

**Social Science Research Group Launch  
Event, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2015:**

*Working class students' resilience  
and experiences of undergraduate study:  
Assisting the quest for social mobility?*

**Dr Richard Waller  
Assoc Prof Sociology of Education  
Dept of Education**

# Project sponsor



---

## The Leverhulme Trust

---

# Background context – ‘taken for granted’ assumptions

- ▶ HE necessary for w/c *upward* social mobility
- ▶ ...And for m/c to avoid *downward* mobility
- ▶ M/c students enjoy advantage over w/c peers re accumulated economic, social and cultural capitals from home and school milieu
- ▶ W/c assumed less able to cope with university than m/c – Bourdieu’s ‘fish out of water’

# Background context – reality...?

- ▶ However, students from all social classes can flounder during the transition from school or college to university, and being from a background where studying at HE is an expectation is itself no guarantee of success

# Neo-liberal policy discourse

- ▶ Discourse of *social justice* through WP (e.g. New Labour's 50% target) has morphed into *social mobility* e.g. Milburn Reports
- ▶ Neo-liberal policies now dominate HE e.g. burden of funding shifted from state to individual; talk of 'graduate premium'; individual's responsibility for success; targets; KIS; NSS; REF; league tables etc.

# The deficit model of w/c culture

- ▶ Working class culture often perceived as ‘lacking’ (McKenzie, 2015)
- ▶ Historically, m/c politicians, policy-makers, and professionals saw w/c as lacking necessary skills, values and ‘needing help’
- ▶ This continues in policy, inc WP – ‘tell w/c kids *how* to be socially mobile and they’ll want to do it’
- ▶ Current (and previous) government view – ‘poverty of aspiration’

# An alternative view

- ▶ W/c culture as rich, distinctive
- ▶ Ability to survive in harsh conditions by ‘making do’ (Pahl, Isle of Sheppey study); or ‘getting by’ (McKenzie in Nottingham)
- ▶ Hoggart: w/c have ‘lived out fraternity day by day for centuries’

# Paired Peers study

- ▶ Compared experiences of cohort of students from different backgrounds at UoB and UWE
- ▶ Students paired across universities and by subject and social class
- ▶ Investigating factors affecting success, including economic, cultural & social capitals
- ▶ Followed for 3 years Sept 2010 – Aug 2013
- ▶ Now following for 3 more years into and through work or further study

# Recent HEFCE report

- ▶ A HEFCE report (March 2014) suggested young people from lower socio-economic groups were likely to out-perform those from higher groups in terms of final degree class when comparing students with the same A level grades on entry
- ▶ *Why?*

# 1. Motivations

- ▶ Some desire to ‘give something back’ (see Anna below)
- ▶ Experience of hardship can motivate w/c students to succeed – ‘getting away’
- ▶ Greater awareness of ‘realities of life’ waiting if unsuccessful

## 2. Self-reliance

- ▶ W/c students often had to overcome the odds to get to HE from environments not geared towards it (e.g. not ‘spoon-fed’ at school; or little ‘strategic’ support from families)
- ▶ *‘So it’s really self-directed learning, it’s just self-reliant, you know, they just treat us like adults, do everything by yourself – which is good, which is really good. It makes you stronger as well, it makes you know yourself and the type of person you are’. (f, w/c, UWE)*

# 3. Resilience

- ▶ W/c students often familiar with 'hard knocks' and able to adjust to failures and reset horizons
- ▶ M/c students feel *entitled* to succeed and so have further to 'fall'; but some struggle to adjust to more independent studying in HE
- ▶ One story to conclude show this

# Anna's story: Economics & Politics, w/c, UoB

- ▶ Parents divorced – Mother a waitress, father an electrician
- ▶ Went to poor-performing state school
- ▶ A level results – 2 As, 2 A\*s
- ▶ ‘All the way to GCSEs I didn’t really work that much, like when I was 15 or 16 I started going out and getting drunk and stuff.....I know that sounds really silly but I didn’t work that much and I still found it quite easy to do well. And then it got to A levels and then I kind of felt like 'oh I actually do need to work now’.

# ‘Experiential capital’?

‘I do feel like I’m glad that I went to a state school coming here because here there’s so many people from private schools. And I meet people from Eton and all of these like....like schools that you’ve only heard of on television or something....I hear about what they’ve done and like how much they’re given at school, and it’s great that they’re given that opportunity but it’s almost like they didn’t have to work for it. The people who do succeed at state schools they have kind of an extra bit of...I think they’ve worked a bit harder to get where they are’

# Making capital/building resilience?

- ▶ Bristol ‘the best university’ she applied to. Wanted to get a job helping the disadvantaged – ‘giving something back’
- ▶ ‘Cooled’ her ambitions to get a 1<sup>st</sup>, achieved 2:1
- ▶ Failed to get into ‘Teach First’ but adjusted her expectations to do a PGCE: she’s bouncing back

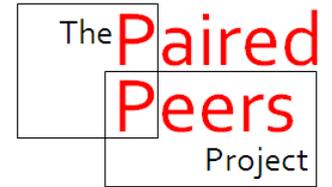
# Conclusions

- ▶ W/C and M/C young people often have different *hopes for, or expectations of, HE*
- ▶ M/C students have more useful capitals to help them into university and progress there
- ▶ However, W/C students' struggles to get there and survive once there build resilience useful in helping them succeed
- ▶ Such assets could be seen as 'experiential capital' – promoting streetwise capability to adapt and profit in new situations

# Final thought

- ▶ The students for whom going to university was initially just a distant and unlikely aspiration, something to be hard earned rather than something to which they felt entitlement through birth and upbringing, accumulated resilience and self-reliance as a result of the struggles faced, qualities which armed them for challenges in the transition into, and journey through, university life

# For further info:



Contact me:

[richard.waller@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:richard.waller@uwe.ac.uk)

Or, visit our (new) website:

[www.pairedpeers2.org.uk](http://www.pairedpeers2.org.uk)