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# Using Rational Action theory and Bourdieu's habitus theory together to account for educational decision-making in England and Germany

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## Abstract:

Both rational action theory (RAT) and Bourdieu's habitus theory are employed to explain educational decision-making. RAT assumes that decision-making involves cost-benefit analysis, while habitus theory sees educational pathways as shaped by dispositions reflecting familial class of origin. These theories are often seen as conflicting, but we argue that they can fruitfully be used together.

Proponents of these theories often employ different methods. RAT advocates usually employ survey data, while those favouring habitus theory often use case studies. If cost-benefit reasoning does partly explain educational decision-making, then we should expect to find evidence of it at the micro-level. Drawing on interviews conducted in Germany and England, we show that young people do indeed talk about their educational choices in ways which fit RAT accounts. Their class-based habitus often, however, provides upper and lower boundaries for their aspirations, thus conditioning the nature of the cost-benefit analysis entering into decision-making.

Keywords: Rational Action Theory, habitus, Germany, England, educational career, sociology of education, secondary school

## Introduction

The differential social distribution of educational achievement, and its persistence, are well-established social phenomena (e.g., Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001, Breen & Luijkx, 2007, Bynner & Joshi, 2002, Goldthorpe, 2007a, Reay et al., 2005, Savage & Egerton, 1997, Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). Social background both in terms of parents' social class (usually measured through occupation) and parents' education is closely linked to children's educational outcome. Rational Action Theory (RAT) (Boudon, 1974, Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997) and habitus theory (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, 1979) are key theories used to explain this phenomenon. RAT assumes that decision-making involves cost-benefit analysis, while habitus theory regards educational careers and outcomes as shaped by the fact that class-conditioned behaviours and dispositions match the demands of the school

to greater or lesser degrees. These theories are often seen as being in conflict, but, as Vester (2006) has argued, they can also fruitfully be used together. Swartz (1981) similarly argues that while there are important differences between the two approaches, they have much in common, including their focus on individual actors, their attention to socio-economic structure and on the ways in which interacting factors produce social phenomena.

Proponents of these theories not only privilege differing claims and explanations, but also tend to employ different methods of analysis and forms of data. RAT advocates typically employ survey data, while those favouring habitus theory frequently use case studies or interview data<sup>1</sup>. Goldthorpe, who favours RAT over habitus theory, argues that the regularities found in analyses of large-scale survey data are compatible with RAT type explanations, but claims this does not imply that evidence of RAT reasoning need characterise every individual case (Goldthorpe, 2007c). He argues, however, that, considering *central tendencies*, educational choices can be understood as rational (Goldthorpe, 2007d). We agree that cost-benefit reasoning would not have to be evident in every single case but argue that, if RAT is to account for the mechanisms underlying decision-making, one would expect to find evidence of such reasoning in individuals' accounts of their educational careers. A complete, or near complete, absence of such reasoning should count against the theory. In this paper, therefore, we examine individual cases for evidence supporting a RAT type approach, while, since we wish to explore combining the approaches, simultaneously paying attention to the constraining and/or enabling role of individuals' habitus.

We next summarise the two theories' main claims. We then discuss our theoretical stance and methodological approach, explaining why we use interview-based case studies instead of the survey data more commonly used by proponents of RAT. We then present findings from interviews conducted with young people in England and Germany, and conclude with a discussion of these findings in the light of the two theories.

### **Theoretical background**

Theories are essential for the explanation of phenomena. Statistical analyses can establish that there is an association between parental social class and children's educational careers, our focus here. More sophisticated analyses can also identify mediating variables such as parents' education and children's cognitive ability. But researchers interested in going beyond description to explain these correlations have to rely on theories addressing underlying mechanisms (Goldthorpe, 2007c, Pawson, 1989). They may turn to existing theories for plausible explanations or might, alternatively, attempt to develop their own theoretical accounts, on the basis of theoretical reflection and/or by employing in-depth study to undertake process-tracing (George and Bennett, 2005).

#### *Rational Action Theory*

Rational Action Theory (RAT) explains actions by assuming that actors undertake a cost-benefit analysis before acting. Applied to educational decision-making, this implies that parents and/or their children consider the costs of staying in education (foregone earnings as well as the direct costs of education), weighing them against expected benefits such as expected higher earnings. Non-monetary costs may also be taken into account. Risks attached to a particular course of action, for example dropping out of education before a qualification is obtained, are also considered (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). The perceived costs, benefits and risks depend partly on the family's social background. According to Goldthorpe (2007d), an important motive is at least to maintain one's socio-occupational status relative to the family of origin's. Given the well-known relationship between levels of education and

achieved occupation, this in itself leads to social classes having different educational goals. Given this status maintenance goal, individuals' levels of aspiration need to be understood not only in terms of the absolute value of qualifications aimed at, but also by their relation to individuals' social starting points. The rationality of any goal must be understood, not in absolute terms, but relative to individuals' starting situations, a position argued for by Keller and Zavalloni (1964) fifty years ago.

Boudon (1974) also drew on RAT to develop his well-known model of primary and secondary effects to explain social inequality in education. Briefly, primary effects refer to class differences in academic achievement early in a child's career. Then, even given similar levels of initial achievement, secondary effects, resulting from differences in destination goals, and perceived costs and benefits, between children from different social class origins lead students to choose educational pathways differing in prestige and levels of possible qualification. Secondary effects result then from RAT type decision making in the context of particular class contexts.

### *Habitus*

The concept of habitus was developed by Bourdieu (1977, 1986, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, 1979), drawing on Mauss (1979). Habitus is a system of lasting dispositions acquired through past experiences. These cognitive and normative predispositions vary systematically between individuals from different social classes, since "the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition" (Bourdieu, 1977) are part of the environment which produces habitus. These deeply ingrained dispositions influence, among other things, individuals' attitudes towards curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and, importantly, also influence how schools behave towards children from different class backgrounds. For Bourdieu, this explains why working class children often struggle in schools. Because their habitus aligns less well with the school's assumptions, requirements and values, they are less likely to succeed.

Actions constrained or enabled by habitus have their roots in past experiences, allowing the latter to shape expectations. Habitus has an influence on which goals are considered desirable or reasonable per se. In addition, a course of action is not merely chosen according to how likely it is to lead to some outcome, but also by the subjective estimation of the likelihood of success. Such estimations reflect previous collective experience within the class of origin.

### *Combining the approaches*

Some RAT-based work has been criticised for making overly simplistic and/or unrealistic assumptions, including by Boudon (1998, 2003, 2006) himself. Adopting a position of methodological individualism, he argues that macroscopic phenomena must be explained by referring to individual actions (2006). However, while arguing that behaviour is sometimes most fruitfully explained by regarding actions as the result of motivations and reasons, he notes these can vary according to the individual's circumstances (1998). While Boudon does not refer to Bourdieu, this line of argument seems to us to be closely related to Bourdieu's claim that habitus shapes desired goals and the means considered suitable for attaining them. Vester (2006) also notes that, while it draws on RAT, Boudon's model of primary and secondary effects already goes beyond the classical RAT paradigm. Primary effects in particular have some affinity with Bourdieu's habitus, according to Vester. Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007), in their study comparing cultural capital and relative risk aversion as potential explanatory mechanisms for explaining educational inequality, similarly argue that primary effects can be explained by Bourdieu's concepts, notably cultural capital. Secondary effects, on the other hand, they conceptualise via relative risk aversion. Devine (2004) also, in her comparative study of middle-class social reproduction, uses Bourdieu's ideas but, noting

some of their limitations, also draws on Goldthorpe's discussion of RAT and cost-benefit analysis.

Goldthorpe (2007d) actually refers to "*cultural* or genetic" influences on *primary effects* (our emphasis) but then argues that sociologists must focus their attention on secondary effects. In line with this preference, he is essentially in favour of RAT-based explanations and has been critical of Bourdieu's habitus concept (Goldthorpe, 2007b). However, he too sees the need for modifying RAT, given the problem that actors very commonly do *not* act purely rationally. The assumption of rationality has therefore to be weakened. "The key idea that has been exploited in this connection is that of *subjective*, as opposed to *objective*, rationality: that is, the idea that actors may hold beliefs, and in turn pursue courses of action, for which they have 'good reasons' in the circumstances in which they find themselves, even though they may fall short of the standard of rationality that utility theory would presuppose."

(Goldthorpe, 2007c) It follows from this view of rationality as subjective that actors do not always act on the best information imaginable, but rather on that available to them at reasonable cost. If they are unaware that they do not have access to all relevant information, or if it would be too costly to obtain additional information, they may act on the basis of incomplete information, a mode described as "satisficing".

Our view is that "subjective" rationality is a useful explanatory notion and it seems compatible with Bourdieu's claim that habitus shapes both desired goals and preferred means for achieving them. Indeed, one aspect of habitus is access to relevant knowledge concerning possible goals and how they may be attained. This is element of Bourdieu's work has been incorporated in Reay et al.'s (2001, 2005) notion of institutional habitus, where schools differ in how much and what kind of knowledge they can provide with regard to post-secondary educational choices.

There is clearly a basis for using the two approaches together, especially given many RAT theorists' understanding of educational goals in relative terms, something Bourdieu's account of the class conditioning of habitus incorporates. During our exploration of individuals' subjective rationality, the terms rational/rationality will refer to a subjective conceptualisation of rationality. A key question is: does the nature of this subjective rationality vary by class origin, as we would expect on the basis of Bourdieu's account of class-based habitus?

#### *Methodological rationale*

As mentioned above, the two theories are quite commonly associated with their own distinctive types of data and analytic methods. RAT studies are often large-scale quantitative studies. Studies exploring the habitus concept frequently use more detailed case studies with fewer cases. While the results of large scale studies can be argued to be comprehensible on the assumption that individuals use cost-benefit reasoning to make decisions, these studies often lack data on processes and mechanisms. Goldthorpe also points out that it is not necessary to assume that all actors act rationally the whole time in order to adopt a RAT approach, "only that the tendency to act rationally (however this may be construed) is the most important common – that is, non-idiosyncratic – factor at work." (Goldthorpe, 2007c). However, if we adopt, as Goldthorpe does, a position of methodological individualism, we should surely expect to find at least some evidence of RAT type reasoning in individuals' own accounts of their educational careers.

We use interviews with 15 to 18 year olds to explore this (see next section for details). We wish to deepen understanding of the role of rational choice as an underlying mechanism generating differentiated educational careers. We also make use of Bourdieu's habitus concept, showing that individuals' "subjective rationality" is shaped by their experience in

their families of origin, insofar as the habitus acquired there provides upper and lower boundaries on their expectations and aspirations, and on their sense of what is possible or impossible for them. This corresponds with the view outlined above that status maintenance is an important motive shaping educational decision-making. For example, the aim of getting some post-16 qualifications for someone from a working class family where the dominant experience is leaving school at 15/16 and having unskilled jobs is ambitious. For a middle class student such qualifications might lead to downward social mobility.

In our interviewees' accounts, we therefore explore whether there is any evidence of RAT type reasoning, and, if so, how the nature of any such reasoning is shaped by the family of origin. We also have to take account, as a possible causal factor, of the school type attended, given that schools – both through the ethos and aspiration of the school itself and those of its pupils – shape young people's expectations. The notion of “institutional habitus” (Reay et al., 2001, 2005), introduced above, is a helpful one here, as is Turner's older concept of “sponsored mobility” via selective schools (1960). The interviewees are drawn from two countries, England and Germany. Germany's largely selective secondary school system provides an interesting contrast to England's comprehensive system. Within England, some of our sample schools are in one of the few remaining selective areas, Kent, to provide another contrast. We wish to explore whether similar mechanisms operate in these different organisational contexts.

## **Method**

### *Process tracing*

As we noted earlier, researchers often aim to explain as well as to describe the social world. One way of gaining insight into the mechanisms required for explanation can be to combine various approaches. The interviews we draw on in this paper were undertaken in conjunction with earlier, large n, work on educational careers in the German and English secondary school systems (e.g., Glaesser & Cooper, 2011a, 2012)<sup>2</sup>. That work was concerned with providing evidence relevant to theories regarding the role of social background in explaining various educational outcomes. We analysed survey datasets using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) (Ragin, 1987, 2000, 2008), a method which, instead of determining the net effects of supposedly independent variables as regression analysis does, aims to establish the configurations of necessary and/or sufficient conditions for particular outcomes to occur. However, we take the view that the cross-case analysis of survey data cannot, on its own, produce causal knowledge (Pawson, 2008), regardless of the method employed, though it can contribute to producing such knowledge. Such work must be integrated with some sort of within-case process-tracing (Collier, 2011, George & Bennett, 2005, Mahoney, 2012) and/or theoretical work on generative mechanisms (Goldthorpe, 2007c, Pawson, 1989). We employed this joint approach in work drawing on our German interviews and the German Socio-Economic Panel (Cooper & Glaesser, 2012). In that mainly methodological paper employing Ragin's (e.g. 2008) set theoretic methods we showed how process-tracing via in-depth case study can be used to improve conjunctural models of the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for success in the German secondary system.

We also use a process-tracing approach here, aiming to shed some light on potential generative mechanisms, especially the sort that RAT and habitus based theories predict we should find. The interviews we conducted were intended to provide evidence concerning young people's (and their parents') educational decision-making. There has been some debate as to whether interviews can provide valid access to such cognitive processes or even whether there are such psychological or social objects as habitus generating the behaviours we observe (e.g. Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Hammersley & Gomm, 2008). We take the view that

such durable dispositions do exist and, furthermore, that notwithstanding the “interactive and co-constructed character of interviews” (Hammersley, 2013), it is possible to gain knowledge of them in one-to-one interview settings.

### *Case selection*

We conducted interviews with 43 German and 36 English adolescents in 2010/11. The interviewees were selected in a process of theoretical sampling. Previously, we had undertaken theoretically informed QCA-based analyses of large scale English and German datasets, focusing on predicting educational outcomes via configurational analyses employing such factors as school type, class, gender and ability (Cooper & Glaesser, 2012, Cooper et al., 2012, Glaesser & Cooper, 2011a, b, 2012). We wished, as a second stage, to be able to explore the causal processes that had generated our findings. For this we selected cases for in-depth study. To do so in a systematic and theoretically informed way, we employed QCA to analyse which configurations of factors were quasi-sufficient or quasi-necessary to obtain various educational outcomes<sup>3</sup>. The factors included parental education, parental occupation, the pupil’s sex and ability, and the school type attended at the age of 15 or 16, i.e. towards the end of compulsory schooling. On the basis of these analyses, we then classified types of cases as either typical or deviant with regard to the necessity and sufficiency of their configurations for obtaining the outcome. Thus, we were able to select cases which could be expected to prove useful in exploring potential generative mechanisms. Typical cases can help confirm supposed mechanisms, and deviant cases can suggest additional factors involved in producing the outcome (for more details see Glaesser & Cooper, 2011b; Cooper & Glaesser, 2012). For this paper, we draw on all those interviews with young people whose parents are either both members of the service class or are both working class. This gives us 12 cases from service class backgrounds and 25 from the working class<sup>4</sup>. We have chosen parental social class rather than parental education as the basis for case selection here because of our interest in Bourdieu’s class-based habitus theory. In fact, for our interviews, level of education and social class are closely linked anyway. This is evident in the tables below (Table 1 and Table 2). They give an overview of type of secondary school attended and parents’ qualification for the 37 cases. As expected, given the strong association between education and social class, notwithstanding the theoretical rather than random selection of these cases, the service class parents are relatively highly educated, the working class parents are not, on the whole. Note also that, in our sample, only 4 (33%) out of the 12 service class interviewees are in non-selective schools (Julia, Helen, Marcus and William), compared with 17 (68%) out of 25 working class interviewees.

We have chosen to concentrate on these ideal typically service and working class cases for several reasons. Firstly, given we wish to present interview extracts, our space is limited. Secondly, within this constraint, we have chosen cases from opposite ends of the class hierarchy in order (1) to be able to make a strong test of Goldthorpe’s claim that rationality characterises educational decision-making throughout the class hierarchy and (2) to simultaneously be able to explore, through a strategy of maximising a relevant contrast, the ways in which such rationality is conditioned by class. In future work, we will extend the analysis to the classes between these poles, and to cross-class families.

insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

## Results

### *Evidence of Rational Choice type reasoning*

We first explore whether there is any evidence of young people talking about their educational careers and choices in ways which would be compatible with Rational Action Theory. In all 12 interviews with young people from the service class and in 24 out of the 25 with working class students, there was at least one instance of this kind of reasoning. Here are some examples:

“Erm, well the thing is, you're only really gonna get a good job if you go on to university and stuff.” (Charlotte, service class, independent school)

“After all, you get more money if you've been to university, once you've got a job.”<sup>5</sup>  
(Julia, service class, Gesamtschule)

„Yeah, most of them [the teachers] encourage you to stay in school, and then you've got extra qualifications and you're probably more likely to get a job. Like they always say 'what if one person has five GCSEs and you have, 'cause you stayed on and you have eight, and this little bit makes the difference'.” (Zoe, working class, all-ability school)

[On why she wouldn't consider leaving school at sixteen:] “Just, I just think like life's just gonna end, like that's just a brick wall in your life. You can't like go further than just getting like, just a job where you don't really need much qualifications.” (Susan, working class, comprehensive school without Sixth form)

It becomes apparent in these quotes that these young people have an instrumental view of educational credentials. Whether it is gaining a degree, gaining any post-16 qualifications or just gaining more GCSEs than the next person, all are seen to be leading to more money and/or better jobs. The above quotes all relate to expected benefits of education. What about the costs? Both direct, monetary, costs<sup>6</sup> and more indirect costs such as missing out on spending time with family and friends are mentioned by the interviewees:

“I mean the living costs, that's the main issue, because obviously it's about, they're putting that up, now it's probably four thousand pounds a year and not income related in England. But four thousand a year is only enough to cover accommodation if that, I mean your parents still have to pay some of it.” (William, service class, voluntary aided comprehensive)

“So yeah, I mean, you know, things [universities] that are near the region, because with the fees increasing and everything I don't want my parents to be spending extra on boarding as well.” (Kalvinder, service class, independent school)

“ And then I definitely want to go to university, and I'd like a BA [Berufsakademie] best, because it means I could earn some money while I'm there.” (Diana, working class, Gymnasium)

“ ... I'll have to see about going to university, I've got, I have to, how I'll get the money.” (Marko, working class, Gymnasium)

„And then moving higher still then, you wouldn't have any spare time any more, just studying and things.” (Vera, working class, Hauptschule)

“Say like you were the law student, you had to do a lot more work and then you can't see your family because you're doing the work.” (Zoe, working class, all-ability school)

Some interviewees also mentioned that they were worried about failing a more demanding course of study. In other words, they took potential failure and its costs into account. But here



already we find a significant difference between service class and working class respondents: this fear of failure is not evident in any of the service class respondents' accounts, regardless of school type or course of study to date. Some working class interviewees, on the other hand, do mention such concerns. In Germany, this is usually in the context of choice of secondary school, where choosing a more demanding school type is sometimes seen as something that brings with it a risk of failing, and therefore choosing the level below was seen as the safer option. Kevin, for example, when asked why he did not choose to go to the Gymnasium despite having had the required recommendation from primary school, says:

“Well, I have, well, that probably would have been too hard.” (Kevin, working class, Realschule)

Service class respondents, when asked about any doubts as to whether they felt choosing the Gymnasium, for example, had been the right thing to do, seemed surprised even to be asked the question. It is perfectly obvious to them that, given the chance, they would always go for the most selective school. On the question of whether she had taken some time to deliberate over whether or not to attend Gymnasium once she had received the recommendation, Alina says:

“No, that was clear right from the outset, well, I also have a big sister, it was the same with her.” (Alina, service class, Gymnasium)

The evidence from our interviews certainly seems to confirm that Breen & Goldthorpe (in Goldthorpe, 2007d) are correct to include, in their formalisation of RAT, a parameter capturing the subjective belief of an actor concerning the likelihood of success at the next stage of education.

### *Habitus, RAT and boundaries*

In the previous section, we discussed cost-benefit considerations by young people across a range of social backgrounds. We will now examine more systematically whether and, if so, how these differ according to familial and institutional habitus. As noted, nearly all of our interviewees seem to take costs and benefits into account when planning their future educational careers, but on closer examination, we find that what we term upper and lower boundaries vary systematically by social background. Lower boundaries concern level of qualification and type of job or career that would constitute the minimum standard for the interviewee. In addition, some interviewees seem to delineate upper boundaries, i.e. they do not seem to think that certain careers are within reach or appropriate for them.

It appears that for most young people with service class backgrounds, gaining a university degree is the minimum standard they and their schools and families expect. Of these twelve, eight (Alina, Anna, Charlotte, Philippa, Kalvinder, Julia, Helen and William) state that they definitely want to go to university. That leaves just four to describe. Vicky is worried about the costs and about whether she would be able to gain a place, but given a place thinks she would go. Ludwig, Marcus and Deborah would consider *not* going to university, but going constitutes a definite possibility. For this group of young people, these plans and aspirations are *not* linked to type of school. Given that non-selective schools' will, on average, embody lower absolute academic aspirations, we might have expected to find that young people attending these schools have lower aspirations themselves, but it seems that home

background overrides any such possible institutional habitus. While the respondents do mention that getting a degree is a prerequisite for a good career – i.e., they do seem to be engaging in some form of cost-benefit analysis – it is clear that, for many of them, the alternative is not even given serious consideration. It is the normal thing to do, given their habitus. Take Anna, for example: her father is a doctor, her mother is a teacher in a Gymnasium. Nearly everyone from her extended family attended university. She would like to study medicine but is unsure still whether she will achieve the required exam results. Despite her professed interest in working in health, she would not consider taking up nursing (which in Germany is not studied at university) but would choose a different university course if she failed to be admitted for medicine. Asked whether there is anything that would make her consider leaving school at the age of 16, she even seemed to misunderstand the question: she replies as if the question had been about what she would do if she couldn't do medicine. Or consider this quote from Charlotte:

“Erm, I don't know really, I think it's just like, my parents both went to university and my brother's gone to university and to be honest I never really thought about not going. Because like, everyone in my family has, so it's just like the next step kind of in your education.” (Charlotte, service class, independent school)

A rather different picture emerges from the analysis of interviews with young people from working class backgrounds. There is also evidence for a lower boundary, but it is in a different place compared to the service class respondents. The lower boundary here is gaining any qualifications at all, and the aspiration is to find a secure, reasonably well-paid job. Getting some qualifications is seen as a means to this end. Harry for example argues like this:

Harry: “I did think about that [leaving school at 16] but then I had an epiphany thinking that like if I get like all my qualifications like early in my life, I won't have to, like, you know, get a minimum wage job. I could get a high paid job anywhere.” (Harry, working class, all-ability school)

His parents left school at a young age with few qualifications but, as he points out, these were less important in those days, and they have always had good jobs nevertheless. Bear in mind, however, that aspirations are relative to one's starting point, as we noted at the beginning. For Harry, a possible “high paid job” does not mean a six-figure salary. Rather, it is one that is paid above the minimum wage. Possible occupations he talks about are painting and decorating or welding.

For Duncan, the lower boundary is not to get expelled from school so that gaining some qualifications remains possible:

“Cos like if I mess things up now and then I got kicked out of school then I wouldn't be able to like do anything with me life, would I, cos I wouldn't have the qualifications, cos I haven't even got enough time to get any qualifications if I get kicked out.” (Duncan, working class, comprehensive school without Sixth form)

We also find evidence of some working class respondents having upper boundaries beyond which they would not venture. Gabriele, in Germany, makes it quite clear that attending the Gymnasium is not something they consider in her family, regardless of academic ability. Her sister had the recommendation and could have entered, but her mother “doesn't like the Gymnasium”. The mother left school at 15 and now works as an unskilled worker in Gabriele's stepfather's printing business. Gabriele's father is a baker by trade. Apart from an aunt whom she sees infrequently, she does not know anyone who has been to university.

Harry, employing cost-benefit analysis, rules university out on the grounds that it is too expensive and that it would not be worth taking out a loan. Generally speaking, working class respondents in non-selective schools either do not consider higher education, or if they do, they often sound fairly vague and uninformed. Kim, for example, did not know that universities in England charge tuition fees. For others, it will depend on their exam results whether they would even consider university (Tessa and Peter). In Germany, the institutional habitus of non-selective schools is not likely, given their function, to be conducive to developing aspirations to enter higher education. Given the largely comprehensive nature of English secondary schooling, matters are more complicated. Our findings are compatible with the view that the institutional habitus of some non-selective or comprehensive schools is not likely to encourage higher education applications from working class students. Some secondary schools do not have sixth forms at all, and in others, some of the sixth form work is vocationally oriented. Two of the four non-selective English schools in this study fit this pattern. Working class students are more likely to find themselves in schools whose ethos is not primarily oriented to higher education, especially in more prestigious universities (Sutton Trust, 2008).

Working class respondents in selective schools have higher aspirations. Such schools' institutional habitus (and, no doubt, the respondents' own academic ability and the school's responses to it over the years) seems to override the theoretically expected habitus. Another factor is educational expansion: many respondents point out that their parents did not have the same opportunities with regard to education they have now. Some of them explicitly say that seeing their parents struggling in unstable careers and/or physically demanding work motivates them to get qualifications in order to escape such a way of life. In Magdalena's words:

“... my mother went from job to job, ..., and she, for two, three years, she'd work a month here, two months there. Did some cleaning there and I didn't want that. And when I realised I didn't want that, what I had to do so that wouldn't end up like that, only then did I realise that I'd have to get my act together and that I had to study harder.”  
(Magdalena, working class, Gymnasium)

Roman (working class, Gymnasium) similarly mentions how tired his father is after a day's hard physical work, and that he wants something better for himself. Interestingly, both Magdalena and Roman are from families who have emigrated to Germany from Poland. In each case, their parents' reason for emigrating was to find a better life. This suggests that considerable ambition and high aspirations are a part of their families' habitus, and that the level of these may be higher than in most working class families. In Roman's case, the familial habitus may reflect his parents' qualifications which are higher than most working class parents'. Having moved to a different country, they were not able to benefit from their high qualifications, but they accepted this given that it meant potentially better lives for their children.

We can see from what these students say that both status maintenance and upward social mobility are motivating factors in educational decision-making. Given, however, the different socio-economic starting points, this translates into different individual absolute goals. Individual's subjective rationality is, in the sense we have described, bounded. It does indeed vary with social class background, and not only, it appears, as a consequence of “ability”, at least so far as this is captured by the school type attended<sup>7</sup>. There is a clear difference, for example, in the upper boundary of educational aspiration reported by service class students in non-selective schools and working class students in the same school type.

## Conclusion

We suggested that a necessary condition for the validity of RAT is that there be some evidence of rational processes of decision-making actually occurring at the micro level. The compatibility of the class-based patterning of cross-case findings based on survey data with those predicted by RAT, taken alone, provides a reason for not rejecting RAT's claims, but, given the underdetermination of theory by data, is not enough to confirm them. In undertaking within-case studies, we have therefore aimed to find micro-level evidence for RAT's claims. Our process-tracing interviews focused on individual accounts of educational decision-making, and we found that cost-benefit analyses played a part in explaining young people's courses of action and aspirations. However, the rationality in evidence is *subjective* (Goldthorpe, 2007c), apparently shaped by familial and/or institutional habitus. Habitus provides lower and upper boundaries within which reasoning takes place. While service class respondents do refer to the expected benefits of a university education, it also becomes clear that they take it for granted anyway, for other reasons, that this will be their own pathway. This is in accordance with Vester's view (2006): RAT and habitus are not mutually exclusive, they complement each other and give a fuller picture of the social processes under study. However, we have to be aware of the possibility that respondents do not normally engage in rational cost-benefit analyses to the degree they have in our interviews. They may have felt social pressure, during the interview, to account for their decisions in a "rational" manner. But while the balance between cost-benefit reasoning and habitual processes may have been distorted by the interviewing process, it is clear that these respondents readily accessed and employed cost-benefit scripts and it would, we think, be over-cautious not to regard these as evidence that they do engage in the processes assumed in RAT accounts. However, it remains possible that the "real" dominant underlying mechanism may well just be to follow ways of acting to which they are predisposed by their habitus. This interpretive problem is inherent in interview studies.

Assuming though that RAT type reasoning is not merely created by the interviewing process but has some basis in actual decision-making and contributes to how aspirations are formed, it becomes fruitful then to explore how actors' *subjective* rationalities seem to be shaped by their familial and institutional habitus. We have seen that social class background, mediated by habitus, can constrain individual decision-making. All respondents wish to gain some post-16 qualifications and, later on, hold jobs which are above the minimum wage. All service class respondents, irrespective of school type, and working class respondents in selective schools had higher occupational aspirations than these. For service class respondents, the type of school they attended did not seem to make much difference to their aspirations; their familial habitus appears to outweigh their being in a non-selective school. For young people from a working class background, there was a clear difference depending on which school type they attended: those in selective schools had higher aspirations overall. To some extent, this will be a reflection of their academic ability, but it is still interesting to note that the converse was not true, i.e. service class respondents in non-selective schools, probably with lower measured ability, at least in Germany and selective Kent, did not seem worried about the risk of failure in a more demanding future course of study. In summary, it seems plausible that experiencing the expectation that progress to higher education is normal, whether through the family or the school, is sufficient for developing such aspirations, but that it is not necessary for this to come from both family *and* school. In principle, given suitable policies, working class respondents in non-selective schools can clearly be given information concerning the expected value of higher education. There is no reason why, however, such access should lead automatically to higher aspirations. For those whose occupational goals are such as to not require higher education, and for whom there is little

previous experience of higher education in their families or amongst their student peers, educational goals may nevertheless be set lower than university. An outside observer might argue that, for some working class students, such a decision is not fully rational. Our aim here, however, is to explain, using the concept of subjective rationality, not to consider whether such “satisficing” might be improved upon.

The finding, on the other hand, that attending a selective school is associated with higher working class absolute aspirations also recalls Turner’s (1960) ideal-typical concept of sponsorship: gaining entry to a selective school may be demanding, but once this hurdle is cleared, the school will support, in general, individuals who have been selected. A prerequisite for working class children is adequate cognitive ability at the point of selection. For service class children, given that, regardless of the school type attended, they can draw on better resourced and informed familial support, cognitive ability and sponsorship by the school are less important<sup>8</sup>.

Analysing detailed case studies in the form of interview data is an atypical means of assessing the value of the RAT paradigm. We believe, however, that this approach has merit because it provides a direct way of testing whether “rational” decision-making (of a *subjective* kind, as noted above) is indeed a plausible mechanism contributing to socially differentiated educational outcomes. Assessing RAT using large scale studies typically provides only an indirect way of inferring that this mechanism lies behind the observed regularity<sup>9</sup>. Goldthorpe (2007c) sees a similar role for ethnography in demonstrating any generative processes derived from theoretical expectations.

As explained above, our approach to case selection was aimed at choosing cases which would be helpful for exploring and understanding the mechanisms generating class differences in educational outcomes. This means that we were not so much interested in obtaining, via random selection, a sample which is descriptively representative. Given the relatively small number of cases we could interview, there would always be a danger of obtaining a biased sample. Using a representative sample is important for conducting large scale analyses of survey data, and, as noted above, such analyses are well-suited to establishing regularities and making predictions. We are concerned here, however, with explanation and therefore chose cases useful for that purpose. The generalisable regularities to be seen in the intergenerational transmission of differences in educational achievement have already been established by studies such as those mentioned in our Introduction. Our aim here was to investigate plausible mechanisms which generate these regularities. In line with this aim, we used cases from two different countries on the grounds that the core processes should be the same if the theoretical explanations are sound, even if they are being played out in different contexts. Obviously, young people have to take into account the peculiarities characterising their own country, such as the rise in university tuition fees in England or the tripartite secondary school system in Germany. On the face of it, secondary education in these two countries is quite differently organised, but from another perspective, both have a layer of selective schools and similar mechanisms seem to be responsible in both countries for producing educational outcomes differentiated by social class. The fact that we found evidence of RAT type reasoning, shaped by familial and/or institutional habitus, in both countries, therefore strengthens our claims about these supposed mechanisms, and the relation between them. In both England and Germany, it seems, young people do apply cost-benefit reasoning in making educational decisions, but, in each case, the lower and upper boundaries within which this reasoning occurs strongly reflects their class habitus.

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<sup>1</sup> Though see Bourdieu's own work, e.g. his *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), which makes use of survey data to analyse habitus in different social classes. There is also a body of work that uses survey data to test Bourdieu's account of the role of cultural capital in educational success and failure (see Andersen & Hansen, 2011, for a recent example and for further references to this literature). However, such studies often, as in the case of the Norwegian study by Andersen and Hansen, make no reference to habitus. For an example of the more usual case-based approach using habitus see, e.g., Reay, Crozier & Clayton (2009).

<sup>2</sup> The work was supported by an Economic and Social Research Council research fellowship [RES-063-27-0240] awarded to JG.

<sup>3</sup> For a configuration of conditions to be logically sufficient for an outcome, we need it to be true that, whenever the configuration is present for a case, the outcome follows. For quasi-sufficiency this is relaxed, and we might accept 80% or 90% of cases achieving the outcome as our criterion, rather than 100% (Ragin, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> These 25 cases include some who grow up in a single-parent family or stepfamilies where the step parent is also a member of the working class.

<sup>5</sup> All translations from the German are our own. The original quotes are available on request from the authors.

<sup>6</sup> Not many interviewees have a concrete view of how they would pay for university attendance, even if they are intending to go. Among the ones that have thought about it, we find a mix of expecting parents to support them financially, taking out a loan, and/or taking on part time work, with no clear social class pattern.

<sup>7</sup> We cannot rule out the possibility that, within our non-selective schools, the service class interviewees are more able than the working class ones.

<sup>8</sup> There is some cross-case evidence, drawn from a set theoretic analysis of the National Child Development Study, that high ability tends to being necessary, but not sufficient, for educational achievement for children from low in the social hierarchy, and that it is sufficient, but not necessary, for children from high in the social hierarchy (see Cooper et al., 2012).

<sup>9</sup> While, in principle, surveys could be designed to focus more directly on decision-making processes, many of the surveys used thus far have been designed for other, more general, purposes.

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Barry Cooper is Emeritus Professor of Education at Durham University where he was, from 1998 to 2005, Director of Research in Education. He was from 2004-2007 co-editor of the *British Educational Research Journal*. His interests are in the sociology of education, especially social class, educational achievement and assessment, set-theoretic research methods and the evaluation of educational aid projects. A representative book is, with Máiréad Dunne, *Assessing Children's Mathematical Knowledge: Social class, sex and problem-solving*. A new book, Cooper, Glaesser, Gomm and Hammersley's *Challenging the Qualitative-Quantitative Divide: Explorations in Case-focused Causal Analysis* was published by Continuum in 2012. Together with Judith Glaesser (Principal Investigator) and Stephanie Thomson (Research Associate), he is working as Co-Investigator on a new ESRC project entitled: "Qualitative Comparative Analysis: Addressing Methodological Challenges, with particular reference to survey data".

Table 1: Types<sup>10</sup> of cases within the group “both parents service class”

Father’s qualification at least A level/Abitur	Mother’s qualification at least A level/Abitur	School type (selective schools in bold) <sup>11</sup>	Cases (pseudonyms)
yes	Yes	<b>Gymnasium</b>	Alina, Ludwig, Anna
yes	Yes	<b>Independent school</b>	Charlotte, Kalvinder
no	Yes	<b>Independent school</b>	Vicky
no	No	<b>Independent school</b>	Deborah
yes	Yes	<b>Grammar school in Kent</b>	Philippa
yes	Yes	Gesamtschule	Julia
yes	Yes	Comprehensive school with Sixth form	Helen
yes	Yes	All-ability school in Kent	Marcus
yes	Yes	Voluntary aided comprehensive	William

Table 2: Types of cases within the group “both parents working class”

Father’s qualification at least A level/Abitur	Mother’s qualification at least A level/Abitur	School type (selective schools in bold)	Cases (pseudonyms)
yes	Yes	<b>Gymnasium</b>	Roman
no	No	<b>Gymnasium</b>	Diana, Magdalena, Marina, Marko, Sebastian
no	Yes	<b>Grammar school in Kent</b>	Lauren, Patricia
no	No	Gesamtschule	Orhan, Tessa
no	Yes	Realschule	Martina
no	No	Realschule	Nadine, Kevin, Gabriele, Tobias
no	Yes	Hauptschule	Elena
no	No	Hauptschule	Peter, Vera
no	No	Comprehensive school without Sixth form	Wayne, Michelle, Susan, Duncan
no	No	All-ability school in Kent	Zoe, Kim, Harry

<sup>10</sup> A “type” here refers to a case having a particular configuration of characteristics. Alina, for example, belongs to the type: female from a service class family where both parents have at least the Abitur.

<sup>11</sup> Selective schools in England are either independent schools requiring an entrance exam or grammar schools where a pass in the eleven plus test is a prerequisite for entry. Non-selective schools are those where selection criteria, if they exist, are not based on academic ability (e.g., siblings already attend the school). German secondary school types are Gymnasium, Realschule, Hauptschule and Gesamtschule, with academic ability being a selection criterion for the first three. The Abitur is the highest qualification, and it is a prerequisite for university entry. It is on offer in Gymnasien and Gesamtschulen (comprehensive schools). We have classified Gymnasien as a selective school. Entry to Gesamtschulen is not based on academic ability, however, which is why we have categorised them as non-selective schools here, despite the Abitur being available. The Realschule offers an intermediate qualification suitable for entry to most apprenticeships and further non-HE qualifications. The Hauptschule is the most basic type of school. Its qualification allows application for some more practically oriented apprenticeships or for further study in the case of good performance.