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Degrees of ‘being first’: Toward a nuanced understanding of first-generation entrants to higher education

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Degrees of ‘being first’: Toward a nuanced understanding of first-generation entrants to higher education

Universities have increasingly adopted ‘first-generation status’ as a new category for addressing equity in higher education, especially in the UK and Australia. This category targets students whose parents do not have a university degree and therefore are ‘newcomers’ to higher education. While the category is well-intentioned, given the persistence of inequitable enrolment patterns and the need to widen participation, it has resulted in a fairly narrow and limiting view of first-generation students. Typically, students have been set in binary opposition to their peers with university-educated parents and consequently positioned within deficit discourses—as sharing a similar set of ‘problems’ that need to be remedied by policy and practice. This paper problematises such a totalising depiction of first-generation entrants by examining diversity *within the category* rather than simply demarcate *differences* from their continuing-generation peers. Drawing on focus group data from 198 prospective first-generation students enrolled in government schools in New South Wales, Australia, we utilise the Bourdieusian lens of social capital to explore the multiple social networks within which young people are situated. We propose a new continuum that better captures how students are differentially positioned in social space, and identify three clusters based on their capacity to mobilise capital – ‘inheritors’, ‘opportunists’, and ‘outsiders’. In so doing, we unsettle the symbolic boundary around what it means to ‘be first’, and argue that this more nuanced reconceptualisation of first-generation entry is critical if the category is to be a meaningful vehicle for redressing historical exclusions and widening participation in higher education.

Keywords: first-generation status; first-in-family status; higher education; equity; social capital; widening participation

Introduction

First-generation status is an equity category increasingly recognised by universities around the globe. Commonly used to identify students who do not have a parent/carer with a bachelor-level degree or higher (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), the category has been taken up in policy and practice as institutions look for new ways to widen participation and redress

historical exclusions in access to higher education. In the UK, for example, a number of universities have moved away from the traditional emphasis on class (Burke, 2012) to implement interventions targeting first-generation students, such as the ‘First Generation Scheme’ at Manchester Metropolitan University and the similarly titled ‘First Generation Scholars Scheme’ at the University of Sussex. Likewise, in Australia, there has been a longstanding focus on the three groups most under-represented in higher education: Indigenous Australians, people from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and those from regional and remote areas (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016). However, institutions have also recently changed tack towards supporting first-generation entry, as is evidenced in the inaugural ‘First Gen’ event for prospective students and their families at the University of Wollongong in 2019 and Charles Sturt University marketing itself in 2018 as ‘first choice’ for first-generation students.

Arguably, first-generation status has been gaining momentum as an equity category for three key reasons. First, enrolment data reported by the OECD (2012) demonstrates a strong relationship between parental education and higher education participation. In Australia, young people with a university-educated parent have twice the odds of enrolling in higher education as their first-generation peers; in the UK, they have 1.5 times the odds. Second, first-generation status represents *the* quintessential concern of widening participation, given that expanding the student body is dependent on newcomers entering the space (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Third, there is a large body of international research drawing attention to the challenges first-generation students face right across the student lifecycle, from the pre-access stage (Horn & Nuñez, 2000; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006) through to early arrival experiences at university (Stieha, 2010; Wildhagen, 2015), attrition, and retention (Ishitani, 2003, 2006; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004).

First-generation status has its provenance in US higher education policy, with countries like the UK and Australia appropriating the category to augment their own equity agendas. In the US, first-generation students have attracted considerable federal funding since the mid-1960s (Engle & Tinto, 2008), with research and university-based programming both growing exponentially in recent decades (Wildhagen, 2015). However, a fairly narrow and limiting view of first-generation students has prevailed during this period, with anyone who belongs to the group frequently seen to be ‘handicapped’ (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004) and ‘at risk’ (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013) because their parents do not hold a degree. We suggest this characterisation has emerged from an epistemological construction of first-generation entrants in binary opposition to their peers with university-educated parents. Further, it has been reinforced by the prevalence of quantitative studies in the field (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), which have shown, for example, that first-generation students are *less* academically prepared to enter university (Atherton, 2014) and *less* likely to persist in their studies (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2006). Worryingly, this first-generation/continuing-generation dichotomy has created the impression of two disparate and even oppositional groups, in which the latter is always associated with legitimised cultural and social worth (Burke, 2012).

More recently, a strengths-based perspective to first-generation entry has been advocated by a number of influential researchers in the field (King, Luzecky, McCann, & Graham, 2015; O’Shea, 2015a; O’Shea, May, Stone, & Delahunty, 2017), reframing first-generation students beyond such a deficit lens. Underpinned by this approach, our aim in this paper is to ensure that first-generation status is understood in meaningful and nuanced ways rather than as part of simplistic binary, particularly as the category is taken up by institutions in the UK and Australia. Given that first-generation students have not been a focus of official equity policy in either country, local research targeting this population is relatively sparse,

but has been gaining traction in recent years (Luzeckyj, McCann, Graham, King, & McCann, 2017; O'Shea, 2015a, 2015b; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; O'Shea et al., 2017; Thomas & Quinn, 2007; Wainwright & Watts, 2019). Notably, this body of research has investigated 'first-generation' status (Devlin & O'Shea, 2011; Thomas & Quinn, 2007) and the more restricted 'first-in-family' status (O'Shea, 2015b; O'Shea et al., 2017), although institutions in both countries tend to adopt the former category as the basis for equity programming, following the lead of US. And yet, it has been already argued that first-generation status is often used unproblematically – even superfluously (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018) – by researchers and practitioners in the US, giving the 'air' of an effective and relatively straightforward target for interventions (Wildhagen, 2015). Indeed, while first-generation students are often seen to symbolise the 'American Dream' (Rondini, 2016), critics maintain that the category principally serves institutional interests rather than the real needs of students themselves (Wildhagen, 2015). On the one hand, it is not surprising that universities in the UK and Australia are trialling new equity categories given the persistence of inequitable enrolment patterns and deepening stratification across the sector (Whitty & Clement, 2015). On the other, cautious adoption is warranted to ensure that any new interventions are empirically and theoretically grounded in rigorous scholarship and not simplistically embraced as an easy way to widen participation.

Against this backdrop, this paper problematises the equity category of first-generation status by examining its fundamental assumption that young people who do not have university-educated parents share a similar set of 'problems' to be addressed in policy and practice. Our specific focus is on the pre-access stage of the student lifecycle (Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013), a period when equity interventions are often designed to 'fill students up' with capital (Burke, 2012; O'Shea, 2015a) under the presumption that they represent a homogeneous group merely embodying their parents' position in social space. The pre-access

stage – prior to students arriving at university – has not been well-researched as it pertains to first-generation status, with relatively few studies directly considering factors that support and/or constrain access to higher education for this population well before application and enrolment (Southgate, Kelly, & Symonds, 2015; Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). Our study makes a unique contribution to this limited body of research, shifting the temporal lens to *prospective* first-generation students – students in primary and secondary school – who aspire to go to university. In so doing, we offer a fresh perspective on totalising depictions of first-generation entrants (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018) by exploring *intra*-group differences among school students who would be ‘first’, rather than *inter*-group differences between these students and their continuing-generation peers. Building on research that has highlighted significant demographic intersectionality *within* the category of first-generation status (see, for example, O’Shea et al., 2017; Soria & Stebleton, 2012), our specific focus is on identifying the different sources of capital young people mobilise as they navigate towards higher education, expanding and disrupting conventional understandings of first-generation entry with important implications for policy and practice.

De/constructing first-generation status: Social capital and hierarchies of difference

Our analysis uses the lens of social capital to explore if, and how, prospective first-generation students are situated within different kinds of social networks. We specifically employ social capital in the Bourdieusian sense, namely as the value of one’s connections relative to a given field or arena of social action (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Following Reay, David, and Ball (2005), we work with a broad understanding of social capital to consider the role of relationships in facilitating or hindering social action, focusing on what one gains from one’s connections, rather than simply the connections themselves.

From this perspective, social capital is a form of investment; you don't just 'have' or 'possess' social capital, rather, it is strategically accrued although perhaps unconsciously. In addition, this process of accumulation requires an outlay of both time and energy (Bourdieu, 1986) given that social capital is inherently based on relationships *between* individuals, which is what fundamentally separates it from other Bourdieusian forms of capital, such as economic capital or cultural capital.

Key to our mobilisation of social capital is recognition that not everyone has access to the same networks, or, more specifically, the same *kinds* of networks. In this way, Bourdieu's full theory of cultural and social reproduction comes into play, and we see social capital as powerfully linked with the unequal distribution of economic and cultural capital. Broadly speaking, economic capital can be understood as reflecting monetary assets, while cultural capital can be interpreted as encompassing cultural knowledge, awareness, and 'taste' (Bourdieu, 1986, 2010). In relation to university access, Archer, DeWitt, and Wong (2013), for example, have shown how children from middle-class backgrounds – personifying dominant economic and cultural capital – have access to relatives and family friends employed in professional and managerial roles, shaping their capacity to utilise privileged contacts as they form their post-school aspirations. Conversely, first-generation students have been represented as knowing few people who have attended university and, in some cases, report knowing no-one at all (King et al., 2015; Scevak et al., 2015; Southgate et al., 2014). Social capital is therefore manifest in conjunction with other forms of capital (Fuller, 2014), highlighting how what is symbolically legitimised as valued, and valuable, in a given field is dependent on, and formed through, a relationship to the dominant culture or group.

Notwithstanding these differences in capital between groups, our specific focus here is on *intra*-group rather than *inter*-group differences in social capital. This approach moves away from a narrow focus on parents/carers which traditionally underpins conceptualisations

of first-generation status (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), to consider how “individuals can be adjacent to each other in social space yet have very different ratios of...capital” (Reay et al., 2005, pp. 21-22). Thus, while individuals categorised as ‘first-generation’ share the same status in equity policy and practice based on the education of their parents (dichotomised as university-educated or not), they vary widely in terms of their access to other forms of capital. To our knowledge, few studies have examined intra-group differences in capital accumulation among first-generation students, with the exception of Birani and Lehmann (2013) who investigated the intersection of ethnicity with social capital. While some scholars adopting a strengths-based approach have re-positioned first-generation students as possessing ‘community cultural wealth’ (for example, O’Shea, 2015a; O’Shea et al., 2017), a concept designed to recognise delegitimised forms of capital within homes and communities not valued by higher education institutions (Yosso, 2005), the possibility of first-generation students accruing legitimised capital has largely been overlooked.

Our concern, then, is to identify the extent to which prospective first-generation students have access to social resources that potentially modify their status as first-generation entrants. With Bourdieu’s own scholarship concentrating on the middle-classes, social capital has frequently been understood as merely a tool for reproduction among dominant groups (Abrahams, 2017). However, our investigation is premised on the view that *all* individuals are engaged in their own struggles to acquire and mobilise capital, “in processes of positioning both the self and others, and being positioned by them” (Bathmaker, 2015, p. 66). Seeing young people as more than just a “by-product of their parents’ relationships with others” (Leonard, 2005, p. 607), we therefore explore the role of interpersonal relationships as a form of currency relative to students’ desired field of action – university (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016) – particularly focusing on contexts of most relevance to young people; families, schools, and communities (Fuller, 2014).

Methods

This paper draws on data from a larger four-year project (2012-2015) investigating the post-school aspirations of students enrolled in government schools in the state of New South Wales (NSW), Australia (Gore, Holmes, et al., 2017; Gore, Holmes, Smith, Southgate, & Albright, 2015; Gore, Patfield, et al., 2017). The project collected two forms of data: an annual online survey involving 6,492 students across Years 3-12 (aged approximately 8-18 years); and, 134 focus group sessions held with a sub-sample of 553 students at two time-points during the study. Findings from the quantitative strand have already been reported in a number of papers (e.g., Gore et al., 2015; Gore, Patfield, et al., 2017). This paper utilises the qualitative data only, in order to look closely at the differing *structure* of capital among prospective first-generation students, rather than simply the *volume* of capital.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the focus groups. First, schools were identified to ensure variability by geographic location (categorised as metropolitan or provincial) and school-level (dis)advantage, according to data publicly available from the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority*. In total, 30 schools were recruited for the qualitative strand. Second, a sampling frame was developed by the research team to identify students at each of these schools to invite to participate in a focus group. Three measures were used, based on answers from the first year of the student survey in combination with linked data provided by the NSW Department of Education (DoE): (1) socio-economic status, derived from parental education/occupation from school enrolment records; (2) prior academic achievement, derived from reading and numeracy scores from the most recent National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) provided by the DoE; and, (3) occupational aspirations, derived from a survey question asking students about the kind of work they would like to do when they are older, coded for occupational status using the Australian Socioeconomic Index 2006 (AUSEI06). The AUSEI06

encompasses the official occupational classifications of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, ranging from 0 (relatively low status occupations) to 100 (relatively high status occupations). In order to recruit a sample who had diverse backgrounds and aspirations, students were invited to participate based on within-strata variance: aspiring to low/high status occupations; being from low, low-mid, mid-high and high socio-economic (SES) backgrounds; and with different levels of academic achievement (categorised as low achieving, mid achieving, and high achieving).

Focus groups were held on school grounds during school hours. The number of students per focus group ranged from one – when other students were unavailable at the last minute – to eight, and most focus groups had a mix of female and male students from one or two year levels of schooling. The protocol was semi-structured, with discussions organised around four broad themes: schooling; educational and occupational aspirations; careers activities in school; and, perceptions of university and vocational education. Of particular interest for this paper, the latter theme included questions on students' connections to people with first-hand experience of higher education and the kinds of conversations they have had with these people about university life. Focus groups were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with students allocated pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Given that our aim is to develop a nuanced understanding of first-generation status during the pre-access period, our analysis was initially grounded in dominant policy-based constructions of this equity category (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Toutkoushian, May-Trifiletti, & Clayton, 2019). That is, we focused on students who did not have any parents/carersⁱ with a bachelor-level degree or higher, derived from school enrolment records provided by the DoE. Next, we restricted our analysis to those students who articulated an interest in pursuing university ($n = 198$) during focus groups. Research relating to first-generation status is complicated by there being no single, or agreed upon, definition, and

different terminology employed (see, in particular, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Toutkoushian et al., 2019; Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2018). While many studies use the phrase ‘first-generation’ status and draw on levels of parental education, other studies use the term ‘first-in-family’ status and incorporate other family members in the definition including siblings, spouses, partners, and children (O’Shea et al., 2017). These understandings of ‘being first’ are typically applied to studies of university students – adults – which is particularly manifest in the latter definition. However, given that our investigation centres on young people in the primary and secondary years, we have used parental education to determine the starting point for problematising *prospective* first-generation status and, thus, employ ‘first-generation’ status rather than ‘first-in-family’ status accordingly.

Coding of the transcripts was undertaken by the lead author of this paper using the NVivo™ software program, adopting an iterative approach to analysis. Our analysis was framed by the Bourdieusian lens of social capital, exploring emerging patterns in the different kinds of networks in and by which students are positioned. Next, the research team sought to identify key intra-group differences in capital, with the coding discussed by all authors in a process of review and refinement. As a result, we propose a continuum along which prospective first-generation students cluster in terms of their capacity to mobilise capital; at one end of the continuum are *the inheritors*, in the middle are *the opportunists*, and at the other end are *the outsiders*. The idea of a continuum is used to illustrate the dynamic nature of first-generation status, which we return to in the discussion. All 198 first-generation university aspirants fall into one cluster only, although some students simply answered ‘no’ or gave succinct responses when asked if they knew anybody who had attended university, limiting the depth of available data. Student quotes are provided as illustrative of each cluster, with student-level information included to denote their geographic location, SES, and prior

academic achievement, as per the sampling frame. Each cluster is presented separately in order to draw attention to the intra-group variation identified through our analysis.

The study was approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee and the NSW Department of Education's State Education Research Applications Process (SERAP).

The inheritors

The 'inheritors' are the most securely positioned in their social networks. They have access to an older sibling or cousin who had already entered university, a relationship which generated an advantage and ultimately worked to improve their social position. We thus use the term 'inheritor' to refer to the way in which students benefit from a predecessor, a family member other than a parent/carer who has gone before them to pursue higher education.

The powerful role of these kinship ties was particularly evident in the symbolic exchanges (Bourdieu, 1986) reported by students. Insider knowledge of university was acquired through stories, providing both practical and affective information as students formed dispositions toward their own futures:

I want to go to university. I won't really have a gap year, because my sister didn't have a gap year. ...My sister's at Hill Valley University and I've been talking to her about what it's like and how it is there and how she's made a fair few friends. ...She's doing costume and stage design, and she has her first assignments due, an assignment due from The Hunger Games – a costume from that, and she has to make a toolbox. She's having fun with that; she got all the materials the other day. ...She's living down there for now. She was going to come back [home] at Easter, but she's not because she has some meeting thing during the holidays, so next holidays she's going to come down. (Oscar, Year 7, provincial, mid-high SES, high achieving)

Oscar's goal is clear and firm, to follow in his sister's footsteps and go straight to university after finishing school. This kind of linear pathway (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002) is extremely rare in the literature on first-generation entry, with relationships between siblings

often overlooked in their capacity to generate capital and establish a higher education trajectory (Gofen, 2009). However, Oscar's account clearly shows how close familial ties can create a strong narrative thread about everyday life at university. Insights such as making friends and *having fun* working on an assignment demonstrate that Oscar is able to vividly imagine university as an active and tangible space, with his investment strategy being to find out *what it's like* and *how it is there* so he has the chance to learn for himself. Because his sister has moved away to attend university, this information may have been difficult to accrue. Nonetheless, the value of the capital is palpable as Oscar outlines how he perceives the transition from school to university will play out for him in the future:

*Well I think it's going to be different, because some universities that you go to, there's rooms and stuff there and you sleep there, and at high school there's no rooms for people to sleep in and do their stuff. So I reckon it's going to be a change, but it's not going to be a massive change. I don't reckon anyway.
(Oscar, Year 7, provincial, mid-high SES, high achieving)*

From Oscar's perspective, going to university represents more of an adjustment to a different living situation, rather than a completely new, unfamiliar experience. In juxtaposing the known world of high school with his knowledge of higher education, Oscar comes to the conclusion that his transition will be manageable and *not a massive change* at all. As such, there is a sense that higher education feels like a relatively safe pathway, highlighting the important role of siblings in opening up university aspirations, similarly seen in other studies using more restricted definitions of 'being first' (O'Shea, 2015b). We therefore posit that it is the strong ties with his sister that have significantly reduced any doubts or suspicions about this pathway for Oscar.

While interactions with a sibling often led students to focus on the positive aspects of higher education, some students reported learning more about challenging aspects:

Isaac: [My sister] goes to Central University right now. Yeah, and she's doing a Bachelor of Arts – I think in language studies. ...She says it's really hard work because she studies a lot.

Facilitator: That doesn't deter you?

Isaac: No, it makes me want to do it more. (Isaac, Year 10, metropolitan, low SES, high achieving)

Unlike Oscar, Isaac knows about the struggles involved in being at university. Through his sister's enrolment he learns that university can be *really hard work*, but gives no indication he is daunted by this prospect. Instead, he has formed a realistic expectation about higher education, which makes him *even more* adamant that university will be part of his own future. In this way, the sibling relationship begins to spark generational change by creating a shift in what is seen to be possible. Isaac even uses the language of higher education – a *Bachelor of Arts, language studies* – signifying a form of 'emergent competence' (Bourdieu, 1986) in this new field. Indeed, we note that he was one of the few prospective first-generation students in our study to use such precise terminology.

Kinship ties within the extended family similarly functioned to build a sense of comfort with a higher education trajectory. Lotus conveys the importance of her cousins' experience in helping her see her own future as closely aligned with university:

Since I was little I've been watching my cousins go to university, and every time they come home they would always say it was good because they'd connect with other people, and my Mum – we don't have enough money to support me in university because I'm the only child that [wants to go] to university in our family, because we're moving house and everything, and my Dad's working to get money and stuff. ...And my cousin, he said it was really fun because you get to connect with new people and share your ideas with them. (Lotus, Year 8, provincial, low SES, low achieving)

There are two key points here. First, both the tangible and intangible aspects of these relationships – *watching* her cousins go to university combined with speaking to them when *they come home* – are of great benefit to Lotus. As a result, she is able to see she is not that different to others in her immediate family. It is these affective challenges of being 'different' intertwined with the broader economic position of families that can stop prospective first-generation students from contemplating university in the first place (Harwood, Hickey-Moody, McMahon, & O'Shea, 2016). Second is the way in which Lotus' cousins foreground

the social capital that can be generated at university. Specifically, their discussions revolve around *new* and *other* connections, signalling how higher education can bridge access to different networks – and therefore an entire portfolio of capitals (Wacquant, 1998) – that have not traditionally been open to this family. Lotus, and students like her, gain significant insight into university as more than a credentialing institution, because they ‘inherit’ detailed understandings about university life from their familial network.

The opportunists

Unlike the ‘inheritors’, the ‘opportunists’ cannot rely on family ties to higher education. Rather, they assemble their own social capital from within their schools and communities. In the focus groups, they indicated that they have no family members with first-hand experience of university and, consequently, relied on non-familial connections as important assets linked to the field. We use the term ‘opportunist’ as a descriptive rather than pejorative term, as students make use of a range of relationships, taking advantage of opportunities as they materialised.

Within the school environment, ‘opportunists’ saw their teachers as an important form of social capital – a key adult in their network of connections who has been to university. Such a stance is evident in how Oriel and Stella describe the role of their teachers:

Well, Mr Howard's been to uni so he knows more. So he's been telling me everything, such as which uni would be better to go to for what I want to do. (Oriel, Year 9, metropolitan, low-mid SES, low achieving)

Yeah, I've discussed it [with my teachers] because I guess that they have a better view of how to get there because they've already been there; they've been there, done that. (Stella, Year 9, metropolitan, low-mid SES, low achieving)

Oriel and Stella emphasise the critical advice their teachers provide, distinguishing their knowledge of university as *more* or *better* than they can gain from their parents and families. Their teachers are prominently positioned here as role models who have successfully

navigated higher education – they have *been there, done that*. Oriel and Stella subsequently concentrate on how the social interactions with their teachers have helped them to understand *which university* to go to and *how to get there*. While teachers are likely to be among the key university graduates students meet at this stage of their life (Tranter, 2005), we note that most of the prospective first-generation students in our sample did not identify their teachers as people with university experience. Oriel and Stella can therefore be seen as strategically utilising their everyday networks as a form of social capital, as a way to gain a personal advantage.

Beyond school, participation in sports and cultural pursuits provided opportunities for students to build new relationships. These new social connections involved their coaches, instructors, and tutors, who broadened students' world view:

I do gymnastics and some of my coaches have been to uni. One's studying to be a podiatrist and another wants to be a teacher. So I know they're doing it now, by studying hard and stuff. I'm not really sure if my Mum or Dad went to uni. I've never really thought of asking them. (Flora, Year 6, metropolitan, mid-high SES, mid achieving)

Interestingly, these contacts tend to be the incidental consequence of participating in extra-curricular activities, as evidenced in Flora's description of her gymnastics lessons.

Nonetheless, these social ties are significant and memorable, facilitating an immediate use-value by initiating a dialogue about university that they might not otherwise have had. The absence of prior familial dialogue is particularly stark for Flora, given that she is unsure if her parents even attended university: it has *never* entered her thoughts to ask them. Through her gymnastics connections, however, higher education becomes more familiar as Flora can begin to conjure up the new realm of the university (*I know they're doing it... studying hard*).

Prospective first-generation students often clung to these new contacts. As such, when these relationships were physically distant, some students attempted to bridge the divide:

I know a few people that go to NIDA [National Institute of Dramatic Art]ⁱⁱ at the moment, so I've talked to them through social media. ...When I started acting we had different workshops and different people teach them. I just keep in contact with them. I'm the sort of person that likes to have lots of connections everywhere. Especially in the acting industry, you need to know people. (Ryan, Year 11, metropolitan, low SES, high achieving)

What stands out in Ryan's account is his strategic use of social media, engaging in deliberate action to preserve his new relationships over time. While Ryan initially formed these connections via direct contact, social media enables him to engage in important exchanges because he can still *talk* via the Internet. As in other studies of prospective first-generation students (Wohn et al., 2013), social media has helped to expand Ryan's networks, facilitating access to a group of people who can provide information linked with his aspirations. He clearly understands the necessity and importance of social capital, acknowledging that he *likes to have lots of connections everywhere* and that *you need to know people*. Indeed, given his goal to become an actor, it is particularly significant that he has formed specialised links with the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) – a highly prestigious and specialised university at which he hopes to study in the future.

'Opportunists' also acquired social capital through their own paid employment.

Shyanne's part-time job at a local retail store, 'Big W', provides a context for extending her usual networks and meeting a number of professionals with relevant information:

I work at Big W. So it's very – it's very open to communication with people who just walk in. Because I'm usually in the fitting rooms and people come in and wait for their children to come out. So I just stand there and talk to them. I've got into some really good conversations about careers. And I've met – I've run into a couple of nurses and stuff like that and they do night shifts and they tell me about [how] it's easy to balance your family life and stuff. And it sounds pretty good. (Shyanne, Year 12, provincial, low-mid SES, mid achieving)

Here, serendipity plays a key role in giving Shyanne access to valuable capital: *I've run into a couple of nurses*. As Hutchings (2003) suggests, there can be a high degree of chance involved in the formation of these kinds of non-familial connections for prospective first-generation students, in contrast to young people with university-educated parents who are

more likely to have assured access to valuable family networks. In Shyanne's case, we therefore stress that her social ties are her own, and not formed in association with her 'family name' (Bourdieu, 1986). Subsequently, we see her as an active creator of social capital, illustrated through her repeated emphasis on shared exchanges in her workplace: *open communication* and having *really good conversations*. While these people might be mere acquaintances, they help Shyanne to amass an understanding of a career in nursing, learning about the positive aspects of the profession and forming a judgement that this career would be *pretty good*. Students like Shyanne can thus be seen as embracing opportunities to change their social position themselves, generating new forms of capital beyond that of their parents and families.

The outsiders

The 'outsiders' are in the most vulnerable position of the three identified clusters in terms of social capital. They reported no first-hand connections – within or outside of the family – to help inform their aspirations and knowledge of university life, and were unable to identify any detailed exchanges related to higher education. We thus use the term 'outsider' to convey how these students are largely excluded from relevant networks and, subsequently, how they are positioned relative to other prospective first-generation students in social space.

Many students were well-aware of their family's educational histories and its effect on the networks they were able to access. Ayla, for example, draws a link between her family's education and the kinds of conversations she is typically privy to:

My Mum dropped out of school when she was in Year 8 and my Dad went through Year 11 and my sister dropped out in Year 11. ...Only two people in my family have ever finished Year 12 but they didn't go to university or TAFE [Technical And Further Education]ⁱⁱⁱ or anything. So I don't really have a lot of experience, a lot of people telling me stories about it, and I haven't gone to any campuses and stuff so I don't really know a lot about it, but I've heard that it's good. (Ayla, Year 11, provincial, low SES, low achieving)

While ‘being first’ tends to be constructed in policy and practice in relation to university entry, this category overlooks the fact that some young people are also achieving another important ‘first’ by completing their schooling. Ayla highlights this reality, explaining how most of her family have *dropped out* of school and that finishing Year 12 is rare – only two people *ever*. Navigating available educational futures is therefore made difficult, as she recognises that her knowledge is relatively weak: *I don’t really know a lot about it*. She points to her dire shortage of social capital, noting a dearth of both first-hand experience and second-hand stories. However, she is also highly articulate in her awareness of this position, knowing how and why these kinds of relationships would be valuable (Wacquant, 1998). In this light, she has vaguely heard that university and TAFE are *good*, but cannot provide an explanation in any detail. When asked if she is able to venture onto a university campus, Ayla elaborates:

I don’t think it’s like that. I think you kind of have to organise a day and – because you have tour people and stuff and you can go and talk to them and they’ll show you different stuff that you can do. But I wouldn’t know. (Ayla, Year 11, provincial, low SES, low achieving)

Ayla highlights how distant university can feel for prospective first-generation students who are ‘outsiders’ – even when they are interested in pursuing this pathway. Without access to relevant social ties, Ayla mistakenly believes she can only visit a university through formal mechanisms, such as a tour. Even then, she is uncertain as to whether her cultural knowledge is correct, using the phrase *I wouldn’t know* to stress her lack of capital. University is largely viewed from the outside looking in (Ball et al., 2002), potentially affecting the extent to which Ayla is able to operate strategically in pursuit of her goals.

Other students without access to people with university experience did evidence familiarity with vocational education. Phoebe and Oliver detail how their networks revolve around this kind of post-school pathway:

My Mum did aged care and my real sister did a fashion course at TAFE. You only have to go on certain days, you don't have to go five days. (Phoebe, Year 8, provincial, low SES, high achieving)

My brother's in TAFE at the moment for plumbing. So he's doing it part time – so he's going to school but he's also going to TAFE. My Dad recently did an apprenticeship for welding and fabrications. So, yeah, but he works in a prison at the moment. He's not in the prison, like, he works there. Just to clarify that. (Oliver, Year 9, metropolitan, low-mid SES, mid achieving)

Phoebe and Oliver can both name several occupations studied at TAFE: aged care, fashion, plumbing, welding, and fabrications. The specificity of their knowledge is accentuated as they discuss the logistics and language associated with these qualifications: studying *part time* and undertaking *apprenticeships*. In so doing, they demonstrate a strong 'feel' for vocational education (Harwood et al., 2016), not evident in any of their discussions about university. Oliver, in particular, wants to stress to the facilitator his family's vocational background, accentuating that his father *works in a prison* and is definitely *not in the prison*. We propose that these social networks run both parallel to, and in tension with, those related to university life, as such connections to vocational education are grounded in a completely different set of cultural resources (Wacquant, 1998).

The students we identified as 'outsiders' also faced silences surrounding higher education within both their networks *and* broader school communities. In the following excerpt, Krystal describes the absence of university talk in her life:

Well as not very good as it sounds, I only know a few people that have ever talked about university. ...I don't know, some people more need to go to TAFE and stuff, but not many of them – I have friends that have thought about it but not many people talk about that. ...I think in school today they don't do anything about that and I think they need to do more stuff about what do you want to be when you grow up, because when we were doing this aspirations survey so many people were like, 'I don't know what I want to do' ...And like, I think we need to do more stuff that involves that. (Krystal, Year 6, metropolitan, low SES, mid achieving)

Krystal is initially apprehensive to detail the social interactions that usually take place in her life, but does admit to the facilitator (*as not very good as it sounds*) the rarity with which discussions about university *ever* occur. While signalling the scarcity of her social capital,

she sees school as a site where such silences can be interrupted; although at present, post-school futures are not discussed. The catalyst for this opinion has been her participation in our research (evidenced in her reference to the *aspirations survey*), seeing the level of uncertainty among her peers when they were asked to think about what they want to do when they *grow up*. Elsewhere in the focus group discussion Krystal is resolute in identifying her own aspiration to study marine biology at university. However, she is doubly disadvantaged in her capacity to achieve this goal given her limited access to relevant social assets and the failure of the school, at present, to alleviate this situation.

Discussion

This paper has examined how young people categorised as ‘first generation’ are differentially positioned in social space. Although explicit attention to first-generation entry is a relatively recent phenomenon outside of the US where the category originates, both scholarly literature and the media has frequently characterised first-generation students as in deficit, with the problem – or *their* problem – constructed as a lack of capital compared to their peers with university-educated parents (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Rather than perpetuate this dominant binary construction, our study builds on research that has highlighted the delegitimised strengths of first-generation university students (O’Shea, 2015a) and the substantial demographic intersectionality within this equity category (O’Shea et al., 2017; Soria & Stebleton, 2012) by investigating differences *among* prospective first-generation students in terms of their access to social capital. This approach has enabled us to bring to light the complexity of relationships and networks that young people mobilise as they navigate towards higher education which, in turn, modifies their status as first-generation entrants in decisive ways.

Overall, our analysis shows that prospective first-generation students are positioned within vastly different kinds of networks. While all of the students in this study will be of the *first generation* to pursue university based solely on the education of their parents/carers, our proposed continuum illustrates these students vary considerably in their capacities to draw on legitimised capital relevant to this field. For some students, generational change has already commenced as older siblings and cousins moved into higher education (the ‘inheritors’), generating new forms of capital that young people can utilise to their advantage. In the middle are students who utilise non-familial connections to build up their own capital reserves (the ‘opportunists’) as they are unable to exploit familial contacts in the same way. At the other end of the continuum are students who are well and truly first in accessing higher education (the ‘outsiders’), anchored in the relative value of their family’s limited educational histories and the kinds of capital they can typically access within their homes and communities at this point in time. We want to stress that all of these students indicated interest in attending university, likely underpinned by the expansionist agenda increasingly manifest in the higher education sector and the different socio-political conditions for higher education aspirations not present in previous decades (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2015); particularly seen in the ‘aspiration nation’ political discourse (Mendick, Allen, Harvey, & Ahmad, 2018). However, some of these young people are clearly at a greater (dis)advantage than others in this trajectory when framed by their broader social networks.

We argue that such stark intra-group differences therefore unsettle the symbolic boundary around what it means to ‘be first’. In particular, we found that when students had a sibling or cousin who had already entered university, these kinship ties altered family narratives by demonstrating that university is not just something that ‘other people do’ (O’Shea, 2015a). For such students, higher education is a real place associated with specific characteristics (Ball et al., 2002), such as having fun at social events, doing assignments, and

working hard – starkly absent in the narratives of those students identified as ‘outsiders’. Due to the generational and intimate nature of this capital, we suggest that students in this more advantaged position have been able to form a strong emotional link to university, manifest in personal stories, conversations, and being able to see someone else ‘make it’ there.

Consequently, while some scholars have proposed that anyone who has a sibling who has been to university should still be considered ‘first-generation’ (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008), we suggest a more nuanced understanding that takes into account differences *across and within* generations. That is, these kinds of interpersonal relationships act as major form of currency altering the status of the next generation overall. Our findings therefore confirm and extend previous research by drawing attention to the role of siblings as a valuable source of capital for prospective first-generation entrants (Gofen, 2009) and also show how a cousin can be a comparably valued asset who facilitates action toward this educational trajectory. At this age, spouses, partners, or children who have been to university are not relevant as in existing conceptualisations of ‘first-in-family’ status (O’Shea, 2015a, 2015b), but an older sibling or cousin can clearly play an important role in facilitating access to the new space of higher education.

We argue that the symbolic boundary around ‘being first’ is also problematised when we consider how, for some students, they are unequivocally ‘first’. We propose that this amplification of first-generation status occurs in three significant ways. First, some prospective first-generation students will not only be first to enter university, but also first in their families to complete formal schooling. This critical dimension of first-generation status tends to be neglected in policy and practice, as the focus on university education overlooks the fact that finishing high school can be another important ‘first’, particularly given that the school leaving age was lower in the past and more parents may have never finished schooling (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Second, first-generation status is magnified when networks are

grounded in vocational – rather than higher – education, in what could be called ‘negative social capital’ (Wacquant, 1998). Such capital has a positive value if invested in a similar arena of action (vocational education), but a divergent effect when the field of interest is university education, an uncommon trajectory for their families (Wacquant, 1998). Third, the education system can reinforce the broader social positioning of first-generation entrants if it does not provide opportunities for young people to build up valuable capital. We therefore stress that the silences surrounding higher education participation experienced by some first-generation entrants can be far broader and deeper than those experienced by other young people, complementing previous research that compounds traditional understandings of what it means to be ‘first’ (King et al., 2015; O’Shea, 2015b; O’Shea et al., 2017); that is, some young people will not only be ‘first’ relative to their family, but also relative to their community.

Furthermore, by conceptualising students’ capacities to mobilise capital along a continuum, we make the case that first-generation status is a dynamic, rather than fixed phenomenon. In previous quantitative and qualitative research, the category has largely been understood as static; that is, underpinned by the premise that first-generation entrants essentially embody their parents’ capital reserves and position in social space, rather than this status ever changing – or being able to change (see, for example, Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Priebe, Ross, & Low, 2008; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). Our broadened scope investigating *prospective* first-generation students who have not yet attended university demonstrates that not only can the nature of ‘being first’ be altered when an older sibling or cousin enters university, but young people themselves are active creators of capital who can be strategic in their investment and maintenance approaches. Various non-familial assets – teachers, coaches, older peers, and even casual acquaintances – were all singled out by students in our study who do not have family members with experiential knowledge of higher

education. As such, these findings confirm Leonard's (2005) prior work researching the mobilisation of social capital among youth, illustrating how young people in non-dominant positions *are* actively resourceful, rather than immobile or passive. Indeed, we suggest that our dynamic continuum further helps to disrupt the longstanding view of first-generation students as homogeneously 'lacking' (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013) and incapable of locating relevant assistance to aid in their educational trajectories (Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

Conclusion

Our unique study investigating differences among prospective first-generation students offers new theoretical and practical insights. Crucially, our analysis challenges common interpretations of social capital as only revolving around adults, and as a tool for middle-class reproduction through 'networking' and membership of elite groups. We have demonstrated the role of social capital within a group frequently positioned as *capital-less* or, in more recent times, as possessing delegitimised forms of capital not recognised by higher education institutions (O'Shea, 2015a; Yosso, 2005). Clearly, some young people who will be 'first' *do* mobilise valuable forms of symbolically legitimised capital, which we found to be based in proximal kinship relationships and active investments in non-familial connections – all without the direct involvement of parents/carers (Leonard, 2005). However, unlike studies investigating the middle-class (Abrahams, 2017), there is no sense of tacit entitlement, no 'naturally given' possession of social capital among the students in our study. Indeed, we also found that some prospective first-generation students have a dire lack of connections in relation to their desired arena of action – university – yet many are clearly aware of the importance of such connections in gaining access to this new educational pathway.

Practically speaking, adopting the category of first-generation status in equity policy

and practice will necessitate more nuanced support and interventions for students who are seen as belonging to this category. We do not wish to deny the overall importance of this equity category, but contend that a targeted focus on first-generation entry will not automatically achieve optimistic goals of widening participation if a ‘one size fits all’ approach is taken. Equity categories are usually operationalised at the institutional and policy level through quantitative measures and indicators (Gale, 2015) – parental education, SES, or location, for example – which means that the students in each group tend to be seen as analogous, while the group itself is constructed as inflexible. However, we propose that recognising ‘degrees of being first’ identified in our research means rethinking first-generation status: not as a homogeneous, static equity category, but as comprised of students with a wide range of capital reserves who are differently positioned in social space and whose status may change over time. At present, not only is demographic intersectionality often overlooked within institutional constructions of ‘first-generation’ status, but so too are other intra-group differences, such as how these students can vary enormously in terms of their symbolic capital.

In terms of equity interventions, then, the students we identified as ‘outsiders’ are likely to require more support in aspiring to, and eventually accessing, university compared to those who are ‘inheritors’ and ‘opportunists’, and at a much earlier point in formal schooling than is commonly the case for university outreach initiatives (Archer et al., 2013; Gale et al., 2010). In particular, for prospective first-generation students who do not have access to social capital via their families, communities, *and* schools, disrupting these far-reaching silences will require a sustained approach that is yet to be realised. Furthermore, ‘opportunists’ manifest skills and dispositions in building their own social capital that could be more systematically facilitated by teachers, schools and universities, so that more young people have the opportunity to build these valuable links to higher education. Here, the role

of teachers as a form of social capital is clearly overlooked in equity initiatives, which often aim to establish new connections to university rather than strengthen existing connections.

And finally, ‘inheritors’ have greater access to capital reserves than other prospective first-generation students, calling into question if these students are strictly ‘first’ to enrol in university. At face value, the evidence we have presented in this paper strengthens the case for definitions of first-generation/first-in-family status to include parents/carers *and* siblings (King et al., 2015; O’Shea, 2016). However, given that many of the young people we categorised as ‘inheritors’ had only very recent access to this form of social capital – often, their sisters/brothers (or even cousins) had only just entered university and had not yet graduated – we believe that it would be misguided to completely exclude these young people from equity interventions.

Overall, we therefore contend that a more nuanced approach to targeting first-generation status is required if this equity category is to be a meaningful vehicle for widening participation in higher education. As this paper has demonstrated, simplistic understandings of ‘first-generation entry’ do not do justice to the breadth and depth of what it means to ‘be first’ brought to light through the accounts of our next generation of potential university applicants.

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Notes

ⁱ Parents/carers encompasses all primary caregivers in relation to a given student.

ⁱⁱ The National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) is a higher education institution specialising in the performing arts, affiliated with the University of New South Wales.

ⁱⁱⁱ Technical And Vocational Education (TAFE) is the main provider of vocational education in Australia.