

Crossing Boundaries: Rethinking the ways that first-in-family students navigate ‘barriers’ to higher education

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Crossing Boundaries: Rethinking the ways that first-in-family students navigate ‘barriers’ to higher education

This article explores how one cohort of first-in-family students narrated their movement into and through university, proposed as a form of boundary crossing. These metaphors emerged from the stories that students told about their persistence, with references ranging from institutional or organisational boundaries through to those imposed by self and others. Applying the sensitizing lens of boundary crossing, an analysis is provided of how learners navigated their transition into university and the types of persistence behaviours adopted. The focus is on those who traversed these boundaries, considering the nature of incursions and the ways these were negotiated within students’ everyday lives. This cohort all self-identified as being the first in their family to attend university but also acknowledged a variety of additional social, cultural and economic factors that impacted upon their educational journey.

Keywords: Boundary crossing, first in family students, higher education participation, transition, educational equity, field

Introduction

...that’s probably a conditioning from a working-class family that didn’t see university as an option. Honestly, when you sat down as a child and you said, “I want to be an astronaut” – that was not something that... that’s great when you’re five but by the time you’re 13, 14, living in a country town, you stop wanting to be an astronaut; you just don’t see that option for you. But in a sense, the country town, that window of opportunity of what it was that you wanted to be was so small given the constraints the familial foundation puts upon you, plus the ignorance and the restraints that you put upon yourself as well. (Brett, 33, identified as being from a low socio-economic status (LSES) background, B. Business)

Brett is a final year student who is studying in an off-campus mode at a regional university in Australia. He did most of his growing up in a small regional centre and had been a mechanical fitter before deciding to return to education and study a business

degree. Brett's reflection above speaks to the foreclosure of educational futures that may occur, when attending higher education (HE) is not an expected trajectory in the family or larger community. This 'window of opportunity' he described as so 'small' gives a sense of impossibility of movement into or beyond its opening. Indeed, the word 'window' evocatively implies that while Brett could see what was beyond, it was outside his grasp; his was a destiny of observer rather than participant. For Brett, his dreams and ambitions were largely contracted before they had any opportunity to take root and grow, leading to leaving school and pursuing a 'very mechanical pathway'.

Brett's quote also speaks to the boundaries that many students, particularly those from equity¹ or less advantaged backgrounds, may encounter in their journey into and through university. Brett's narrative, along with others, inspired this article, which considers how imperceptible boundaries present themselves to students and how, more importantly, students navigate these to ultimately realise their goals. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) argue that 'all learning involves boundaries' (p.132) and point to the nature of discipline structures and the ways these construct borders across learning. However, the focus of this article is on how boundaries exist both internally and externally to the university landscape and how these are navigated by first in family (FiF) learners like Brett. These students often have limited exposure to the HE learning environment or its implicit rules and practices, therefore exploring how boundaries or

¹ Within Australia, where this study occurred there are six identified equity groups as follows:

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds; students with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Non English Speaking background students, rural and remote students and women studying in non-traditional areas

‘spaces between fields’ (Eyal, 2012, p. 158) are managed, can provide insights into how this cohort can be better supported and retained within the HE sector.

By drawing on the metaphor of boundaries this article aims to conceptually broaden understanding of student persistence; as Eyal (2012) explains boundaries between fields do not simply ‘separate what’s inside and outside of the field’ but represents a ‘zone of essential connections and transactions between them’ (p.162). In this article, I distinguish between HE ‘barriers’, often assumed to be impenetrable, with the metaphor of traversable boundaries. Barriers encountered by university learners from diverse backgrounds, particularly those from families where university attendance is not the norm, have been well documented in the literature (see for example Collier & Morgan, 2008; Cushman, 2007; Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett & Slack, 2006; Lehmann, 2007; 2009; Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins & Serrata, 2016 and others). However, the term ‘barrier’ assumes an immovable object or something that prevents incursion, a fixed or unyielding entity which learners must adapt to or overcome. On the other hand, a boundary can be penetrated and traversed (Tsui & Law, 2007) albeit difficult and confronting work. Individuals move over and between boundaries, enacting an agentic navigation, whereas barriers are fixed and appear insurmountable.

The ways in which learners navigate boundaries they encounter during travel into and through HE remains somewhat under-explored, particularly the repercussions for self and others. Focusing on the persistence narratives of those who have successfully navigated these boundaries provides insights into the relational nature of these movements. While the literature is replete with descriptions of barriers students encounter, this article extends current research to consider learners’ narration of boundary crossing, offering an alternative perspective to those that foreground the inevitable struggles of this HE journey. Drawing on the metaphor of boundary crossing

and recognising this as offering a ‘space between fields’ recognises the possibilities of this space ‘where things can be done and combinations and conversions can be established that are not possible to do within fields.’ (Eyal, 2012, p. 177)

Setting the scene

The movement into and through university is perceived as a fraught process for many students, but particularly for those from diverse or equity backgrounds (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Polesel, Leahy, Gillis, 2018; Reay, 1998, 2003, 2016, 2017).

Numerous barriers have been identified as limiting the academic success and progression of students who are not privy to the cultural and economic capitals expected or assumed within the HE environment. Key issues include financial constraints (Oldfield, 2012; O’Shea, 2018); academic under-preparedness, leading to feelings of dislocation or culture shock (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004); complex management of identity or existing relationships (Waller, Bovill & Pitt, 2011; Brine & Waller, 2004; Mannay, 2013) including the emotional work involved in managing caring responsibilities (Gouthro, 2006; Giles, 1990; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Pascall & Cox, 1993). All factors that may lead to higher levels of attrition or early departure for this cohort (Coates & Ransom, 2011; McMillan, 2005; Rubio, Mireles, Jones, & Mayse, 2017, Spiegler, 2018; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

Within Australia, approximately half the university student population (51%) is regarded as being the first in their family to attend university (OECD, 2013; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). However, data is not collected systematically and definitions around what constitutes being the ‘first’ are somewhat ambiguous (O’Shea, 2016a). For the purposes of this article, being the first in the family means that no one, including parents, siblings, partners and children, have previously attained a university qualification. This definition deliberately focuses attention on those students who do not

have access to significant others within the household to ask questions about university or from whom they can seek necessary institutional ‘insider’ knowledge (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, & Grinstead, 2008). The FiF population is also often comprised of older females, many of whom are returning to education after a significant gap in formal learning (Stebbleton, Soria & Huesman, 2014) - factors which, in turn, can impact on HE experiences. As Cox and Ebbers (2010) explain:

adult students bring with them different and multiple experiences, roles and responsibilities than those of traditional age students...experience different transitions...and have a different focus (p.241).

In this article, the FiF participants were all completing their final year of study and each was invited to reflect at length about their persistence at university. The article deliberately focuses on mature-age participants over 25 years of age, in recognition that they are more likely to be financially independent from parents or care-givers, in paid employment and/or have caring responsibility for others, such as partners and/or children (Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009), and in terms of equity categories, are highly intersected. Given the complexity of their existing lives and the assumed barriers these learners all encountered, how each articulated navigation into and through university can usefully build upon existing scholarly understanding of diverse HE populations. By deliberately focusing on the act of persistence, this research seeks to foreground what students ‘bring to’ the HE setting in order to provide a ‘close-up’ examination of how individuals productively manage complex issues and situations to enact HE success.

First in Family students moving into and through university

Overwhelmingly, research indicates that this FiF population have a limited sense of ‘fit’ with HE institutions and experience difficulty ‘mastering the college role.’ (Spiegler &

Bednarek, 2013, p.330). Thomas and Quinn's (2007) seminal work on UK FiF students who departed early from university describes how learners struggled with feelings of isolation, leading to a sense of being a nameless face in the crowd. This 'invisibility' was further compounded by a general lack of understanding about how tertiary institutions operated, specifically knowledge about how or where to get support or assistance. Thomas and Quinn (2007) concluded that for their participants 'Establishing a level of social "fit" proved to be problematic' (p.92). Lack of 'fit' has also been argued as leading to frustration and isolation during transition to HE (Cushman, 2007) and in some cases disenfranchisement leads to thoughts of early departure or limited engagement.

The emotional and affective aspects of returning to education for older students has also been outlined in the literature. Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) argue that emotionality is:

most pronounced amongst students with no previous familial experience of higher education, where there is no reservoir of knowledge to draw upon (p.569).

Christie et al's (2008) participants defined feelings of 'displacement, anxiety and guilt' alongside more expected and anticipated emotions such as 'hopeful anticipation, pleasure and self-esteem' (p.569). The affective repercussions of returning to education may also be exacerbated by parenting or caring responsibilities which similarly, can impact on the identity work of older students. As Wainwright and Marandet (2010) highlight 'adopting a new identity of learner in addition to the continued identity, role and responsibilities of parent can be challenging' (p.458). A sentiment echoed by Mallman and Lee (2014) who contend that very little is known about the actual identity work of older FIF learners, particularly the 'emotional dynamics of inhabiting a new learner identity' (p.5).

Boundary work and higher education participation

Some scholarly work has taken a more ‘close-up’ investigation of FiF students’ interactions between HE experiences and existing situational contexts, indicating that careful negotiations are necessary to succeed in both domains. For example, Collier and Morgan (2008) unpack the ‘implicit expectations’ and ‘tacit understandings’ (p. 426) needed for learners to perform successfully, arguing that this type of role mastery may be more difficult for those with limited apriori understanding of the university environment. Focussing on younger FiF students, Longwell-Grice et al, (2016) also highlight invisible and difficult work undertaken in the movement between the different worlds of home and university. Managing transition is also a focus of Bryan & Simmons’ (2009) work which highlights challenges of fully assimilating into the university environment, that ‘assimilation was specific and issue-driven, which allowed them to switch back and forth between their home and university cultures’ (p.404). Applying the lens of boundary crossing may capture the intricate movements that many FiF students undertake, echoing Thomas and Quinn’s (2007) observation that these participants seem to require ‘a flexible system to accommodate a more fluid learning self’ (p.56).

University campuses are not impartial places but rather spaces governed by social norms and discourses, which endeavour to position individuals in certain ways (Hook, 2016, p.3). Akkerman and Bakker (2011) argue that the study of boundary incursions or interactions provide the opportunity to develop a more ‘fine-grained appreciation of diversity’ (p.135) in contested environments. This movement between and over metaphorical boundaries merits closer attention, suggesting a fluidity and agency amongst learners, whereby the idea of the impossible ‘becomes’ possible, or at least worth trying. The next section explores how boundaries are considered within field

theory and how such applications might inform more nuanced understandings of the ways in which diverse student populations persist in often uncompromising HE environments.

Analytical Framing

Applying spatial metaphors to the field of sociology has emerged as a powerful analytic tool over the last decades. These applications offer the potential to open up the relational nature of lived experiences, providing a more nuanced analysis of the inner operations of agency and power (Silber, 1995). The metaphor of boundary crossing has been applied to individuals' incursions or interactions across various boundary domains; these domains can encompass geographical locations, socio-cultural affiliations and also, belief systems, which exist across social systems and communities (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Within education, the notions of boundary crossing, boundary object and also boundary subjects have theoretically drawn upon the broad areas of activity theory (Engeström, 1987) and situated learning theory (Wenger, 1998). The application of boundary crossing in this study relates more specifically to Bourdieuan notions of field, which alongside capitals, and habitus can be regarded as one of the 'conceptual cornerstones' of Bourdieu's theories (Bennett & Silva, 2011, p.429). Essentially, Bourdieu (1997) identifies 'fields' as being the social spaces that are structured by shared rules and relationships, individuals' movement and successes within these fields are governed by the capital that is possessed. Martin and Gregg (2015) highlight field as a complex entity being both 'a field of forces and a field of struggle that has game-like aspects to it' (p.48). The relational nature of the field renders this a dynamic space where individuals have varying levels and types of capital (Noble, 2013) but equally, this is a 'space of possibilities' for the social actors inhabiting it (Bourdieu, 1993, p.64).

While dynamic, fields are also mapped by the actors, institutions, accepted practices and discourses; like any other ‘map’ there are also boundaries or ‘a sense of the “borders” which mark the space in which the game of the field is played, and what is outside that space’ (Noble, 2013, p.352). Focusing on how individuals navigate across fields provides some insight into the ‘subjective experience’ of these movements particularly how incursions across fields are managed at a practical or day-to-day level (Loveday, 2015, p.578).

Research Design and Methodology

The data presented in this paper is part of a larger study that explores the capabilities and capitals that underpin FiF learners’ persistence behaviours during their progression through their degrees. The study received funding from the Australian Research Council (DP170100705). Survey/interview data was collected over six months (April-September) during 2017, involving nine university² sites across Australia. The focus in this article is on the interview data with details across participating institutions provided in **Error! Reference source not found..** Summary details of the universities including their population size and annual attrition rates are provided; the latter data is included to contextualise the act of persistence, which was the focus of the overall study.

TABLE ONE NEAR HERE

The universities in this study shared a number of characteristics; all were medium - large teaching/research institutions (mean on-shore student population = 25,500) with campuses in both regional and urban settings. Within Australia, regional universities generally have campuses located outside main cities and as a result tend to attract a

² No interviews were completed at one participating university – only surveys were completed

higher proportion of students from identified equity groups. None of these universities could be classed as 'elite' in the sense that none were members of the 'Group of Eight' which are those institutions in Australia that are classed as 'red brick' or 'ivy league'.

Following ethics approval from the lead university, a number of public HE institutions were approached to participate in this study. The universities that agreed to participate (n=9) distributed an email or approved communication (i.e posters/e-announcements) to final year domestic, on-shore students inviting participation in an online survey or interview that would explore their experiences of persisting through their undergraduate studies. In some cases, this communication was directed solely at students who had been identified as FiF; where this data was not available, the invitation explicitly stated the target group. In addition, the first question in the interview/survey asked for this demographic detail. A very small number of participants were not first in the family and these surveys/interviews were removed from the data set. While the majority of the participants opted to complete the survey (n=306) a significant number agreed to participate in an in-depth interview (n=69) which was conducted either face-to-face or, given the distances involved, via phone or Skype. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and while interviews were semi-structured each broadly covered the following themes:

- Student self-reflections: Key qualities / characteristics that individuals used to described themselves and their expectations of university
- Reflections on HE: How participants viewed their time at university including expectations and also, benefits or positive outcomes

³ Surveys covered similar themes with the same questions used

- HE Participation and Community/Family Support: The ways in which family/social networks assisted (or not) the journey into and through HE
- HE Participation and Institutional support: How the institution valued existing skills or knowledges held by the individual
- HE Participation and others: These questions specifically related to perceptions of other students and how they had managed (or not) their university studies

During interviews, participants were also encouraged to reflect upon topics and themes beyond those outlined above. This resulted in deeply descriptive data that explored participants' university experiences and the ways in which they navigated their way through HE environments. The richness of this data is complemented by the diverse nature of the participants, who were derived from multiple cultural, economic and geographical backgrounds. Adopting a narrative biographical methodology also assisted in capturing this diversity. Narrative inquiry enables an exploration of the situatedness of human action to present a more embodied version of lived experience. This is a powerful methodology that enables individuals to articulate the connections between the complexity of lived experience and the 'emotional and motivational meaning connected with it' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.11).

Each interview was transcribed and de-identified to ensure anonymity, with two researchers independently conducting line by line coding of a selection of transcripts. This inductive process formed the basis for generative discussions around emerging themes. Transcripts were then imported into QSR NVivo 11 for further analysis and exploration. During this process, some of the themes became redundant or were collapsed into collective categories. Whilst there were no specific questions relating to the concepts of boundaries or boundary crossing, during analysis I was struck by the

fact that participants repeatedly reflected upon, what I have termed, the ‘boundaries’, they traversed during the journey into and through university. Amongst the older participants (n=54) in particular, there were 265 broad references to boundaries or barriers to attending HE that were located both externally and internally to themselves, often manifestly limiting their capacity to succeed in this environment. Given that each participant was at the culmination of their studies and had not succumbed to these identified barriers, the ways in which these older learners successfully negotiated this HE field and implied boundaries, provided an alternative perspective on this educational undertaking.

Considering boundaries and boundary crossing

Most of these participants had undertaken lengthy and interrupted pathways to university. The many twists and turns of this movement informed narratives that were both descriptive and also unique. Despite this individuality, there were commonalities across stories. The next section explores the shared themes associated with how participants referred to the boundaries they negotiated during this journey. These boundaries were often informed by beliefs they or others held concerning expected social roles or personal destinies. The data is presented under two broad themes that while interrelated will be explored separately as follows.

- Considering boundaries around HE fields
- Managing or navigating these ‘spaces between fields’

These findings draw solely upon the words of the student participants, all names are pseudonyms with any references to locations being removed to protect identities.

Further demographic details about the participants are included in brackets, where these were described or indicated during interviews. This will be followed by a

discussion that explores how the findings contribute to our understanding about persistence in HE.

Considering the boundaries around HE fields

As mentioned above, these students were all in the latter stages of their degrees with many on the brink of graduating from university. However, when asked to reflect on their journey, many indicated that prior to commencing university, the possibility of crossing into the HE field seemed improbable or implausible. Like Brett's quote that begins this article, HE was a pathway that people 'like them' typically did not follow. Such restrictions were not related to the material boundaries of educational pursuit, such as entry requirements or application procedures, but rather embedded in assumptions about personal capacities and imagined futures. Boundary perceptions were clearly articulated during interviews and existed both within the mindsets of the learners as well as those external to them, creating limitations around their options or choices. Heather, a 59-year-old single parent of three children in the final year of a Visual Arts Degree, described how university was not a 'priority' when she was growing up; attending HE was simply not 'something people did in the 60s and 70s around me'. This is echoed by Nerida (39, Disability, B Social Work) who explained how 'higher education wasn't considered something of value' by those in her household. For Paz (43, B Science), who had enrolled in university after a career in construction, '...I think it's just from our family background – you're supposed to be... your life is about your job and how much you earn and what assets you own...'

In some cases, there were hidden obstructions to undertaking this endeavour often demarcated by the immediate family of the learners. Those closest to the learner were described as defining post-schooling pathways that mirrored their own educational trajectories or preconceptions about who attended university. As each of these

participants were the first in their families to attend university, there was little familial experience of educational pathways beyond school and perhaps as a result, little generational shift in beliefs or perspectives. This was particularly noticeable amongst the older female participants who reflected upon family expectations of progression from school to housewife, with perhaps some temporary employment in between, as the most appropriate trajectory. Pippa (39) provided an example of how family pressures could curtail aspirations and set up a seemingly insurmountable boundary. Despite wanting to study engineering at school she accepted her parent's beliefs that she should simply 'get married, have children and have a good job and have a nice home and be close with your family'. Pippa followed this route: 'I did get married when I was 20 and the marriage fell apart about 11 years later' (Pippa, 39, NESB, Sole parent, B. Engineering). After she lost her home and was diagnosed with a serious illness she finally enrolled in an engineering degree: '...so I think I also used the degree to get my mind off losing things, sickness'.

However, limits set by gender expectations did not end for Pippa once she had enrolled in her Engineering degree, made very clear by the male lecturer, who said:

Of the statistics of females doing an Engineering degree, only eight percent graduate and of that eight percent there's less than two percent that are mature age". And I said, "Well I'm going to be part of that two percent.

Pippa rejected advice to do nursing instead, explaining: 'Look, thanks for the offer but I'm a nurse, I'm a psychologist, I'm all these other things at home; I want to do something that I want to do for me'. Pippa was just one example of someone who rejected social or familial expectations, instead opting to transgress pre-defined boundaries and disrupt pre-conceived beliefs. She interpreted her ability to keep moving forward in her learning as an attribute that was part of her approach to life and

underpinned by her understanding that ‘through my whole life, I’ve been the odd one out.’ By drawing upon previous experience as a boundary outlier, Pippa seemed able to manage this contested space, resisting pre-conceived limitations others had defined.

It was not only women who reflected upon the boundaries imposed from those around them. Aaron (47, Rural/Remote, B. Education), indicated that his rural/farming family was actively opposed to the idea of further study beyond school:

I just didn’t do it because there was not much pressure to... “No, university is no good. You just read books” and the whole family is dead against it.

In the face of such strong preconceptions of futures in which university had no place, a number of the participants described their boundary crossings as acts of defiance. For Isabel, ‘I just made it happen’ (28, LSES, B. Nursing) whilst for Ruth it required ‘putting [her] foot down’, rejecting what was anticipated and rewriting her life course:

I think that life will interfere if you let it...you really have to put your foot down and say “No, it’s about me right now” ... and some people can’t do that, some people feel that sense of responsibility for all the other things that they do. (Ruth, 53, B. Arts).

By crossing over the boundary, Ruth regards herself as being different to those ‘others’ who are unable to detach themselves from competing responsibilities.

Crossing the boundary into university required a level of determination, as Hayley described: ‘I’ve spent pretty much most of my life people telling me that I won’t amount to much, I won’t get to university, I’m not smart enough....’ (Hayley, 26, LSES, M. Teach). The need to reject peoples’ preconceptions or assumptions about what was possible was a recurring theme in the interviews, almost a desire to remap predetermined borders:

I want to prove to everyone – especially my husband – that I’m not this silly, dumb person that can’t put one foot in front of the other ... (Heather, 59, B Arts).

Crossing the boundary into university was clearly not only rejecting what is anticipated but also rewriting a social narrative more reflective of an individual’s experience and self-identity. The ways in which this boundary crossing was enacted and managed across the participants is described in the next section; while this could be a painful undertaking, moving between these boundaries and fields could also be rewarding, fulfilling persistent and lingering desires or emotions.

Managing or navigating ‘spaces between fields’

Participants reflected on many different ways they managed movement between fields and the management of boundaries across different domains. At 45, Bernadette had just successfully completed an Honours degree in Speech Pathology, an accomplishment she had achieved studying full-time with two children and also a disability. Like others in this study, Bernadette referred to the need to delineate between the fields she occupied, for example carefully selecting topics of conversation to avoid perceptions of difference:

they’re just looking at you like you’ve got two heads sometimes... You don’t actually tell them the content because you know that they’re just looking at you going, “Yeah, you’re just talking at me”.

The perceptions of those outside the university field did not necessarily change once studies commenced. Instead, existing perspectives could create dissonance in relation to family values and construct new boundaries to be managed between fields. In these cases, participants indicated how keeping home and university spaces separate seemed to enable various aspects of their life to be better managed with less conflict or

resistance from others. Perhaps as a result of this division, the need to develop a social network of those from similar backgrounds was key; such networks provided the means to maintain momentum and negotiate movement between different fields:

I think that's just what's gotten me through is that continual persistence and having a network of people that I can rely on and sort of be my cheer squad so to speak to give me that belief in myself that I can do it. (Erin, 32, Single Parent, B. Nursing)

...other fellow students. You know, there's also – not a lot but you know, quite a few mature age students; we have a chat and support each other and give advice. (Erica, 55, NESB, B. Business)

Importantly, these relationships were selective and strategic, participants recognising that not everyone could understand or actively support their educational undertakings. Erica (55) detailed how she deliberately sought out relational support from a select few as she recognised that 'People, friends on the outside' did not understand her activities within the university setting, explaining that 'they cannot imagine what it's like and what you go through'. Interestingly, she perceived an 'inside/outside' divide, those on the 'outside', while still friends, were not regarded as an asset within this HE field.

Divisions between fields created a need for careful censorship at times but also a degree of agility or flexibility in order to manage domains. As Evelyn (38) described university demanded a willingness to 'take apart a bit of yourself and realise that we don't know everything. I unlearned so much to learn what I now know.' She continued by explaining how it was necessary to be:

a bit fluid, you've got to be agile, you've got to be flexible, you've got to be balanced – you've got to have your feet firmly set on the ground but you've got to have your knees bent, you know. It's like standing on a moving train. That's me –

I'm standing on a moving train. (Evelyn, 38, Disability, B Commerce)

For Aaron, this adaptability was founded on his willingness to change and 'be changed' including a readiness to renegotiate existing self-identity and positionality:

I was ready to immerse fully and let the university experience change me instead of trying to use the university experience to prove that I already knew everything. I wanted it to change me and so it did . (Aaron, 47, Rural, B. Education)

Both Layla (25, LSES, B. Psychology) and Leon (36, LSES, B. Engineering) similarly reflected upon this need to be open to change. Layla described how she 'had to change my perceptions of myself' while Leon had reconsidered the relational aspects of his life to better negotiate boundaries between various fields:

so everything changed – the way I had relationships with people changed, the way I had relationships with, yeah, everyone – friends, family, women, the whole lot. I just had to throw it all under the bus and just make sure that I got this piece of paper after four years (Leon, 36, LSES, B. Engineering)

The ability to be flexible and adaptable also extended to apriori experiences or knowledges. To work across boundaries sometimes required students to revise their skills and capitals and apply them differently within the educational field, which were not only work-related knowledges but importantly, capitals derived from life experience. For example, both Isabel and Josie explained how previous hardships in life provided a rich resource to persist at higher education, no matter how difficult this boundary work might be, both had endured worse:

I think my resilience. I think I'm very proud of that. Very, very long stories that I could go through but I've had to be resilient – I dropped out of high school, I was homeless for a while, the father of my first-born child passed away, then I got

married, my husband and I had a child that passed away – I’ve had a whole huge massive difficult life (Isabel, LSES, 28, B. Nursing)

it’s kind of those “If it doesn’t kill you it does make you really stronger” and you say “Well, I coped with that so I can cope”, you know. (Josie, 41, LSES, Rural/Remote, B. Nursing)

The ability to recognise the difficulties of this pathway and yet, almost defiantly, move forward is succinctly summed up by Molly:

I think some of these first in families are way ahead of some of the sixth generations through because it’s the life experience, it’s the nouse to think outside the square and cope with it when it’s tough, you know. (Molly, 33, LSES, B. Social Work)

The previous sections have considered how one group of FiF students, all at the culmination of their degrees, considered their movement into and through the university environment. A ‘sensitizing lens’ of boundary crossing has been applied to this data to consider how it might be understood at a more conceptual level. The next section will discuss the broader implications of this understanding, drawing on key sociological theories and theorists in order to present final conclusions and suggestions for practice.

Discussion and conclusions

It is perhaps unsurprising that the concept of boundary crossing should be applied to the narratives of FiF students; shifting from a life without university to one with university is a dramatic change, particularly as the first amongst family and community to do so. Ball and Vincent (1998) explain these students may not have considered university as a possibility given the lack of an ‘educational memory’ or HE biography within the family. This is echoed by Dyke (2011) who identifies how the combination of economic and cultural factors can impede or ‘limit’ what these learners

reflect upon as possible. Like Brett's opening quote, this may mean that 'a decision is never taken and the agenda need never be set... university [is] simply not within the bounds of possibility, either culturally or economically' (Dyke, 2011, p.106). These narrative biographical interviews highlight how this movement represented much more than simply 'making a decision' to attend an institution or completing an application form. Instead this was an emotionally layered move that had repercussions for both learners and those around them.

A number of participants in this study reflected upon what Friedman (2014) refers to as the 'psychic costs' of being educationally and socially mobile. Students like Bernadette indicating how boundary work was complex, requiring an emotional agility to ensure that relationships across social domains were maintained or continued. Some participants had already metaphorically crossed over the border, embracing new social statuses whilst others, like Bernadette, seemed to be 'permanently caught with one foot in two different taste cultures' (Friedman, 2014, p.363). Such relational dislocation is also echoed in Southgate et al's (2017) study with FiF students in high status degrees, who described a 'social, economic and symbolic distance' that existed in relation to 'their more privileged peers' (p.251). My participants also referred to such distances but largely in relation to themselves and those metaphorically positioned external to institutional borders, such as Erica's delineation between those who existed on the 'outside' and 'inside'. A number of these participants seemed to exist 'between worlds' (Keane, 2011); their boundary crossing necessitated planned and strategic actions designed to maintain equilibrium across different fields.

Yet importantly, existing in this 'in-between' space may also offer possibilities, crossing over boundaries could enable new definitions of the self to emerge or new future imaginaries. As Aleisha (38, B Education) explained:

...university is like a separate little mini-world. I don't know how to explain it. For me, when I go to uni, I'm not mum, I'm not wife, I'm not child – I just get to be me when I'm there. That's what I really like about it.

Eyal (2012) refers to the 'fuzzification' (p. 179) of boundary work, defining this as an 'unregulated' space that can offer the potential for new learnings and resources to be acquired; as Eyal concludes 'there are great advantages in staying liminal.' (p.179) Like the participants in Ishimaru et al's study (2016), these FiF learners often occupied the role of 'boundary spanner', which required individuals to 'mediate between different organizations or spaces' (p. 860) Undoubtedly, this mediation necessitated self-censorship, silence and adaptability, but equally this 'space between fields' also offered opportunities for learning. This included recognising previous life experiences not in terms of deficit or lack but as a form of 'experiential capital' (O'Shea, 2016b) that could assist in negotiating the various boundaries between fields.

Focussing on how learners themselves reflect upon their boundary crossing contributes to a deeper understanding of 'structural influences...operate to maintain hierarchies of distinction and differentiation within the field of higher education' (Reay et al, 2001, p.862). Equally, exploring this boundary work foregrounds the 'spaces' that exist. As Eyal (2012) highlights 'the boundary does not simply separate what's inside and outside the field...but is also a zone of essential connections and transactions between them' (p.162). Students' reflections indicate the fields they occupy are not autonomous or separate entities as Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) seems to suggest; instead there is continual movement across and between these spaces. Perhaps as result of 'bleeding [ing] into each other' (Watkins, 2018, p. 1244) a 'permeability' (Lamont & Molnar, 2002) or 'porous' nature (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017, p. 952)

characterises boundaries that maintain continuity between fields and in some cases, provide opportunity for the acquisition of new capital resources (Eyal, 2012, p.179).

Boundary crossing seems inevitable and not necessarily a negative activity, but how this traversing can be achieved ‘safely and in a manner that is empowering, instructive and productive for everyone involved’ (Singh, Martsin & Glasswell, 2013, p.109) does require attention. While the HE field is a bounded system, boundary work is rarely explicitly named and no ‘roadmap’ exists for students engaged in its complex navigation. However, for learners perhaps the very act of reflecting on these boundary movements provides a conduit to additional and somewhat invisible types of learning. Drawing on the analytic tool of boundary crossing also foregrounds the creative ways that individuals manage boundaries in order to refute and problematise suggestions around lack of agency or implicit acceptance of inequity. The challenge of accommodating the needs of heterogeneous student populations engenders a need for continuing and ongoing research that addresses the complexity of issues that impact upon student retention and attrition. This article provides an alternative conceptual lens from which to consider this movement, drawing attention to the lived reality and ‘messiness’ of this boundary work while equally recognising the possibilities such activities might offer both students and institutions.

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