

‘It’s quite difficult letting them go, isn’t it?’ UK parents’ experiences of their child’s higher education choice process.

Studies in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper challenges the dominant discourse that Higher Education (HE) choice is a consumer choice and questions assumptions underpinning government policy and HE marketing. HE choice is largely viewed as a rational, decontextualized process. However, this interpretivist study found it to be much more complex, and to be about relationships and managing a transition in roles. It focuses on parents, an under-researched group, who play an increasing part in their child's HE choice. It finds that they experience this process primarily as parents, not consumers and that their desire to maintain the relationship at this critical juncture takes precedence over the choice of particular courses and universities. The role of relationships, and in this context relationship maintenance, is the main theme. This is experienced in two principal ways: relationship maintenance through conflict avoidance and through teamwork. These significant findings have implications for the way governments and universities consider recruitment. (149 words)

Key words: Higher Education; choice; decision-making; parents; marketization.

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Introduction

In an increasingly marketised UK Higher Education (HE) environment (Gibbs 2001; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon 2011; Brown and Carasso 2013; Nixon, Scullion and Hearn 2016) there seems to be an underlying assumption by policy makers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that HE choice is, and should be, a type of consumer choice.

Additionally, that prospective students and their parents ‘shop around’ to compare offerings, as if they were choosing consumer goods, with students and perhaps their parents, seeing themselves as consumers or even ‘co-consumers’ (Williams 2011) of education. This then leads to the view that providing more information will result in ‘better’ choices being made. For example, the 2011 UK government’s HE White Paper produced by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) tells us that ‘better information will enable students to make informed choices about where to study’ (p.46). This view is echoed in the recent (2016) White Paper which refers to students needing ‘information, particularly on price and quality...’ in order to make ‘...informed choices’ (BIS 2016, 11). However, it is important to question these assumptions which underpin government and HEI’s policies and, in doing so, to challenge the dominant discourse around HE choice. This paper seeks to do this by exploring choice experiences in depth from the parent’s perspective and by focusing on the often neglected context of family relationships.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (the funding and regulatory body for HEIs in England) has found through its own research that too many HE choices ‘can lead to “decision-making paralysis”’ (Matthews 2014, 9). This echoes Schwartz’s (2004) findings about the problems of choosing between an abundance of options. Understanding the student choice process is critical for HEIs at a time of rapid change in the HE landscape (Nedbalova, Greenacre and Schulz 2014), including the impact of the new White Paper (BIS 2016). HEIs are seeking to maintain or expand student numbers despite

growing competition, which has intensified since the removal in 2015 of restrictions on undergraduate numbers (Ratcliffe and Shaw 2015). Competition is also coming from overseas and from the proposed introduction of new providers (BIS 2016). It is also notable that government safeguards for institutions unable to recruit sufficient numbers will be removed, allowing them to fail (Boxall 2016). In the past these safeguards have included financial assistance for struggling institutions (Boxall 2016). This is resulting in an increase in many HEI's marketing budgets, including the amounts spent on recruitment (Matthews 2013; Boffey 2014; Sandler Clarke 2014).

A rise in parental involvement in UK HE choice amongst certain groups of parents (Redmond 2008; Moorhead 2009; Fearn 2010; Machan 2011; Thorpe 2011; Williams 2011; Cozens 2013) is also part of this changing landscape and in the current climate, with the possibility of more increases to tuition fees through the 'Teaching Excellence Framework' (TEF) (BIS 2016; Adams 2015), this involvement might be expected to increase. Yet parents are an under-researched group with most previous studies of HE choice focusing on the student perspective (e.g. Connor 2001; Maringe 2006; Walsh *et al.* 2015). The literature that does exist on parental involvement tends to focus on under-represented groups (e.g. David *et al.* 2003; Reay, David and Ball 2005). It finds a range of overlapping influences including social class, ethnicity and gender; however, these influences are complex and the findings can be contradictory. Most of these studies, though, focus on students' perceptions of their parents' involvement with a few notable exceptions (Reay *et al.* 2001; Reay, David and Ball 2005; Reay 1998; Pugsley 1998 and David *et al.* 2003), which do interview parents. In none of these studies, however, are parents the sole focus, often positioned as playing a supporting role. This research responds to this gap by foregrounding parents' experiences in this vital stage of student recruitment.

Personal choice in education, starting with schools and extending to HE, is increasingly positioned as positive and as being the fairest way to allocate places, with ‘responsible parents’ making the ‘right’ educational choices for their children (see Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe 1995, 21 for a critique of this). The notion that there is a ‘right’ choice to be made can serve to further reinforce an underlying assumption that choices are, or at least should be, purely rational. Coupled with this is the fact that many studies of HE student choice adopt a positivist approach enacted through a quantitative methodology (e.g. Maringe 2006; Callender and Jackson 2008; Bennett and Ali-Choudhury 2009), which often assumes that a logical, cognitive process is followed, with alternatives carefully compared. This study purposefully responds to this by taking an interpretivist, phenomenological view focusing on how parents experience and make sense of this choice process. In doing so, it sees choice as deeply embedded in the context of people’s everyday lives and in certain circumstances as a shared, rather than purely individual, experience.

Choice and decision-making literature

The underpinning theoretical perspective of this paper is marketing and in particular consumer behaviour. However, given the established literature in the area of educational research, it also draws briefly from educational sociology, which offers a broad understanding of parents’ behaviour in this context.

Whilst it is recognised that there have been moves away from seeing choice as purely rational with the aim of maximising utility (e.g. Meyer and Kahn 1991) and many criticisms of this approach (e.g. Olshavsky and Granbois 1979; Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999); models of choice and decision-making persist in marketing (Kotler *et al.*, 2012) and in HE (Moogan, Baron and Harris 1999; Moogan and Baron 2003; Vrontis, Thrassou and Melanthiou 2007; Simões and Soares 2010). Equally, the dominance of these models further reinforces the idea

that choice is rational, decontextualised and can be predicted. This is despite acknowledgement of the need to consider the emotional (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Hamilton and Catterall 2006), social and contextual aspects of choice (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe 1995; Allen 2002). This paper seeks to challenge the dominant orthodoxy relating to how choices are made within both marketing and much HE literature and in doing so to move away from decision-making models and the associated terminology, to focus on the context and meaning of choice. An often neglected aspect of this context is relationships and how choices are made for and with other people. This focus is in contrast to the literature which mainly views choices as individual (Nørgaard *et al.* 2007).

HEIs are attempting to become more marketing oriented (Hesketh and Knight 1999) (including trying to recruit marketing professionals from outside the sector (Annandale 2013; Haggerty 2013)) and are adopting commercial marketing practices (Matthews 2013; Boffey 2014; Leech 2014). They may be doing this at times unquestioningly and without considering the issues that might arise in following commercial logic and marketing choice theories, and applying them to this particular context. In doing so, they may also be in danger of overlooking the complexities of what is a shared experience at a crucial time in a core relationship and instead to make assumptions about this process. These might include that more information will result in 'better' choices as the White Paper assumes (BIS 2016); that these choices can be modelled and even predicted based on assumed rational behaviour and that parents' involvement leads to a more rigorous process (Haywood 2014).

Joint and family decision-making, including in HE

Much of the literature on joint and family decision-making is dated and mainly quantitative (e.g. Sheth 1974; Spiro 1983); often relating to purchases for a child, for the whole family, or to spousal decision-making. Joint decision-making is an area which is under-researched; this

is because more recent views of choice focus on the idea of personal choice which reflects a privileging of individual choice, often linked to identity construction (Elliott 1998; Gabriel and Lang 2006). Whilst there are some more recent qualitative studies on family and joint decision-making, (e.g. Thomson, Laing and McKee 2007; Hamilton and Catterall 2006; Nørgaard *et al.* 2007) which mainly focus on influence and conflict avoidance; most research in this area is still quantitative (Ekstrom 2007). Some of the relevant findings relating to joint decision-making include that it is acknowledged to be more complex and time consuming than an individual process (Sheth 1974). There are of course some parallels with organisational buyer behaviour such as the idea of the 'Decision-making Unit' and of different roles being adopted. However, differences include the desire for 'harmony' (Davis 1976) and 'co-operation' (Hamilton and Catterall 2008) which can lead to expertise being sacrificed (Davis 1976) to keep the peace and to a more accommodative rather than problem-solving approach being taken (*ibid.*; Spiro 1983). Conflict avoidance heuristics are also adopted, such as task specialisation (Park 1982; Hamilton 2009). As early as 1982, Park found that family decision-making was not rational, being more akin to a 'muddling-through' process (p.152) (also Nørgaard and Brunsø 2011). However, despite this, there has been little research since into this process and crucially how it is experienced and there remains a need for more research in this area (Hamilton 2009). This paper aims, in part, to fill this gap.

With regard to HE choice and the parties involved in this joint decision, much of the existing literature focuses on the students themselves and on the information sources and choice attributes they use (Briggs 2006; Simões and Soares 2010; Walsh *et al.* 2015). This focus feeds from, and then into, a dominant perspective that this is a rational process. Some findings include that the process can be difficult and students can become overwhelmed by the large number of apparently similar courses and HEIs (Moogan, Baron and Harris 1999). Studies note a difference in choice criteria between parent and child (e.g. Broekemier and

Seshadri 2000; Reay, David and Ball 2005) and whilst parents are seen as an important source of information (Carbrera and La Nasa 2000; Brooks 2004), they are not always felt by students to be the most useful (Brooks 2002; Reay, David and Ball 2005). Thus, we need to better understand parents' role and their experiences in order to explore this apparent contradiction.

Method

The aim of the study was to explore parents' experiences of their child's HE choice process. More specifically, given the marketing literature in this area, to better appreciate if and how they made sense of these experiences as consumers. In-depth, unstructured phenomenological interviews were conducted to collect the data. These allowed participants to recount their experiences in their own way and to focus on areas of importance to them, rather than of importance to the researcher (Silverman 1998). After an initial open question, participants directed the course of the interview, which aimed to be conversational in style, with interjections only to clarify meaning, or to encourage participants to elaborate on something (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). These interviews captured first person accounts of participants' experiences and the meanings that they attribute to them and in this way offer a fresh perspective, by including the contextual, relational and emotional aspects of this choice process. Interviews took place with 16 parents which generated 27 hours of data. Participants were mainly recruited from a local co-educational comprehensive school on the south coast of England (and also via 'friends of friends'). Vitaly, all participants had direct experience of the phenomenon being investigated (Patton 2002; Creswell 1998). They were all parents of year 13 pupils who were in the process of making their HE choices; having narrowed down their initial options to confirm a first and insurance choice, pupils were now completing their school studies.

This was a purposive, convenience sample relying on volunteers and it transpired that they were all white and all female except one. Given the location of the school and the nature of the interviewer's friends it must be acknowledged that the sample was predominantly 'middle class'; noting Brooks' (2003; 2004) discussion on how broad this group can be, as many participants had not been to university themselves. The predominance of mothers also derives from the nature of the recruitment process. 'Friends of friends' tended to be other women and for those recruited via the school, whilst there was no attempt to encourage one or other parent to participate, it was mainly women who were prepared to make the time available for these lengthy interviews. Thus, this sample of volunteers has resulted in participants with these particular characteristics, rather than them necessarily being more involved in the choice process. Whilst the gender and class skew in this study has implications for the generalisability of the findings and discussion, this is not the aim of interpretive phenomenology (van Manen 1990) and two important points should be noted here. Firstly, the aim of this study was to explore parents' experiences, with a focus on them as parents and on the parent/child relationship, not to make assertions or comparisons using criteria such as class or gender. Secondly, we were most interested in volunteers' 'discursive practices' (Holstein and Gubrium 2005) - the way in which these individuals account for their lives as a coalescing of their sense of individual agency within a specific cultural context. Our entry point into their world is through them recounting their experiences at a liminal time in their relationship with their child, as they engaged in the process of making choices with and for a close family member. Such an approach is consistent with the notion of culturally situated individuals that has been long established in many philosophical and research traditions (see, for example, Gadamer 2006). Crucially, such a stance allowed us to stay close to the phenomenon being investigated (Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom 2001), in this case

parents' experiences of going through this specific choice process and of what it means to them.

Data analysis followed Thompson, Locander and Pollio's two-stage process (1989; 1990) for interpreting phenomenological interviews. Firstly, detailed readings of each transcript were undertaken to produce an idiographic analysis of each narrative to get a sense of each participant's 'life-world.' Verbatim quotes and sections of interest were examined carefully and related back to the whole interview, so that they were not taken out of context ('part to whole' hermeneutic analysis, Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). Once this was completed, the second stage consisted of looking for patterns across interviews, what Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989; 1990) term 'global themes'; focusing on the experiences which were most salient to the study's aim. Care was taken to ensure that these themes were supported by evidence in the transcripts. The themes are now discussed.

Findings and Discussion

In the HE choice process we posit that it is the close family relationships, specifically here between parent and the child intending to go to university, that foreground all of the parents' experiences. The meta-theme of putting significant effort into relationships, and particularly into 'relationship maintenance', dominates the meanings afforded to the parent's experience of their child's higher education choice process. This relationship maintenance was experienced in two main and overlapping ways: through conflict avoidance and through teamwork.

Parenting as relationship maintenance

Prevalent and prominent for all participants was that this choice-making process was experienced as part of parents' on-going efforts to maintain a positive and productive relationship at a critical juncture - critical because parents are keenly aware of the fact that

their child will soon be leaving home. Thus, the various processes undertaken to reach decisions and the ways in which they engaged with choices, need to be seen as part of this broader phase of parenting. All of the themes discussed here in effect derive from this.

These experiences are partly about acknowledging and renegotiating this changing relationship, about a sense of 'letting go' and about facilitating the child's independence: *'It's a moment when you have to step back from them, and they are starting their adult life'* (Rachel). Lizzie echoes this saying that she has been finding it hard to both handle her son and the process and to get the balance right; the balance being *'of gently encouraging and standing back and saying, look, it's up to you, you know it's your choice.'* For some parents this made the experiences stressful.

Chloe illustrates this stress and discomfort as she explains how negotiations change as the child grows up:

It's also quite difficult to judge as a parent because obviously they're growing up as well and one minute an offer of help may be greeted with open arms, and another what you think is a similar offer of help might be treated with your head being bitten off and 'how dare you nag me about this, mum'.

This is also an example of what parents see as inconsistency in adolescent behaviour; they felt uncomfortable at times due to the different ways their comments and offers of help were received. This apparent inconsistency, caused in part by the child's growing independence, adds to this tension and the feelings of uncertainty some parents felt regarding how best to engage with him or her, and about their changing role and future relationship. Rachel tries to encourage her child's independence through what she describes as *"adult training"* which she explains like this:

...and we try and do it as much as we can to make her do as much and she quite often says, no, I don't want to do that...and we say, well what are you going to do when we're not about to do it for you? You know things like ringing up and making an appointment [themselves].

Chloe describes going through the process as '*a growing up experience for me*' and says that '*But I've sort of had to get it into my head he is 18. If he stuffs this up it's him stuffing it up not me...*' However, she then tells a story which illustrates how she cannot actually let him '*stuff it up*', as she gets involved and sorts out a potential problem for him. This is an example of the difficulties some parents had and tensions they experienced in terms of trying to 'let go' and relinquish some control. On one hand they wanted to stand back from their child and encourage his or her independence, but on the other hand they still wanted some involvement and to be consulted. Young *et al.*'s (2001) study supports this idea of parents of adolescents still wanting to be listened to and of the importance of communication in maintaining relationships at times of transition.

This transition in their role as parent with which they are in the process of coming to terms, underlies all these experiences. It derives from the child growing up, which impacts this core relationship, thus producing this transition in role. This means that parents have to adapt the ways that they relate to their child and respond to his or her moods and changing, sometimes inconsistent, behaviour. At times they are uncertain about how best to do this. They have to work hard to try to maintain a positive relationship and to avoid or minimise conflict. This transition creates tensions, as illustrated, in that parents still want to be involved and want the best for their child, but they also recognise the need to encourage their child's independence. The next sections illustrate some of the strategies they adopt and the approaches they try out to attempt to persuasively maintain communications and to keep the peace with this more grown up 'child'.

The choice process for HE is different to other choices the parent will have made with (and for) their child, including those in which the parent will have played a much bigger role. This is because this choice is about the next stage in the child's life and this is a choice in which the child needs to play a significant part, and which has consequences for them both and for their relationship. The process is thus dominated by a desire to maintain and prioritise the relationship and the need to deal with its changing nature impacts and underlies the experiences that are now discussed.

Relationship maintenance through conflict avoidance

Parents described going to considerable lengths to avoid disagreements and conflict, as a way of trying to maintain a good relationship with their child during this extended choice process. Conflict avoidance includes minimizing expressions of disagreement and is illustrated by participants holding back and not saying what they thought about a course or HEI for example:

But, you know, I just have to keep quiet a lot of the time because if I say too much she's one of these, you know, you say black and it'll be white. So I have to keep my mouth shut a bit. (Jackie).

Alison also holds back on her opinions to avoid future blame: *'Well I've always tried not to say, 'well, if I was you', because I'm not the one who's doing it...'* Participants experienced this at times as treading carefully, being guarded and standing back.

Conflict avoidance could be experienced in a number of ways, but two primary ways from the findings are the use of persuasion and compromise:

- *Conflict avoidance through persuasion.* This is about some parents having to try to encourage or coerce a sometimes reluctant teenager to engage with the HE choice process. As this was something which was at times more important to the parent than the child, parents

needed to be as persuasive as possible. It is about how parents approached discussions with their child and this section details the types of persuasion they used in order to try to maintain this changing relationship. This was persuasion with the particular purpose of conflict avoidance. It was experienced through using their knowledge of their child to not only choose the right moment for a discussion, but also to know when to withdraw completely: *'Once B's made up her mind about something it's really difficult to change her...'* Natalie explains and later she describes her daughter as *'she's not a child you can tell her what needs and has to be done.'* Persuasion was about parents trying to have some involvement in the process and to express their views, but at the same time doing this carefully and thus more persuasively. It was also about parents being cautious not just with what they said, but also when they said it, including taking advantage of when the child was in a good mood, *'he's got to be in the right frame of mind to want to chat to me'* (Sarah), or when an opportunity presented itself, such as being in a car with them:

Yes, sort of quietly we've been...my husband was saying to me, well has she made up her mind yet, you know, and I said, well, I keep trying to ask, you know.....we'd be driving to school or something and I'd be saying, well, obviously you've only got a couple of weeks, you know, have you sort of, ...have you made your choices you know. And I'm sort of trying to eke out of her what she's deciding and, you know it has been hard..." (Mary).

Alternatively, they took advantage of a visitor's presence. Sarah deliberately invites a friend round when she wants to discuss things with her son, but does not want to risk upsetting him:

...I would go to her and say I don't know, you know, J – you know, we're not really talking here. I need to know and she would say, 'well, what about this, J, and what about that, J' and draw him out...a bit more than I could...

Later she says '*...L [friend] will say it and say what I want to say but because it doesn't come from me I'm happier*'. So this is an example of someone deferring to a friend who is less emotionally involved and using her to get answers to questions that she feels she cannot ask herself, for fear of causing an argument. This strategy is echoed in the HE literature by Reay, David and Ball (2005) who detail one participant bringing in a family friend to counsel her daughter who is resistant to her mother's advice.

Participants were also careful to avoid nagging, with its negative connotations, and in order to better reflect the child's growing independence and the beginning of this new relationship, they tried to come up with other approaches to attempt to persuasively talk to their child. However, despite these efforts, some of them acknowledged that they were either nagging, or that this was how it was being perceived: '*I'm recognising that this is just turning into what's sounding like nagging to you ...*' (Lizzie). Lizzie also explains how she attempts to cajole her son into at least visiting some of the HEIs under consideration:

'Right. Well I'm not sure'. 'Okay, you're not sure. So would it be a good idea to go just to take a look and then your options are open? If you don't even do this that's fine but you know what you're choosing about. Would that be a good idea?' 'Yes, all right then'. So it's been kind of like that.

Her very persuasive language and tone here seem more suited to a much younger child; she is working hard to be positive and calm and to avoid upsetting him.

The heavy use of persuasion employed to start, frame and maintain discussions could be for several reasons. One is that the child is now older and therefore parents can no longer

insist that he or she listens or obeys them, another is that this is a decision with which the child needs to be happy. It also reflects the fact that parents are uncertain and tense as this relationship is changing and their role is in transition. They recognise that previous ways of engaging with their child may no longer be effective and that they need to try new ones. Parents are trying to get their child to listen to their views and accept their advice, and they are using persuasion in the hope of avoiding confrontation and conflict. This echoes the literature, as persuasion is one of Sheth's (1974) strategies for conflict avoidance.

Conflict avoidance through compromise. This relates to getting the best result you can from a situation. Parents sometimes had to compromise in order to avoid conflict with their child and to maintain this relationship. If they did not succeed with their attempts at being persuasive, compromise was needed; so compromise often followed attempts at persuasion. However, the relationship between these two concepts was more complex than this, as parents could also find themselves needing to be persuasive whilst discussing possible compromises.

There were two main types of compromise. One was when parents decided which of the decisions mattered to them and which could be left to the child and thus that they were prepared to compromise over. The second type arose for some parents, when they had to compromise over decisions that did matter to them and in which they would have liked some involvement.

Nørgaard and Brunsø's (2011, 147) study finds evidence of parents having to 'choose their fights', as well as engaging in 'trade-offs' to avoid conflict. Thus, it supports this first type of compromise, where parents prioritised the decisions that were important to them, and thus that they wanted to be involved in. So that, for some participants initially it was sufficient that their child considered going to university at all, and the details of where and/or what they studied could be left to him or her, even when parents thought that the child was

making a mistake. For example, Sarah knew that accounting wasn't right for her child, '*not quite him*' but did not say anything, as she was just happy that he was at least engaging with the process. Clare felt her son would not cope with a particular course, but did not say it, as he '*needs to come to that conclusion [himself]*'. So again, parents are being careful about what they say. These sorts of compromises reflect the fact that the university choice process is multi-layered, with various choices to make at different stages and parents may decide that some choices matter more to them than others. Maintaining the relationship and avoiding conflict was thus often more important than the details of the choice made. This is a significant finding.

Other parents were involved right up to the final choice, but then once they were sure that all the options under consideration were acceptable, this last choice could be left to the child. Rachel illustrates this saying that her child made the final choice '*as soon as we'd sort of discussed that they were all good medical schools*'. So that her child was making this last choice, but only from a small group of equally good alternatives (termed an 'evoked set' by Zeithaml and Bitner 2003). Lee and Beatty (2002)'s study supports this, as they find that parents often set the parameters of choice, with some options not even being presented to the child, having already been discounted.

The second type of compromise was experienced by some parents when they had been forced to compromise on aspects of the choice that did matter to them and to leave those choices to the child. These were parents who felt that they had not been listened to and had been ignored. For them compromise essentially meant 'giving in' to the child and his or her preferences and ways of working. Hamilton (2009) identifies 'giving in' as one strategy for conflict avoidance. Mary illustrates this well as she expresses some regret at her child's choices and her lack of input into them:

So it would have been a safer back-up and I suppose because she isn't very chatty and responsive we've sort of very much left it up to her, and as I say now, I do have a little regret, that I think, well perhaps we should have tried to put our foot down and gone, well, actually that's - ...you look at what you're doing here.

But her child was very reluctant to discuss things with her:

“Well, I suppose I quite like to have the opportunity to talk about it, whereas she just doesn't really want to, whereas I would quite happily have a sort of longer chat about something that – As I say, it's almost well you can't say anything sort of twice...She's very, ...she has her own sort of thought process and works things through and, you know, will make her own decision. You can only sort of put little bits in there and say well you need to consider x, x, and x and see what she comes up with.”

Wendy also laments her lack of involvement, saying '*...he doesn't want me too involved in his decisions, you know, and I've had to take a bit of a step back.*' Later she describes how she feels as '*I sort of like felt a bit redundant I suppose*'. So this again illustrates parents having to come to terms with the changing relationship and with their child growing up. Davis (1976) notes the role of compromise in reaching a joint decision and that in some situations expertise and experience are sacrificed to maintain harmony, which seems to be the case for these participants.

These detailed accounts add to our understanding of how choices are experienced and of the vital role of compromise. This includes the idea of different types of compromise which can take place during an extended choice process and the key point in this context, which is that maintaining a relationship takes precedence over the actual choice made.

Relationship maintenance through teamwork

Another way that the experiences of choice are shown to be about relationship maintenance is to consider teamwork. Teamwork was experienced in different ways, ranging from some parents who worked harmoniously with their child for the most part, to others who barely worked as a team at all. It was about the differing roles that each played and for many, it was a mixed experience. They worked as a team with varying degrees of success and in different ways at different times, with one or other of them (child or parent) leading it, or putting in most of the effort and these roles could vary and be interchangeable during the long choice process.

One way that teamwork was experienced was through the parent and child focusing on different aspects – thus dividing up what needed to be done. So that parents focused on factors such as safety, accommodation, finance, dropout rates, contact hours and employability, referring to themselves as asking ‘*parent type*’ questions (Jasmine) in these areas; whereas, the child might concentrate on the course or social life, for example. This supports the literature which finds different choice criteria between parent and child (e.g. Broekemier and Seshadri, 2000). Here, this appears to be a deliberate strategy by some parents to gain some control over aspects which were important to them and/or about which they were knowledgeable. For example, Mark talked at length about his involvement in his daughter’s accommodation choice and was also involved in overseeing the financial aspects; using his experience and expertise. This of course also helps to maintain the relationship and avoid conflict, as by focusing on different aspects there is less likelihood of disagreement between parties. It echoes Park’s (1982) notion of ‘task specialisation’ (also Hamilton 2009; Haywood and Molesworth 2010; Nørgaard and Brunsø 2011).

It was also interesting that some participants described their experiences as ‘teamwork’ (‘*so yes we are a team...*’ and later ‘*...we’re operation education*’ (Jasmine)), when what they described seemed unlike common ideas of teamwork. It may also be that the

child does not see it like this, as he or she may not care about the parent's priorities or involvement. At times it is teamwork, but at other times, it seemed to be more like two people working on a project separately and in parallel (with different aims, agendas and ways of doing things). In some cases, it seemed as if only one party, the parent, actually wants it to be a shared experience, a team effort, and will work hard to try to achieve this, including making efforts to persuade the child to discuss things, and being prepared to compromise. This again illustrates parents coming to terms with a changing relationship. The child may be happy to get on with it on his or her own without any involvement from the parent: '*he said when I've made the choice and when it comes to the deadline, I'll let you know*' is how Tina describes her son and his independent approach to choosing a university. She describes him elsewhere as:

That's just M, he keeps his cards close to his chest, that's the expression I could use for him. He doesn't let on a lot. He's very...quiet and he keeps...his thoughts to himself and everything. He... looked into it, he made his decisions...So he said on the deadline day...I've applied to X as my first choice, Y as the second, so that's it.

So he discusses very little with her. Or alternatively, some children just wanted to forget about it altogether and did not want their parents trying to 'nag' them into getting it done.

Thus, teamwork could be experienced as the differing levels of involvement in the process parent and child had. This is illustrated by parents such as Mary, Wendy or Tina who struggle to get their child to talk to them about it at all, or alternatively by Clare, Lizzie and Sarah who find it hard to get their child to engage with the process, meaning that at times they have to take over and get more involved in it than they would like. Sarah describes how she suggests the idea of going to university to her son in the first place, orders some

prospectuses and books Open Days; although she is keen for him to get involved, or as she puts it, to ‘own’ it:

Oh no he hadn’t owned it by then. When we were looking through the prospectuses this was me going through the options and him just not being prepared to look at the options. So in a sense I was—had to do that for him I felt...

Clare echoes this experience, describing how she researches courses for her son and only once she has narrowed them down and identified some possibilities, does he get involved. Here she describes the detailed knowledge she has acquired about the different types of courses within the subject area that interests him and how she matches them to her knowledge of what will suit him:

Yes, it was...all within either film and TV, film and video, film and moving image. They all called it something slightly different, but they-, you know, you had to drill down on...the university websites and really drill down into the make-up of the course. And actually some I was looking in great detail at what they were suggesting, what you had to do, and just the wording of it...much more ‘you learn through practical experience’. Whereas some of the others were, ‘well we will teach you these modules and you will learn a bit about the camera things.’ I thought, oh no, he needs ‘hands-on’...

This supports Thompson’s (1996, 397) study of the experiences of working mothers which finds that a critical role adopted is negotiating compromises, but also that to avoid ‘emotional stress’ they end up taking over and doing things themselves, rather than having to keep ‘nagging’. It is also partly supported by some of the HE choice literature, which finds that some parents put a lot of hard work into the process (e.g. Reay, David and Ball 2005; Pugsley

1998), engaging in what Ball, Macrae and Maguire (1999, 217) term the “‘hands on’ choice-work’ part of it.

These detailed descriptions of how teamwork can be experienced are not prominent in the choice literature, which often ignores this vital relational element. Key findings in this study include the view that decision-making experiences can be framed by the nature of the relationships formed with other people; where people are working together, but also at times working in parallel. One person may be trying to maintain a sense of a team and to keep both parties together as their priority. Thus, they will be prepared to compromise over the choices made and these compromises can be seen as efforts to maintain relationships. How this is manifest in the HE choice context will depend on how involved parents want or feel they need to be in the process and by the moderating effect of their existing relationship with the child.

Given the nature of highly interpretive work, we acknowledge that this reading of our discussions with the participants offers an 'always provisional' account. Whilst we have made efforts to reflect and represent what was important and of prime concern to those we interviewed, we accept that our interest and experiences within higher education helped shape the paper's discursive contribution. Whilst we believe the themes outlined are widely pertinent, readers should recognise that they are, as with all experiences, grounded in a particular set of circumstances captured in a particular moment (Jessop 1996). The themes also derive from our convenience sample. The nature and composition of this sample are discussed in the Method section and some implications of the sample are further explored in the Reflections section.

Conclusion

This study explores experiences of parenting at a liminal time in the relationship with the child, made more prominent in a UK setting where most students move out of their family home to attend university. It specifically then examines how this impacts on the HE choice experience. It underlines the importance of considering choice as deeply embedded in people's everyday lives and of the need to consider the context of choice that gives it rich meaning to those involved in it. Here the prominent context is relationships; specifically relationship maintenance experienced through parents' efforts and involvement in these choices which are with and for someone else. Both the context and role of relationships are areas neglected in much marketing choice literature and in most prior studies of student recruitment. The recalled experiences of the parents in this study meant that notions of consumer choice and the symbols of a market-oriented HE sector, such as league tables, branding strategies and web sites, receded into the background, acknowledged but not prioritised. Thus, these lived experiences were framed in ways that meant the focal point was the intrapersonal relationship. The methodological approach adopted allowed the experiences of parenting and this intrapersonal relationship to dominate participants' accounts and the meaning that they attributed to them.

Rather than being a rational consumer process, HE choice was experienced by parents as an attempt to maintain and renegotiate a relationship with their child at a time of change. This results in strategies for conflict avoidance and compromise, and feelings of stress and uncertainty which could lead to a messy process '*a little bit of a muddle*' (Rachel). Existing literature and government policy largely ignores the relational and emotional aspects which formed such an important part of participants' descriptions of their experiences and instead views HE choice as a logical, calculative process of utility maximisation.

Implications

In problematizing HE choice and questioning the idea that this is a consumer choice and by focusing on a neglected group (parents), this study contributes to our understanding through the richness and detail of how this choice process is actually experienced. This is not a decision-making process in the way that most of the literature discussing HE student recruitment positions it. At a time of rapid change in the HE landscape (Nedbalova, Greenacre and Schulz 2014), including increasing competition, HEIs need a far more sophisticated understanding of their recruitment in order to maximise its effectiveness.

Policy makers and HEIs need to recognise that this is not purely, or even primarily, a rational process and that parents' involvement is not necessarily leading to a more thorough, informed process, as they might think (Haywood 2014). Producing ever more information e.g. indicators of teaching quality through the TEF (BIS 2016), may be counterproductive and simply serve to overwhelm or confuse; rather than create a market in HE as the government wants (BIS 2016). Some parents are prepared to prioritise the relationship with their child over the actual choices made and thus to compromise to avoid conflict. These are nuanced experiences which cannot be simply predicted, modelled, or easily influenced in the way that HEI marketers might like to believe. They can be fraught and take place at a key stage in the relationship when tensions may already be running high. Unrealistic expectations about how parent and child work together and how much complex information they are willing and able to process (e.g. 'Key Information Sets') may lead to unfounded assumptions. For example, students' understanding of the course and what it involves may be less clear and well-informed than HEIs think (Haywood and Molesworth 2010; Haywood, Jenkins and Molesworth 2011). As a consequence, HEIs need to consider how to organise their communications in ways that tap into this desire for relationship maintenance, including Open Days, as many parents now attend them (Moorhead 2009; Thorpe 2011; Machan 2011). For example, some universities separate parent and child at Open Days and they need

to reflect on their rationale for this. If it is to allow for a focus on different criteria, this could have some benefits. However, they still need to think about how they might encourage a productive discussion and the avoidance of conflict when both parties come back together again.

HEIs also need to understand that the roles parents play and the interactions they have with their child vary; so that just as there is no one single 'prospective candidate', there is no one single type of parent, or type of relationship either. So they need to avoid assuming either that all parents are heavily involved and thus directing communications at them (as is increasingly happening in the USA for example, see Coughlan 2008); or conversely that parents have little or no involvement. The reality is much more complex, perhaps requiring them to invest in establishing relationships with parents and in gaining a greater understanding of their perspective. HEIs perhaps need to reconsider their priorities; for example by redirecting some of the budget currently devoted to enhancing the 'student experience' for existing students (Temple *et al.* 2014; Burns 2014; Ratcliffe 2015), towards gaining a more sophisticated understanding of the recruitment process and of parents' role in it. They also need to reflect on and question the relevance and applicability of mainstream marketing and business theory to this sector. Fruitful alternative perspectives might be found in emerging work in transformative marketing (Ozanne 2011) that might also serve as a useful location for further research in this area.

As this process is about relationship maintenance at a critical time; schools also need to avoid putting more pressure on this relationship by having unrealistic expectations. They can help parents by taking some of the responsibility off them through providing pupils with a lot of help and guidance and by trying to unite with parents so that they can work together, for example, through clearly communicating and reinforcing deadlines. Communicating directly with both parties, through Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and joint meetings

rather than relying on the child to pass on information, could also help avoid conflict and maintain this crucial relationship.

Reflections

As discussed earlier, the convenience sample of volunteers was predominantly middle class and female and it should be noted that a wider range of participants would have elicited an alternative set and range of experiences. These might have included a focus on different aspects of the choice, on different types of behaviour being foregrounded and revealed different experiences with regard to the evolving relationship with the child; this is the nature of highly interpretive work. A future study may wish to take the findings identified here further. For example, this could include looking at the experiences of fathers or other family members to see how they interact with the child and to examine their changing relationship during the HE choice process. It might also be interesting to talk to the whole family, both parents and the child, separately and also all together (Pugsley 1998 and Hoover, Clark and Alters 2004 do the latter), as this would allow a focus on their different perspectives and a polyvocal exploration of this core relationship.

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