; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Next, we tried to bring to the fore possible connections between the categories in order to tap their main concern, as Glaser has called it (1998:127). Finally, in a last refining that was more conceptual, we aimed to inquire how this main concern is interrelated with the informants' transition narratives as they are articulated by means of the strong evaluations which permeate their life histories. We carried out 70 narrative interviews with 18-year-old adolescents in their final year of secondary school. The gender distribution was equal for both males and females. All the names of the adolescents we use in the next sections are fictional.

Biographical identities and higher-education aspirations: a typology

In analyzing the interview data our focus was on examining the decision-making process involved in the adolescents' transition to university, in conjunction with how they craft their biographical identities. We argue that in analyzing decisions related to university transitions one has to take into account not only cultural and structural factors, as RAT and cultural theorists do, but also how these factors are inscribed in the life-world experience of adolescents and are biographically organized in the narratives they forge for construing themselves and their school trajectories, something that RAT and cultural theorists downplay. In the conception of identity construction we propose, when adolescents narrate their biographical life events producing what Alheit calls "biographical self-presentation" (2003:14-17), they both internalize life-world experiences during their socializing routes and set in motion discursive and narrative

schemes for classifying their biographical critical moments, such as what academic path to pursue in high school or what university department to attend. Thus, identity is not to be conceived in static terms, that is as an answer to the questions "who am I?" or "where do I belong?" but as a process related to how what adolescents were is tied up with what they are now and with what they want to become (or not) in the future. For adolescents, this biographical work functions as the existential ground in order for them to make decisions and to deal with possible contradictory experiences they face in the home, in the school or in their peer group.

Three types of biographical identity formation related to a specific narrative pathway according to which adolescents plot their transition to higher education, seemed to emerge. These narrative reconstructions should not be seen as particular cases disconnected from their school trajectory, but as a typical formation indicative of the collective history which framed them, or to put it in Lahire's terms (2003:349) "to account for the singular nature of a particular case, we must understand the general processes of which this case is a complex product". Each of these types presents distinctive features related to different biographical self-presentations and university aspirations and to different routes in the decision-making process. Furthermore, a specific ambivalence related to the ways adolescents' biographical identities have been forged corresponds to each of these types, influencing how they view the transition to university.

Type 1: "I do not know what to do, but I hope for something better". An ambivalent vocationalism

The first narrative pattern that defines type 1 biographical-identity decision-making process (henceforth BIDMP) is made up of two thematic fields. Firstly, type 1 BIDMP concerns adolescents that somehow survived the selection mechanisms of junior high school and chose to attend General senior high school despite the fact that they had had a hard time in the school exams, receiving low grades in the tests. Most of them are of working-class origin, their parents are unable to contribute to their offspring's university planning and they themselves seemed unclear and undecided regarding the university department that suits their future self more. Additionally, they seemed to retain an estranging or vocationalistic relation to schooling, as the pattern of "necessary evil" attests:

I never liked reading, but it is what is called a necessary evil if one wants to do something better or do well in his life.

(Argiris, his father is an officer, his mother a secretary, both of them are high-school graduates).

I never liked school, I was never interested in it, it was boring, high school was easier for me, of course I did some private lessons just in order not to fail the year, my grades are relatively high

(Nontas, his father is a car mechanic and a high-school graduate and his mother is a nurse and a vocational-school graduate),

M: What was your experience of school all these years?

B: school for me was a kind of escape from family, it was a way to find friends, I have never been involved in reading and in stuff like that, I started reading this year

M: what about your parents? What are their dreams for you?

B: my father says "do whatever you want", my mother is a little bit reserved and wary regarding our economic situation and she says I should study in my town, they do not want to impose their dreams upon me, my father told me "come to work with me if you do not want to do something else"

M:haven't you ever thought of going to work with your father?

B: for me it is a second option, I would like first to obtain a bachelors degree, just so I can say I have something in my hands, after that I may go with him

(Bill, his father is a manual worker and his mother a housekeeper, both of them are elementary-school graduates)

M: Dimitris what is your specialty in high school and what are you thinking of doing after your graduation;

D: I did not know what to do, I did not like all those theoretical lessons, so I chose a technological specialty in order to go to the technological university in my town, I am a soccer player, I am not interested in school, I am not saying that I do not want to study, I am not a lazy guy who spends his parents' money or asks for money all the time, because I can not live with the 500 euro I receive from the team

M: what are your parents' dreams for you? What do they want you to do after school?

D: I never remember my mother or my father saying, "do this or that, be a doctor", they were never telling me something, my father never told me "I would like you to become this or that"

(Dimitris, his father is a manual worker in train services and a high-school graduate and his mother is a kiosk employee and elementary-school graduate)

What type 1 adolescents want to obtain from their schooling are credentials and qualifications, which will protect them from unemployment; by enriching in that way the cultural capital they did not inherit from their parents. That is why adolescents of type 1 BIDMP formation choose to attend university departments such as Philology, Philosophy, Primary Education or Theatrical studies, which are all more strongly connected to unemployment, work insecurity and low wages. It is also worth noting that some of the male adolescents invest in sports in an attempt to manage the abovementioned indecision and work insecurity (Christodoulou 2014).

Secondly, by morally distancing themselves from vocational adolescents and from the life-style that sustains their associations, type 1 adolescents come to form biographical identities that are based on the following contradiction: on the one hand they choose to attend General senior high school so as not to become whatever they afraid of and, on the other hand, they are ignorant about the careers the university qualifications may offer them, as the pattern "I just want to have a bachelors degree, it can offer me something" denotes.

It is this contradiction that feeds an ambivalence in the way they construct their narratives since, even though they do not want to be identified with vocational adolescents, they seem to produce narrative renderings grounded on traditional gender

values and worldviews, apparent in the value boys attribute to work ethic and body strength and by the importance girls attribute to the fact that they "are women", that they are responsible and decent (for a similar pattern see Stuber 2011:150-63). That is why boys' relation to reading is structured with reference to the fact that they are not "lazy" and why girls read not in order to achieve the transition to university but to express their decency to their parents.

However, as far as girls are concerned, they are more prone to invest in school values and qualifications so as to break from the gender order that dictated their upbringing, to deal with the struggles stemming from such ruptures, to plot self-narratives by means of vocabularies of motives completely incongruent compared with those of their family socialization and to follow those university studies which are in direct contrast with what their parents aspire to. Christine's life-story is typical of this possible rupture. Although she always liked "theatre, dance and philological lessons", her father (he works as a building worker) proposes that she follow vocational training in order for her to take over her family's vineyards. However, Christine does not seem willing to accept this career planning since she is trying to craft a different social route by basing her decision to follow university studies related to her gendered ambitions and job preferences:

M: would you ever propose to your kids to follow vocational training?

C: No, no, no, I would never exercise on my kids the pressure my parents exercised on me, my mother was always telling me "you are a good student, what is the point of following vocational studies? You should complete university studies so that you can do something better in your life", on the contrary my father keeps telling me "you should

go to vocational school in order to obtain a wine-making diploma", but both of them can not accept the fact that I want to study Theatre, they tell me "what? Theater actor? Forget it"

M:how did you handle all this situation?

X: I never gave them a chance to be imposing and finally I told them "this is who I am, you became a building worker because you wanted to, you did not study because your parents were not supportive, now it is me who is going to take my life-decisions, independently of what may happen in the end", after that they seem to have accepted my choices

On the other hand, boys, even if it is possible for them to invest in school values and search for university departments for which their parents are not able to provide information, tend not to make a break like Christine's or to conceive of university studies as an "escape" route, because they have not experienced "hegemonic masculinity" as something against which they have to struggle.

Type 2: "The thought of succeeding in just any university kills me". The price of being socially mobile

In type 2 BIDMP, adolescents seem to develop a vocationalistic stance against school knowledge, like type 1 adolescents, but, while vocational school had crossed the mind of type 1 BIDMP adolescents but they did not enroll in it due to the spoiled identity attached to its members, in contrast, type 2 adolescents had not even considered vocational school as a post-16 choice. Type 2 adolescents choose the General high

school in order to be socially mobile while type 1 adolescents choose it in order to avoid unemployment by means of the qualifications they wish to obtain. In other words, for type 2 adolescents, school investment is inscribed in their biographical identities in terms of realizing their ambition for upward mobility, which entails a peculiar kind of ascetic morality.

In particular, the upward mobility ambition, which is articulated as a family strategy to the extent that parents motivate them in realizing this class passage, is put into action in their everyday life proceedings within which their habitus is shaped in different narrative terms compared to those of their family values. These adolescents are trying to forge biographical identities through narratives structured by a double distancing: they distance themselves both from the unclear ambition of their parents that is encapsulated in the "whatever university you succeed in is ok" pattern and from their fellow adolescents who "do not have goals".

For instance, for Chris, whose father is butcher and whose mother is a housekeeper, school investment is not a "necessary evil", as it is for type 1, but a presupposition of upward mobility indicative of his social recognition and of his unwillingness to be compromised with "a low-status university". Furthermore, it is in this ambition that he projects both his claim to become autonomous and the moral value of the "uncompromised" identity through which he crafts his views on university transition and on his future work:

M: Have you ever been afraid of your job destination?;

C: yes, I have, all the time, I mean I am not a guy to compromise, I want to do something really good, I am telling my father that I want to study abroad and become a

doctor or a university physics teacher, I want something good as a job, my mother tells me "whatever university you succeed in is ok" and I reply to her "what you are saying kills me, I do not like whatever university, I can not even hear this, I want something good"

M: something good in what sense? In order to find a job for example?

C: No, something I like, a scientific subject, not something simple such as boring office work

M:what does your father say?;

C: he is telling me to do whatever it takes so as not to follow his job, in the butcher's shop, he tells me to read and stuff like that, he tells me to become a football player, he tells me to do whatever I can, the sure thing is I do not want to be compromised

One should not see as a paradox the fact that for type 2 adolescents the upward mobility ambition is tied up with an instrumental or vocationalistic relation to school investment. It is our contention that this vocationalism should be examined in conjunction with the fact that they draw identity boundaries in moral terms. This is obvious in the vocabulary of motives Loukas sets in motion when asked to describe differences between pupils at his school:

M: Are there any differences between pupils?

L: of course there are, what I observe is that most of the students are indifferent about their future, there are no ambitions for their future life, I see my friends bored and indifferent, an indifference about what they are going to do after school, about their future job, all they do is hang out or have fun all the time, I do not get into such groups

of pupils but I see this kind of indifference, I separate them from those who are more mature and care about their future

Loukas' ambition is plotted in his narrative in such a way so as to construct himself as morally superior to those who are "indifferent, immature and who have no goals". Regarding his university plans, he has decided to attend the Physics department, he devotes 17 hours per week to private tuition, he searches for Physics conferences and he has planned to pursue postgraduate studies in this field. Hence, the psycho-socially stressful investment in educational success and its bearing on his biographical self-presentation are the reasons why Loukas experiences his present life in terms of burn-out:

M: That is, your priority now is university success?

L: yes, of course, I want to study physics, but I just want all that to be finished, I am too tired from all this effort, it started in September and it is a long period, if someone said to me "get ready, your exams are tomorrow", I would reply "thank God, tell me the time and I will be there because I want to get rid of this burden, I can stand it no more, I experience a fatigue in my body and my soul has been destroyed", I spend all my time reading both in school and at home, it is an overwhelming situation, I feel exhausted

The distinctive feature of type 2 adolescents has to do with their strong motive to succeed in prestigious university departments such as medicine, Maths, biology, finance and secondary school teaching, despite the fact that their parents are not culturally able to support their offspring's desire to succeed in them. What is more, the time-consuming and laborious effort required to realize this goal concerns not only the hours they spend studying but also their attempt to reshape their habitus. Thus, boys'

biographical identities are full of narratives through which they appear to distance themselves from the "hegemonic masculinity" values and girls' narratives are structured in contradistinction to the flamboyant version of femininity construction.

This is the reason why, firstly, the way these adolescents draw identity boundaries has moral grounds and, secondly, a peculiar ambivalence exists in the way they relate to school knowledge, which is crucial regarding how their identity evolves. The pivotal character of this ambivalence lies in the fact that these adolescents are called on to handle a contradictory family-educational plan according to which parents push their kids to attain something they are both afraid of and approve of (for a similar pattern see Goodwin 2006:57-74). Parents want their kids to become upwardly mobile through educational paths and to attain occupations higher than what they practice now and at the same time they are afraid of seeing their offspring evolve into a kind of person who will be culturally and psychologically different. In the family plans of the type 2 decision-making process an ambivalence between the history of past socialization and the identity construction the class mobility entails is encapsulated.

Type 3

"Reading makes you different from others". The cultural production of gratification delay

In type 3 BIDMP, the adolescents' social origin concerns families with high educational and economic capital that is a fraction of the middle class, who seem to socialize their kids early in school investment. By having become familiarized with school values in

their childhood years, these adolescents develop biographical identities based on narrative vocabularies that put priority on achieving autonomy in school tasks and on such cultural stakes as practicing musical instruments in their leisure time. In addition, their life-narratives are grounded in a language code which articulates their self-understandings in terms of disinterested observer that is they narrate their life-world experiences through a grammar that draws on science, philosophy or art, claiming thus relevant identities. That is why they have made educational and occupational decisions early in their school trajectory:

M: where do you aspire to be next year Andreas?

A : I want to succeed in the physics department. I like this subject

M : are you thinking of becoming a school teacher?

A : No, no, I want to follow a university career, I like it very much, I devote 10 hours per week, 2 hours every day

M :*Do you think it will be easy to make it?*

A I really want it because I like it very much

(Andreas, his father is a university teacher and his mother is a secondary school music teacher)

M:Katherine what is your high-school specialty and what do you think about your university studies?

K: I am in theoretical specialty and I want to be a judge, I decided on it when I was in junior high school

M: what were the criteria for such a decision?;

K: because I like distributive justice, I've always liked it

(Katerina, her father is a computer engineer and her mother is a doctor)

M: Charis what is your high-school specialty and what do you think about your after-school life?

C: I am in technological specialty and I want to be an army pilot, I've wanted to do this since I was a kid, it was my dream

(Charis, his father is a bank counselor in finance and his mother is a lawyer)

M: Fotini what is your high-school specialty and what do you think about your after-school life?.

Φ: I have chosen theoretical lessons ever since my childhood, I've been devoted to them, my aim is to study in Law School

(Fotini, her parents are Philologists in secondary school)

By claiming not to be identified with those who are "conformists" or who are "not cultivated", type 3 adolescents draw identity boundaries in cultural terms since they are not willing to break with the habitus of their family culture. While they claim an identity that prioritizes tolerance for "otherness" (mostly homosexuals, immigrants, people of different color, race, religion etc.), at the same time the "others" they want to distance themselves from are working-class adolescents. In other words, they choose to tolerate what school culture promotes as worthy of tolerance and at the same time they can not but be dis-identified with what school culture excludes:

M: are there any differences between pupils of your school and vocational adolescents?

M: there are, sure, vocational adolescents may have some kind of aspirations but in the Peiramitiko school we want to study medicine, Polytechnic Schools or Law, on the contrary, a vocational student is somehow compromised into following technical universities, it means that he does not fit into General high schools

M: would you ever think of having a relationship with a vocational student?

D: my first reaction is absolutely no, but when I think of it I say "why not?", usually vocational adolescents are kids who have been withdrawn from reading or school tasks, when I was in junior high-school I knew pupils who would follow vocational training and their whole life-style fitted in with that type of schooling, it was not that they were not good at school, it was that they were what we call "underground" kids, the lads, those who don't behave in the classroom, who are suspended and stuff like that, so I think that these kids are not mature in forging relationships, maybe I could create some kind of friendship with them but as far as the relationship issue is concerned I would like a relationship with someone I admire

(Dimitra, her father is a university researcher in biology and her mother is a PhD school counselor)

M: Is there any difference between pupils of your school and other types of schools?

F: of course there are differences, here in Peiramatiko students are what is called "high-achievers", I think that we are the nerds, when we enter junior high school we devote ourselves to studing and to getting high grades, there is too much competition, regarding who will participate more in the classroom, who will take part in projects etc. Generally

speaking here students are interested in school lessons and this is extremely important in the cultivation of our personality, I mean when you devote yourself to reading it is something that makes you different from others, you are more cultivated, instead, in other types of schools there are students who do not even know what exactly a book is, I mean they are not interested

(Fey, her father is a secondary-school teacher and her mother is a civil servant)

As far as elite schools' adolescents are concerned (students attending the 'Peiramatiko' school), their narratives are articulated through a peculiar individualism, which, so long as it is tied up with the organizational habitus of the school that conditions its members' school trajectories, frames the vocabularies they use for their self-understanding (on the role of organizational habitus in higher-education transition see Smyth and Banks 2012). Given that for these adolescents the sense of autonomy and difference stems from their claim to choose and not to be chosen, they tend to define themselves as those who "really care about their future", to distinguish themselves from those who "can not stand school pressure" and to position themselves in the imaginary community of adolescents with "special abilities" (what in Greece is called "aristeia").

It is a kind of imaginary community the members of which are not connected by emotional or social bonds because of the fact that their families live in distant areas. This does not mean that these families do not create what is called social capital through their common leisure-time activities, but instead, that they are not likely to forge collective identities imbued by an esprit de corps with common behavioral and cultural symbols, as their fellow vocational adolescents do. In other words, what gives them

coherence, as an imaginary community –that is the possession of academic abilities – is also what constructs their individuality through the hierarchy these abilities set up.

However, one should not see type 3 adolescents as the copied products of their families' strategies for attaining middle-class jobs through university transition. Their biographical identities are grounded on an ambivalent process, for they are conscious of what is at stake in their university success. Thus, while it is possible that they imagine their future selves in occupations different from those of their families, many an adolescent of type 3 BIDMP seems to inhibit their desires and to have them realized after their university studies. For instance, George, even though he says that he will choose to study medicine if he succeeds in the national university entrance exams, at the end of the interview he admits that "medicine is not what I imagine for myself, I want to become an orchestra conductor, this is what I deeply desire for myself, my parents want me to be a doctor", and he concludes:

M:I would like you to describe moments wherein you experience your real self, I mean situations within which George is his real self. Are there any?

G: oh! That's a tough question, mainly when I am with friends and the environment's eyes do not look upon me, I think that the social environment demands a lot from those who are called good students, although I do like to describe my self in that way, the more respect I receive from the environment, the more obliged I feel to be effective in my school tasks, there are some social demands I have to obey

M: and in what situations do you feel you are not your real self?

G: when I am asked to do things I do not want to do, like in school, unfortunately here in school I have to play my part

(George, both of his parents are doctors)

One could say that the narrative reconstruction of their biographical time is made up of a bipolar tension between necessity and freedom in the contexts in which they set up plans for their university careers. Hence, the ambivalence revolves around how they are going to grapple with this bipolarity and around the narrative space this bipolarity opens up. It is in this narrative space that the "yes, but" pattern emerges because of the fact that their schooling experiences are dictated by the necessity of the "pressured time" that university and occupational success demands, a necessity they have to succumb to in order to "not have unrealized dreams", a necessity they have not chosen but in which they believe, in order to experience distance from necessity in the future.

Discussion

The above analysis suggests, we argue, three theoretical points. First, while the two research traditions we mentioned agree, through different explanatory models, on the intergenerational transmission of class disadvantage, what is not highlighted is how this transmission is deployed and how it is tied up with their identity construction. To fully grasp adolescents' university transition one needs not only to sketch statistical distributions documenting what goes where but also to implement concepts tapping the process though which objective measures frame the transition to higher education (see also Taylor 2005). The theoretical importance of the concept of biographical identity lies in the fact that it can shed light on the subjective side of this process by enabling us to examine the way adolescents interact with the objective determinants of their

schooling and how their perception of the offered possibilities motivates and guides their future-oriented tertiary lines of actions. Thus, the concept of biographical identity enables us to elucidate the following point: while according to Goldthorpe's argument disadvantaged adolescents, through rational calculation, aspire primarily to avoid downward mobility and secondly to be upwardly mobile, what our research shows is that most of the upper-working-class and petit-bourgeois adolescents strive to obtain university qualifications. The explanation that we propose for this research evidence is to be found in the different ways these aspirations are articulated in type 1 and type 2 biographical identities.

In particular, located in upper-working-class fractions, type 1 adolescents invest in university diplomas because of the prestige they signal for their family environment and for themselves, given that they undervalue vocational schools and they want to avoid not so much unemployment but the spoiled identity and stigma these schools receive (Christodoulou 2014, Foskett and Hesketh 1997). It is the school-promoted disdain for manual work they have internalized from their high-school years that makes type 1 adolescents invest in transition to university. That is why they are undecided during their school years on what university department to attend and they are more likely to succeed in those departments that are associated with high rates of unemployment. Devoid of the cultural and social capital that could provide them with the resources in order for them to know the higher education market, they rely upon peer information and teacher advice so as to navigate the pathways that the qualifications they will acquire lead to.

Secondly, biographical identity can overcome some of the drawbacks of Bourdieu's reasoning, namely his suggestion that working-class adolescents are characterized by

"poverty of aspirations" and that it is their habitus that leads them to exclude what excludes them ("it is not for us") (Devine 2004:149). In contrast, by looking carefully at the interactional contexts that give shape to their habitus, it seems that their vocationalistic stance against university diplomas is driven by the credentialization of the job market which, in turn, makes their decision to study in the university not a "taste for the necessary", as Bourdieu would put it, but a pragmatist choice obeying a context-bound subjective rationality, as Lehman (2007), Hodkinson et all (1996) and Lahire (2011) have proposed. In particular, since working-class adolescents' motives are shaped in a filtered way through such influences as having ambitious friends, teachers' advice, self-perceived abilities or chance encounters in secondary-school interactions, it is important that one takes into account how these experiences can transform habitus and how they craft their biographical identities within and during these transformative situations.

Despite the fact that their class habitus makes them more liable to uncritically believe in "society of knowledge" discourse, to drop out early in their university studies or to be influenced by how the media represent job careers (e.g. Hutchings and Archer 2001), one should not remain blind to the potentials that university completion and academic experiences can have on how their identities could be transformed or dislocated through these educational passages. No matter how embedded their vocationalism is in their class background and in their parents' hope that they will follow university studies, the university experiences of first-generation students have the potential to enrich their past habitus, to dislocate it, to create in them dispositions towards knowledge different to what their heterogeneous socialization dictates, to choose university departments for reasons other than those of social discomfort and to cultivate in them motives to follow

such educational paths as post-graduate studies that lead to lower-middle-class occupational destinations (e.g. Lubrano 2004; Granfield R., 1991; Lee and Kramer, 2013).

Middle-class adolescents, in addition, are not immune to the complex and plural ways habitus and biographical identities set the stage for their university transitions and occupational choices. We assume that there is not a single and unitary habitus that drives the motives and aspirations behind what university department to choose. Research evidence has shown that it is possible for adolescents with high cultural capital to dispute school culture (Eckert 1990:22; Ortner 2002), to develop instrumental attitudes to university studies (Lehman 2009:11), to change university department decisions according to how their sense of "high achiever" is shaped through comparisons with their peers (Brooks 2003:11) and, as our research has shown, to delay desired occupational aspirations until after the completion of their studies. All these tendencies are not exceptions to the (statistical) rule but represent, nowadays, situations, which are more frequent than we might think.

Be that as it may, the point, in my view, is that one should not deploy the habitus concept in the Piagetian way as Bourdieu did because it can make transferability appear to be a lasting disposition disconnected from the social worlds the bearer of habitus lives and interacts in. This, in turn, could make researchers believe that the "new (the present situation) is forcibly assimilated to the old (the scheme acquired earlier) and [that] the difference the "new" brings only leads the old scheme by accommodation to a greater degree of generalization" (Lahire 2011:80). Instead, researchers should carefully examine the social micro-history of the actors' biography and the extent to which their dispositions have been adapted, transformed or toned down (and not take them as a

given), exactly because "the general or partial character of a scheme of action depends directly on the degree of social and historical generalization of the contexts in which it is susceptible of being actualized" (Lahire 2011:85). There is no sense in picturing adolescents' stances regarding university studies in such polarized terms as "ascetic"/"bohemian" because most of the adolescents experience an ascetic way of life during their high-school years and on their passage into the university they adopt hedonistic life-styles or in explaining students' success and failures through such oppositional linguistic structures as "restricted"/"elaborated" codes because a great many adolescents may, notwithstanding their elaborated middle-class code, set in motion in their out-of-school interactions linguistic habits completely alien to school language. The theoretical challenge of our era concerns the need to develop conceptual tools that can tap all these mixed, ambivalent and non-unitary schemes of actions that the students seem to process during their university and life trajectories.

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