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The past, present and future of widening participation research

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The provisions of the Higher Education Act (2004) have renewed interest in widening participation research. Therefore, this paper explores the development of this scholarly field, primarily in the United Kingdom, by examining major trends in the study of higher education. Political debates related to higher education, the prevailing structure of the sector and predominant sociological perspectives have largely shaped the empirical and theoretical concerns of widening participation research. These delimiting factors have resulted in incomplete accounts of the barriers to higher education, which do not fully explore the relationship between students' social characteristics, learning experiences and university careers. Furthermore, contemporary research runs the risk of reinventing the wheel and replicating the mistakes of the past, since there has been a collective act of forgetfulness with respect to earlier contributions. In contrast, this paper provides guidelines to facilitate a holistic agenda for future widening participation research.

Introduction

There has been a proliferation of research related to widening participation in the past 45 years. Contemporary research in this field has explored, among other things, the decision to attend university, the student experience and the management of equal opportunities policies. This research manifests diverse aims, methodologies and theoretical positions. However, it is united by the belief that 'current policies and practices have undermined the commitment to combat the social inequalities that are institutionalised and reproduced within the academic world' (Burke, 2002, p. 1). Hence, contemporary widening participation research is unified by its concern for the relationship between higher education (HE) and social justice.

The agenda of current widening participation research is, primarily, a product of the macro-economic and social policy objectives of the New Right and New Labour. Successive governments have tried to manage human capital and achieve economic

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growth by expanding HE. These goals have led to a plethora of legislation, including the Teaching and Higher Education Act (1998) and the Higher Education Act (2004), which has fostered specific strands of research. The introduction of student loans, a student contribution to tuition fees and, subsequently, variable top-up fees has generated a substantial interest in the relationship between student finance, decision-making and social class (Callender & Jackson, 2004). This sensitivity to change is laudable. However, it has produced a reactive widening participation research agenda focused on narrow issues, discrete aspects of learning and a lack of awareness of prior studies.

Therefore, this paper traces the origin, history and (dis)continuities of widening participation research. It is shown that the socio-cultural context of research, predominant sociological perspectives and unproductive categorical, dichotomous and contradictory thinking have shaped the widening participation enterprise (Holmwood & Stewart, 1991). Contemporary research is in danger of reinventing the wheel and replicating the errors of earlier approaches. Indeed, the sense of *déjà vu* experienced when reading current research is not simply an illusory feeling, because prior work has covered this ground in similar ways before. Those factors constraining the study of university recruitment, progression and outcomes have also resulted in either quantitative or qualitative analyses that fail to conjoin the exploration of social formation and causation. Therefore, the explanations provided by widening participation research have often been weak (Ahier & Moore, 1999). It is argued that the future of this scholarly field requires a holistic research agenda, which can expand explanatory resources and provide strong evidence for education policy.

The origins of widening participation research

Concerns about the social composition of the universities probably emerged alongside the antecedents of Oxford and Cambridge in the twelfth century. At this time, personal interest in who would fill positions of power in the Church and State motivated curiosity about university entrance. By the early nineteenth century, however, the need for skilled labour led business leaders to pressure civic authorities to expand provision, which resulted in the emergence of the modern HE system in the United Kingdom. There were 11,000 students in English and Scottish universities by 1825, and in the latter part of the century Sheffield University, Birmingham University and Manchester University were founded. Public schools in England were the main source of recruits to the universities in the nineteenth century. In contrast, the universities in Scotland were more open, because the country lacked a substantial number of public schools (McPherson, 1973). Nevertheless, nineteenth-century universities were 'intrinsically inequalitarian', despite increasing participation, since recruitment was limited to the privileged (Halsey, 1961, p. 457). Only in the late nineteenth century were serious concerns expressed about 'access' inequalities. These intellectual, industrial and political voices represented the forerunner of widening participation research and were motivated by the desire to extend educational opportunities in an age when the franchise was being broadened.

The university sector did not develop substantially until the late nineteenth century. This expansion reflected the state's growing involvement in mass education. Consequently, the origins of widening participation research can optimally be traced to this period. Nevertheless, the notion of 'accessibility' had been outlined as early as 1868 in Scotland by the Education Commission, which justified an increase in university participation on the grounds of economic prosperity (McPherson, 1973, p. 169). Similarly, James Stuart, a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, was concerned with access, and in the late 1860s provided lectures to working men in several northern towns (Barnard, 1947, p. 182). The idea of accessibility was also deployed in England to promote equal opportunities for women in the ancient and emerging universities (Tullberg, 1998). However, early demands for access by and for women were aimed at achieving HE for the daughters of the middle class. The notion of accessibility was used to establish the citizenship right of certain social groups to attend university.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the term 'access' was primarily equated with the demands of highly able students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter university (Cole, 1955, p. 115). However, the meaning of the term was expanded, at this time, to include both the citizenship right to attend HE and the monitoring of the participation and, to a lesser extent, progression rates of under-represented groups (Jenkins & Jones, 1950). Studies of undergraduates' academic experiences and life-styles also emerged in the twentieth century (Angell, 1930). The primary concern of these ethnographies was to describe and explain the undergraduate experience, using concepts such as students' adjustments, but they occasionally mapped the occupational status of students' parents *en passant*. Therefore, the study of university access by the mid-twentieth century incorporated three distinct strands: the desire to extend citizenship rights, the quantitative monitoring of participation rates and the qualitative exploration of student lifestyles. In these guises, access was an under-developed concept since the analysis of rights, social formation and social causation had been separated.

The development of widening participation research has been characterised by the reproduction of this threefold distinction. Those struggling for the liberation of disadvantaged groups have continued to use access to mean the right to attend university. The Civil Rights Movement in the USA in the 1960s, for example, led to demands for improved access to HE for black Americans that continue in contemporary work (Beattie, 2002). Those seeking to promote social justice by measuring differential rates of participation, for example by social class, continue to equate the study of widening participation with a quantitative analysis of the barriers to learning (Gayle *et al.*, 2002). Finally, those who analyse the meaning of the undergraduate experience persist in separating the exploration of student lifestyles from patterns of participation (Silver & Silver, 1997). These distinctions in widening participation research reflect scholarly divisions within sociology, generate limited research agendas and produce a sense of *déjà vu* when we review work in this field. More importantly, perhaps, limited research agendas reduce the power of widening participation research to generate policy recommendations that will promote social justice.

Post-war studies of widening participation

Educational research was, after 1945, dominated by structural functionalism and social class analysis. Functionalism flourished in the USA until the 1970s and neo-weberian class analysis or educability studies predominated in the British sociology of education until the 1960s. The key concern of functionalism was how education operated to recreate value consensus and the division of labour. In contrast, educability studies explored those factors that 'prevented a perfect relationship between measured ability, educational opportunity and performance' (Flude, 1974, p. 16). Therefore, these theories may appear strange bedfellows, because functionalism was committed to a consensual model of society and educability studies challenged social inequality. These approaches, nevertheless, shared a concern for access to HE by social class, since they applied quantitative methods and structural theory to university sectors that were both expanding.

In the USA, high school enrolments grew after 1945, which generated research into the functions of education, family values and attainment, and the relationship between HE and social stratification (Hofstadter & Hardy, 1952). In Britain, the 1944 Butler Act expanded secondary education by making it free and compulsory up to the age of 15. Pupils were placed in grammar, secondary modern or technical schools according to their attainment in the 11-plus examination. The creation of this tripartite system led researchers to analyse social class and sometimes gender differences in school selection and attainment, university participation and the relationship between HE and social mobility (Hall & Glass, 1954). However, the universities expanded more substantially in the USA at this time, hence the access opportunities of less privileged Americans were favourable compared with those of Europeans. This situation was often explained in terms of the openness of the American stratification system (Turner, 1967). Nevertheless, a fully fledged widening participation research agenda developed in neither country, because scholars were preoccupied with class inequalities in compulsory schooling.

Despite the absence of a comprehensive widening participation research agenda, functionalism and educability studies provided important insights into university attendance. By most measures of school-based attainment and participation in HE, middle-class students were found to obtained superior results compared with working-class students. Therefore, such research specifically identified the *barriers to opportunity* experienced by working-class children, which inhibited their participation in HE (Floud, 1961, p. 94). However, no consistently positive association was established between social class and degree result, because in HE successful pupils are usually admitted irrespective of their background (Eckland, 1964).

Functionalists located the barriers to university participation in the value orientations of particular social classes. This reflected their theoretical preoccupation with social order and a decline in material deprivation in the post-war years. Such studies concluded that working-class culture, unlike middle-class culture, was collectivist and present-oriented, resulting in a failure to master tasks (Rosen, 1956; Strodtbeck, 1961). Therefore, the barriers to working-class progression were family

and community values that resulted in inadequate educational practices. Clearly, this approach to access is inadequate because it dichotomised material and cultural experience, depicted working-class culture as pathological and tended to ignore social processes within education.

Educability researchers located the barriers to HE in the structure of the family, rather than wider processes of cultural deprivation. Dale and Griffith (1965) identified the following factors, for example, as class-related determinants of attainment at school: home facilities, family size, parental attitudes, pupils' mental health and the quality of teaching. Logically, these variables were implicated in low levels of working-class progression to HE. However, the concern of educability researchers with social mobility led many of them to focus their access studies on the measurement of the relationship between intelligence, socio-economic status, participation and degree results (Abbott, 1965). Educability studies can be criticised, like functionalism, for providing an asymmetrical model of access that emphasised barriers to participation. They ignored the bridges to participation experienced by some middle-class and, to a lesser extent, working-class pupils, and downplayed gender and ethnic differences in HE.

In Britain, educability studies were influenced by the report of the Robbins Committee, which measured differential participation and produced recommendations to promote university attendance (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). Specifically, by surveying a sample of people born in 1940–41, the Committee demonstrated that members of the professional class were 33 times more likely to enter HE than their counterparts from semi-skilled and unskilled backgrounds. This difference was explained in terms of familial, educational and socio-economic processes, rather than in terms of the notion of a limited pool of talent. Girls were also shown to be less likely to progress to HE, which was explained by a lack of parental enthusiasm for their education. The results of this approach to access found expression in the Robbins principle; HE should be provided for all those people who have achieved the appropriate entry qualifications and who wish to pursue such courses.

On first inspection, the work of the Robbins Committee appears to provide an inclusive model of access because it combined an analysis of patterns of participation, the causes of differential participation and recommendations for change. It also explored social class and gender differences in access. However, appearances can be deceptive. The Committee can be criticised for focusing primarily on variations in university recruitment by social class. Indeed, the subsequent growth of feminism, neo-marxism and ethnography in sociology has promoted the consideration of gender, ethnicity and disability in widening participation research. These perspectives have also largely rejected the analysis of patterns, factors and concomitant education policy. Instead, they have often explored meaning, action and, more recently, discourse and practice on a smaller scale (Williams, 1997). A truly powerful and productive widening participation research agenda would, of course, combine elements of both approaches.

It is easy to criticise functionalist, educability and associated official models of widening participation. However, the contribution of these approaches to the development

of the field is worth noting. Contemporary studies have devoted much energy to confirming the findings of post-war research related to differential patterns of participation. Functionalists and educability researchers explained these patterns by reference to psychological, familial and, in the latter case, material factors that inhibited the participation of disadvantaged students. The interest of functionalists and educability researchers in economic efficiency, the role of credentials in social selection and the avoidance of wasting talent also implied the need for equality of learning opportunities between the classes. This theoretical convergence was, however, unintentional. Nevertheless, recent studies of HE have often reproduced the political commitments, research agendas and factor-based explanations provided by earlier researchers.

The British sociology of education underwent a paradigm shift in the 1970s heralded by the development of phenomenological, neo-marxist, feminist and ethnographic approaches to schooling (Moore, 1996). In part, the emergence of these approaches reflected the commitment of the Labour Government to comprehensive reorganisation, an increase in the school-leaving age, diversification of the curriculum and an expansion of HE. There were similar developments in the American sociology of education, which also reflected dissatisfaction with the products of extant theories and methodologies (Bowles, 1975). Phenomenologists were primarily interested in the stratification of knowledge in education and society, neo-marxists with the relationship between schooling and capitalism, feminists with the reproduction of patriarchy and ethnographers with the exploration of student life.

Unsurprisingly, these changes had an impact on the study of HE that persists to this day. Phenomenological theory promoted a consideration of the fairness of the university curriculum and the needs of non-traditional students (Young, 1971; Warren-piper, 1981). Likewise, feminism resulted in an increased concern for gender differences in access, subject choice in HE and the recruitment of mature students (Carnegie Commission, 1974). Participation in elite universities for neo-marxists was viewed as the preserve of the capitalist classes, which reproduced their cultural and social capital and the superstructure of society (Bourdieu, 1973). This reproductive model of participation was sustainable in the 1960s, since an increase in student numbers was not associated with increased class diversity in many universities. The middle class took advantage of the massification of HE. Neo-marxism also resulted in studies of the openness and liberal progressivism of universities, which argued that increasingly rational hierarchies in HE alienated non-traditional students (Harris & Holmes, 1976).

In some respects, the new sociology of education had a negative impact on widening participation research. Phenomenologists and neo-marxists assumed that there was a relationship between class background, university participation and social reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). However, the neglect of quantitative methods meant that they rarely verified this assumption. Such evidence was, nevertheless, provided by other researchers (Wakeford & Wakeford, 1974). The neo-marxist model of HE and social reproduction also contained some omissions and contradictions. Firstly, neo-marxism postulated an isomorphic correspondence between the structure of HE and the prerequisites of capitalism but it largely ignored processes,

such as social mobility, that had the potential to transform society. Secondly, Bourdieu (1973) depicted access to HE as restricted and, therefore, reproductive of inequality, whereas Harris and Holmes (1976) portrayed HE as relatively accessible, which was also interpreted as generative of inequality. Hence, neo-marxism interpreted both closed and open recruitment to the universities as reproductive of capitalism. Despite the limitations of new sociological approaches to HE, or perhaps because of them, the study of widening participation emerged as a substantial field of research in the 1980s.

Contemporary studies of widening participation

Recently, a plurality of approaches to widening participation research has blossomed. These approaches include the 'new access' studies; the resurgence of official, managerial and monitoring studies of widening participation; the extension of ethnographic, feminist and postmodern research related to access and non-traditional student life; and studies that have deconstructed access discourses (Burke, 2002). In reality, it is not always possible to separate strands of research, because some scholars have combined a variety of positions. Despite these developments, the contributions of contemporary widening participation researchers are remarkably similar to those of their predecessors.

In part, this proliferation of widening participation research in Britain resulted from the education reforms of the New Right. The abolition of the binary divide between the universities and polytechnics in 1992, motivated by a desire to reduce prestige inequalities, promoted an interest in access. However, the prime mover in the growth of widening participation research in the 1980s was concern over the potential impact of 'substantial financial cutbacks' to HE (Moore, 1983, p. 214). It was feared that cutbacks, mirrored in declining student numbers between 1981 and 1985, would increase the barriers to working-class participation and result in the decline of HE. Academics responded to this squeeze on funding by advocating a reaffirmation of the Robbins principle, an increase in student numbers and improved financial support for undergraduates. Social prediction is a tricky business, however, and the election in 1997 of a Labour Government committed to expansion and diversity in HE meant that warnings of a long-term decline in student numbers were incorrect. Nevertheless, revisions to university funding by New Labour, *qua* the Higher Education Act (2004), and their commitment to diversity in HE have been challenged, because student loans and variable top-up fees may discourage less privileged applicants. These changes have generated a flurry of research related to student funding and university recruitment.

The development of the 'new access' studies owes much to Watts (1972), Hearnden (1973) and Fulton (1981). In these approaches, access was equated with more than the demand for university places because the study of student choice, university selection and the effects of HE were seen as part of a wider commitment to social justice. These concerns reflected the work of educability researchers and resulted in studies of: trends in the age participation rate; differences in participation

by social class, gender and age; international comparisons of participation rates; and the prospects of mature students (Fulton, 1981). The findings of educability studies were largely confirmed in such research and, therefore, a sense of *déjà vu* is experienced when reading this literature. Watts (1972) confirmed the predominance of highly privileged students at Oxbridge, like Jenkins and Jones (1950); and Farrant (1981) confirmed the selective mechanisms of the education system by social class related to school-based attainment and access to HE. These latter findings echoed the conclusions of the Robbins Committee (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). However, the new access studies did more than just consolidate knowledge because, for example, it combined an exploration of under-representation and over-representation in HE (Watts, 1972).

In Britain and the USA, the new access studies explained the under-representation of less privileged, ethnic minority and female students in HE by separating social and economic factors. Taxonomies of the barriers to learning have been provided to explain the low participation rates of non-traditional students that identify poverty, lack of family support, low aspirations, employment prospects and poor quality schooling as the causes of under-representation (Allen, 1971; Gordon, 1981). These taxonomies strongly echoed the findings of educability studies. They also replicated the deficits of their predecessors, because they ignored the interaction of barriers and neglected the bridges to learning, which promote the success of some disadvantaged students. Additionally, low participation rates were often explained in the new access studies by deploying the notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973). However, if the explanation for differential participation resides in the possession of cultural capital by the middle class and its absence among the working class, this replicates the cultural deprivation model of functionalism. Some contemporary research has tried to resolve these theoretical deficits by exploring processes related to participation, inhibiting and promoting factors, and the costs and benefits of HE (Gayle *et al.*, 2002). However, recent access research often represents the re-emergence of old ideas in new guises.

The deficits of access studies have, more recently, been addressed by official, managerial and monitoring approaches. The Labour Government's commitment to university expansion and cohort diversity, reflected in the establishment of the Office of Fair Access, has encouraged more widening participation research, although some of this research was inherited from its Conservative predecessor. Official, managerial and monitoring studies have tried to advance widening participation policy by providing relatively inclusive research agendas. A number of examples may illustrate this point.

Firstly, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, set up in 1996, sponsored research into gender and ethnic variations in participation in combination with strategies to promote the recruitment of alternative students (Coffield & Vignoles, 1997). Therefore, the earlier emphasis on social class variations in participation was extended and it was acknowledge that HE was partly responsibility for failing to attract alternative students. Secondly, integrated reviews of participation rates by age, sex, social class, ethnicity, main qualification and subject group have been

undertaken (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 1999). Thirdly, a number of reviews of the effectiveness of initiatives to widen participation have been conducted (Woodrow & Yorke, 2002). This concern for monitoring access initiatives has diffused into the universities. Consequently, there has been a growth in research examining the management of access initiatives in HE, which represents progress compared with earlier work. Finally, debt aversion as a factor encouraging or discouraging participation by social class has also been researched (Callender & Jackson, 2004). Legislative change has driven research into student finance, but it is important to recall that earlier studies paid scant attention to material factors. In early studies, there was little consideration of the interplay of psychological, financial and educational factors in the decision-making process. There has, therefore, been some progress in official, managerial and monitoring approaches to widening participation.

Despite the relative merits of official and quasi-official approaches, a sense of *déjà vu* is still experienced the more this research is explored. Recent quantitative research has, for example, surpassed the notion of barriers to HE by examining factors that encourage and discourage participation (Connor, 2001; Connor & Dewson, 2001). These factors are usually identified as: belief in the labour-market value of a degree, the financial costs of studying, the necessity to work part-time, concern about academic workloads and gaining entry qualifications. Not only are these factors reminiscent of those identified in functionalist and educability studies of differential learning, but they also present a bipolar model of widening participation. While the focus is no longer on barriers isolated from bridges, Connor (2001) and Connor and Dewson (2001) present their findings using a dichotomous model of social class: encouraging factors exist for a bounded middle class, and discouraging factors for a bounded lower class.

Contemporary ethnographers have also explained the under-representation of disadvantaged groups in HE. In such research, a variety of reasons have been given for low participation, including poor achievement at school, low aspirations, financial constraints, students' perceptions of university, and discourses related to the student' experience (Hutchings & Archer, 2001, p. 69). In terms of the undergraduate experience, Hesketh (1999) has constructed a typology of students' financial life, which differentiates those who are confident about money from those who are casual, circumspect or anxious. These categories were related to parental financial support, the level of students' maintenance grant and their social class. Once again, such findings echo the factor-based approach provided in educability studies. Qualitative research, like its quantitative cousin, also tends to rely on dichotomous notions of the bridges and barriers to participation, and typological representations of student life.

Qualitative and reflexive methods have been adopted by contemporary feminist, postmodern and black studies researchers to explore the experience of being in HE. In particular, feminist poststructuralists have challenged the academy's definition of widening participation, the content of the university curriculum and advocated new directions toward community-based knowledge (Ryan & Connolly, 2000). Similarly, the relevance of the curriculum to black undergraduates has been challenged and changes to pedagogy recommended to promote their participation (Mashengele,

1995). These models of the relationship between gender and/or ethnicity, the deci-sion to attend university and the content of the curriculum are highly reminiscent of the work of Young (1971). Moreover, the emphasis on the construction of widening participation discourses, the role of HE staff as gatekeepers and the need for curricu-lum change reflects earlier reproductive approaches to HE (Thompson, 1997).

While feminist, postmodern and black studies approaches to widening participa-tion have advanced our understanding of the transition to and experience of univer-sity, their conceptual contributions have been more limited. Parr rejects the notion of barriers that inhibit the return of women to HE, for example, and replaces it with the idea of trauma, because of the 'painful nature of what the women were telling me' (2000, p. 6). However, the notion of barriers to progression has long incorporated sensitivity to psychological damage. When one of Lacey's working-class respondents commented that passing the 11-plus meant that 'all day my friends' parents' attitudes to me changed … I was treated as a "puff" and was a "brainy soft-arsed mardy"', he was clearly aware of the issue of trauma (1970, p. 143). In this case, the attitudes of some working-class parents constituted a factor inhibiting progression, which was acknowledged to possess a damaging psychological component. The concept of trauma only gives us more of the same, regardless of the divergent nomenclatures of these approaches.

There are a number of limitations associated with feminist, postmodern and black studies approaches to widening participation. Specifically, these perspectives have studied women, ethnic minorities and other non-traditional students in isolation from men, the ethnic majority and traditional students. Most feminists, postmodernists and black studies researchers are, of course, aware that the objects of their inquiry emerge from social relationships. Nevertheless, the failure to produce simultaneous analyses considering a plurality of students' characteristics and a range of groups persists, but the experiences of women, ethnic minorities and non-traditional students cannot be understood without comparators. Research based on these perspectives also tends to provide inadequate definitions and measurements of students' socio-economic background, since they have often rejected the quantifica-tion of social class as part of a malestream enterprise. Finally, these perspectives have focused some of their energy on deconstructing the discourses of widening participa-tion. Competing discourses are, unsurprisingly, found to be contradictory and some-times not conducive to the participation of alternative students (Williams, 1997). However, such research locates the issue of widening participation in disembodied discourses, which do not necessarily reflect what potential entrants, undergraduates and university staff *actually do*.

There is substantial continuity between historical and contemporary approaches to widening participation. New access studies sought to measure differential participa-tion, explore social and material factors influencing decision-making, and recom-mend changes to promote social justice. This agenda reflected earlier functionalist and educability research. Many of these interests are also exhibited in official, managerial and monitoring approaches. In contrast, feminist, postmodern and black studies approaches have adhered to the agenda of the new sociology of education. In

particular, they have explored the discourses and traumas that inhibit the participation of certain groups, examined the curriculum as a source of discouragement and explored how HE reproduces inequality. However, the errors of older approaches to participation, such as the emphasis on barriers, have not been successfully replaced.

The future of widening participation research

Historical and contemporary approaches to widening participation have been shaped by the organisation of HE, government policy and predominant sociological perspectives. There has been a degree of continuity as researchers have considered patterns of participation, the factors inhibiting attendance and recommendations to broaden participation. However, there have been discontinuities in this field. A shift from quantitative and structural approaches to participation to qualitative and practice-based approaches has occurred. Furthermore, the concern for social class differences in participation has, in part, given way to a concern for the experiences of women, ethnic minorities and other alternative groups. Cultural models of the barriers to HE have also declined, and research related to student finance has expanded. Similarly, interest in the management and monitoring of widening participation initiatives, largely absent in earlier research, has burgeoned. There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with these developments and some of them are to be welcomed.

These discontinuities in research reflect the adherence of sociologists to categorical, dichotomous and contradictory thinking. Many researchers continue to treat quantitative and qualitative research as separate undertakings, social class, ethnicity and gender as isolated components of students' lifestyles, and the social structure and social relationships as distinct explanatory frameworks. In part, these practices have inhibited the emergence of productive accounts of participation, which expand the explanatory resources of sociology. The idea of barriers has, for example, been mobilised in most approaches to participation, but there is little concern for the interaction of these inhibiting factors, nor is there sensitivity to their contextual fluidity. Moreover, little debate has occurred about the content and qualities of a powerful approach to widening participation. Such an approach would be able to explain the totality of patterns of participation, progression and outcomes in a given context, at a given time, and account for the relative effect of specific student characteristics on these stages of student life. This requirement may be achieved by emphasising the continuous, relational and contextual qualities of experience.

The future of widening participation research requires the re-conceptualisation of the field and holistic research agendas. It also requires a firm grounding in empirical evidence related to students' everyday experiences, rather than a concentration on attitudinal data divorced from the factual conditions of specific contexts. In terms of definition, widening participation research must move beyond the underdeveloped concept of barriers. Future research must deploy an inclusive definition of the *social processes shaping higher learning ranging from those that promote (bridges) to those that inhibit (barriers) differential participation in, progression through and outcomes from HE for certain individuals and social groups.* It must also avoid the artificial separation of

cultural and material experience; exploring instead how the *differential distribution of resources and skills* influences learning. This definition emphasises the indivisibility and continuity of experience. It also acknowledges that experiences that constitute a barrier to participation for a given individual or social group, in a given context, at a given time, may in an alternative context constitute a bridge to learning.

A number of other criteria can be derived from this review to guide the future of widening participation research. Firstly, proposed work must establish its intellectual context, because the omissions and errors of prior studies must be overcome. Secondly, research should provide simultaneous accounts of the patterns and causes of differential participation, progression and outcomes in specific contexts. The aim of empirical research should be to generate theoretical accounts that encompass the data. Thirdly, holistic approaches to students' characteristics should be provided, which explore the mechanisms through which aggregate lifestyles impact on HE. Fourthly, there is a need for longitudinal research related to participation, since the bridges and barriers to HE begin in early childhood. Finally, future research must include an exploration of the educational reproduction *and* transformation of the bridges and barriers to HE. These accounts should not be presented as discrete entities.

Such criteria present a demanding remit, but they are achievable. These principles could be applied to analyse the patterns and causes of differential participation, progression and outcomes for a representative sample of all students in several universities at different positions in the sector. An in-depth exploration of the social characteristics and learning careers of these undergraduates would be required to map their responses to the curricula. This comparative approach would facilitate an exploration of the social conditions of learning in HE and delineate the various 'situational adaptations' of students (Sewell, 1997). It would also acknowledge that the cause of differential progression resides in the social relationship that develops between the learner and the university. This relationship is likely to reflect students' social characteristics, their reasons for selecting a specific university and its curriculum. A powerful study of widening participation involves a holistic analysis of the processes of moving into, through and out of HE. The future of this scholarly field resides in recognising the indivisibility and unity of its various enterprises. Such a research agenda would not reject historical and contemporary approaches *a priori*; rather, it would learn from their contributions, omissions and errors.

Conclusion

Scholarly concern related to the composition of the universities dates back to the late nineteenth century. Early research related to accessibility was characterised by three distinct strands: the citizenship right to attend HE, the enumeration of students' characteristics, and the exploration of student life. These interests were largely treated as separate undertakings guided by specific methodologies and theories. Unfortunately, the development of widening participation research has preserved these distinctions, which produces a feeling of *déjà vu* when reviewing contributions. The majority of

research related to working-class under-representation in HE has, for example, provided lists of factors that discourage participation. There has been little effort to provide integrated theoretical explanations of the processes that produce, and occasionally transform, patterns of participation considering students' aggregate lifestyles. The future of widening participation research does not reside in identifying gaps in the literature, nor in plugging these gaps by modifying existing approaches. Instead, the application of the sociological enterprise to the issue of widening participation needs to be challenged and empirical, holistic and mixed methods projects designed.

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