

Multiple, relational and emotional mobilities: Understanding student mobilities in higher education as more than ‘staying local’ and ‘going away’

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Abstract

This paper advances theorising around student geographies in higher education (HE). It extends recent work, which has problematised the primacy of social class and binary thinking about student mobilities, and presents local/non-local experiences and im/mobility as a defining dualism. Drawing on a qualitative longitudinal study of women’s experiences during and on completion of HE, the following explores the ways in which a more diverse and constantly negotiated set of mobility practices emerge relationally, in the stratified field of HE, and through shifting personal and emotional attachments. Theoretically, the paper develops a new approach to student mobilities, synthesising Bourdieu’s dominant notions of field with relational theories pertaining to mobilities (e.g. Adey, 2009), emotion (e.g. Holmes, 2010) and personal life (e.g. Mason, 2004; Smart, 2007). Such an approach makes it possible to move beyond the binary thinking that has become entrenched in policy and academic debates about student mobilities, and recognise a broader range of movements, flows, stops and starts that emerge relationally, emotionally and temporally as students and graduates move into and through HE. It is argued here that, given the policy emphasis on accelerated and flexible HE provision (BIS, 2016), a gradational view of student mobilities is more important than ever.

Keywords

emotion; field; graduates; mobility; personal relationships; students.

Introduction

Within the specific field of UK higher education (HE), student mobility is generally understood as ‘the semi-permanent move associated with leaving home and migrations over distance rather than mobility and everyday-life’, despite the fact that students are ‘constantly on the move’ in all manner of ways (Holdsworth, 2009, p. 1849). This limited perception of mobility (as distance travelled or as separation from home) endures, notwithstanding significant changes to the HE sector over the last three decades, which has seen a growing number of students choosing to remain at home and eschew the ‘boarding school’ model of participation (The Guardian, 2014). This trend is likely to increase under new HE policy proposals, which encourage multiple mobilities, flexible and accelerated participation, and the embeddedness of HE within other fields (i.e. domestic and economic) through the promotion of part-time and distance courses (BIS, 2016, p. 13).

Issues related to mobility (geographical, social, digital, transitional) are increasingly central to policy debates and interventions in HE. Due in part to rising tuition fees and widening participation—initiatives which have brought ‘new’ students and new ways of being a student into the field (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003; Christie et al., 2005; Keane, 2011)—the landscape of university-related mobilities has shifted significantly in the UK. For example, whilst the number of students who commute to university is increasing (HESA, 2015), there are also signs of more nuanced blending of living both at home and away through occasional (week/end) mobilities that serve both

leisure and economic purposes (author). However, even though traditional models of participation based on residential mobility have been challenged in some quarters, the increasing internationalisation of HE has fuelled the 'hyper-mobility' of many middle-class students, who seek further status and distinction through overseas study and international exchange programmes (Findlay & King, 2010; Brooks et al., 2012). Thus, the sharp distinction between local participation on the one hand and international migration on the other has constructed a dualistic discourse in which a broad range of practices and orientations are now understood rather simplistically as either 'mobile' or 'non-mobile' experiences (Hurley et al., 2016).

Working within this binary of im/mobility is not only unhelpful for the way it oversimplifies the classed nature of HE choices and experiences, but also because it reduces mobility to spectacular, one-off events—thus neglecting the significance of everyday encounters that constitute important affective experiences and emerge out of complex relational negotiations within personal networks (Finn 2016). To redress this, the following examines the multiple experiences of mobility for women HE students that exist within and between notions of immobility and hypermobility and emerge at different moments of transition. Drawing on qualitative longitudinal data generated over seven years (2006–2013), the following advances a relational approach to student mobilities which takes into account: the highly-stratified field of HE (Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009); the centrality of emotion and personal relationships for everyday decisions and actions (Mason, 2004; Smart, 2007; Holmes, 2010); and the affective and relational aspects of movement, stasis and flow (i.e. Adey, 2009; Jensen et al., 2014). Longitudinal data are presented as three case studies which do interesting work in highlighting some of the themes discussed by other participants, but they should not be approached as being representative in an abstract sense. I say more about this approach later.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Mobility requires close attention because it pervades much of contemporary social life (Urry, 2000); however it is, of course, much more than the physical act of moving between places and spaces. Mobilities are multisensory and embodied; 'something we feel in an emotional and affective sense' (Adey, 2009, p. 162). The emotional dimensions of moving into and through the spaces of HE remain a point of interest for HE researchers (Christie, 2009), and there is now a considerable body of work which explores the often difficult and ambivalent socio-spatial 'immobilities' of working class students who remain in the local region whilst studying at university (Reay et al., 2001; Christie, 2007; Abrahams & Ingram, 2013). These (and many other) studies employ and extend Bourdieusian concepts, so that it is now common practice to explain whether and why some students move away from home whilst others 'stay local' in terms of 'mobility capital' (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Corbett, 2007) and the possession of a habitus that is either 'mobility enabling' or characterised by 'immobility' (Cairns et al., 2013; Cairns, 2015).

Whilst such a mobilisation of Bourdieu's concepts is undoubtedly of value to the study of educational transitions and movements through social space, and for highlighting persistent inequalities of access and participation, these conceptual adaptations do little to think outside the binary extremes of im/mobility, which are themselves underpinned by dualistic notions of middle-class privilege and working-class disadvantage (Davey, 2012). As Donnelly and Evans (2016) have outlined in this journal, reading students' mobility choices solely in terms of oppositional class positions is limiting for the ways mobilities are understood; it obscures their nuanced and multifaceted nature and loses sight of the ways mobility decisions are complexly embedded in 'national and local connections and their significance for young people irrespective of their social-class position' (Donnelly & Evans, 2016, p. 88).

Theory from the new mobilities paradigm offers the kind of nuanced understanding of movement, stasis and flow that is missing from discussions about HE participation and the various mobile dimensions at play in the UK (e.g. Adey, 2009). At one level this literature develops a multifaceted conceptualisation of what mobility is, acknowledging everyday movements, imagined and digital mobility, as well as corporeal, geographical travel (Urry, 2008). Additionally, there is a strong recognition of the ways everyday mobility is experienced as dynamic and affectively oriented, emerging out of relational practices and shaped by the everyday temporalities of family and personal life, in addition to the longer temporalities of the life course (Jensen et al., 2014, p. 379). This work sits comfortably, then, alongside relational theories of personal life and emotion in which actions, identities and values are understood to be deeply and complexly embedded within webs of relationships that may be enriching and sustaining or equally, difficult and destructive (Mason, 2004). From this perspective, emotions and personal relationships become central to reading and making sense of the world and our place within it, making it impossible to engage or make choices—about mobility, home leaving, staying close to or getting away from friends or kin—in a neutral, non-personal way (Burkitt, 2014, p. 101). This kind of emotionally infused reflexivity (Holmes, 2010) is a useful analytical tool for thinking about how decisions and orientations towards work, study and mobility involve emotional processes as well as inculcated social and cultural knowledge. As Holmes (2010, p. 143) explains:

How and why people feel committed to their concerns is a matter of emotional relations to other things and people . . . Feelings about and connections to others are crucial to reflexive practices, even within a climate of individualization. Reflexive commitment to projects fundamentally involves how we relate to others.

These ideas are brought together as a way of keeping the theoretical conversation open and to allow us to ‘think otherwise’ (Fine, 2009) about student mobilities. Thus, it is not the intention to dismiss Bourdieu-inspired thinking in this context, but rather to be mindful of the limits and possibilities of any approach. Indeed, the following engages with Bourdieusian notions of habitus, social, cultural and mobility capital to consider how student mobilities evolve within the now highly stratified field of HE (Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009), paying attention to the ways in which different orientations towards semi-permanent migrations, occasional mobilities and everyday travel become normalised and valued in specific spheres of action. However, the central aim is to understand how a variety of mobility practices are negotiated and made meaningful at different stages of women’s HE transitions and how such decisions emerge out of personal and emotional networks, for better or for worse and not simply as a means of capital exchange and/or for the purposes of social mobility. This, I shall argue, requires a new (complementary and relational) lens, which will be developed in the second half of this paper.

Research

The discussion draws on analysis of biographical interviews generated through qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) conducted with women over a seven-year period (2006–2013). Twenty-four women were interviewed for an ESRC-funded doctoral study which explored the experiences of undergraduate students as they made the transition from further into higher education. Three interviews were conducted over a 15-month period, during which the women were anticipating, experiencing and completing their first year of study. In 2012, funding was sought to conduct a fourth phase of interviews with 10 of the original 24 participants, as they were making their way as graduates in times of considerable uncertainty.

This is, in part, a locality study, with the women beginning their HE 'journeys' in a former mill town in North West England that I have called Millthorne. Millthorne has a tradition of heavy industry and thus retains a strong sense of 'workingclassness'; however, in recent years it has become a focus for national debates about social and economic decline, unemployment and problematic ethnic segregation. Located within the Pennines, Millthorne has a rural feel in parts and yet also has good motorway and rail links to nearby university cities. Participants attended state-funded schools and further education institutions, and reflected a range of socio-economic backgrounds. In the main, though, they were first-generation entrants to HE (n = 18).

Millthorne has a small but significant ethnic minority population (around 10%), thus the sample included seven participants who identified as British Asian or British Muslim and 17 as White British. The phase four subsample included six first-generation entrants and one minority ethnic participant. In terms of their mobilities for university, there was a tendency to remain within the North West region (n = 15), with four of these women continuing to live in Millthorne with family. Nine women moved to universities over 100 miles away from Millthorne; however, by 2012, all but two of the women had returned to live in Millthorne. Analysis of each phase of interviews was cross-sectional, exploring themes which emerged from the literature on everyday mobilities, emotional experiences of space and place, and negotiated co-mobility. To supplement this, individual case histories were produced, with biographical motifs identified and employed comparatively to 'generate insight rather than make generalisations' (Thomson, 2007, p. 573). It is from these case histories that the pen portraits which now follow are drawn.

Three models of mobility

As an advocate for the case approach, Thomson (2016) argues that 'qualitative longitudinal research can play around with our ideas of scale' and that a small collection of cases can offer deep insights into broader issues. Although it is important to understand how and why cases are selected and compared, Yates (2003, p. 224) argues that placing too much 'emphasis on techniques of data treatment and comparison is misplaced' when working with QLR data, because the meaningfulness and potential contribution of these studies 'lie in acts of interpretation and dialogue with the broader field'.

The cases selected here do, in some ways, reflect broader themes that were observable across the sample. However, they were selected first because they highlight the position-taking that goes on in different sections of the HE field—elite/traditional (Stacey and Ashley); new (Mira)—and the ways mobility is shaped by this. Second, they illustrate different biographical motifs that shaped the women's mobility trajectories: the rupture of family and the importance of 'getting out and getting away' (Stacey); the intermittent absences and presences and the enduring pull towards home (Ashley); and the tentativeness of mobilities that are overshadowed by an anticipated future departure (Mira). Finally, these motifs reveal different models of family and relational networks; from a loose, elastic mode of relating and supporting (Stacey) to more dense networks of care and obligation (Ashley and Mira).

Stacey: Going, going, gone?

Stacey is White British and over the course of the project described the most linear and 'traditional' mobility trajectory of all the women in the study. In 2006, Stacey was living in a rural parish on the outskirts of Millthorne with her parents and younger brother. After moving on from the local high school where she was unhappy and unfulfilled, Stacey attended Valley Sixth Form which adjoins a selective grammar school and is renowned for its high levels of student achievement and

progression to some of the UK's most prestigious universities. Like many of her friends there, Stacey opted to leave the North West to study at university, moving over 200 miles away to attend an elite Ancient Scottish institution. 'Getting out and getting away' was a defining biographical motif and central to Stacey's perception of the 'university experience'. This view was shared and supported within her family; both of Stacey's parents themselves studied at university and they were in agreement that the transition to HE signalled a more or less permanent break with home.

Stacey saw geographical mobility as inextricably linked to opportunities for social advancement. Although she regarded her own background as typically middle-class, she was aware of the networking opportunities available at her institution. Indeed, Stacey was rather candid about establishing romantic links at university and, sharing the news of a new relationship, she reflected: '*I don't mean to sound totally manipulative, because I do really like [her boyfriend], but that's kind of why I came here, to mix with someone like him*' (Interview 2).

Once at university Stacey moved in fairly small and explicitly student circles, remaining in situ in the small Scottish town which is comprised of more students than locals. She enjoyed feeling embedded there and reflected on the predictability of the experiences she shared with her peers.

It's odd because it does feel very small and peculiar here—there are lots of traditions and very [institutionally specific] ways of doing things. But then it's, well it's home because of those things. It is true that [she and her friends] are terrible for just treading a fairly well-worn path around the place, we're such clichés. But that's kind of what you do when you come somewhere like this.

Despite her limited physical mobility, Stacey mixed with many international students and this gave her a sense of global cosmopolitanism amongst her friends and acquaintances. The high number of international students and the boarding-school model of participation at her university meant that students stayed on campus and, thus, visits to Millthorne were infrequent. This was, largely, in line with Stacey's expectations about university; however, she was unprepared when she returned home for her first Christmas vacation to find her bedroom packed up and all her belongings placed in storage. Stacey described her shock and confusion at finding her personal space so vastly changed. The fact that her mother had undertaken this without consultation or collaboration was clearly very upsetting for Stacey; however, there were no rows or disagreements, and Stacey's reaction was muted and very much in line with the family habitus, that is to leave things unspoken and simply move on. Crucially though, it signalled a key moment in which Stacey's ties to home and family officially began to loosen and became part of her framing of future decisions and actions (i.e. to keep moving).

During her second interview, Stacey shared her plans to undertake postgraduate study in Canada. Since meeting many international students, Northern America had become something of a focus for Stacey as she found ways to articulate a future that did not rely on an enduring connection to 'home'. When interviewed for the fourth phase of the project, Stacey was actually located in London where, like many of her friends, she was living and working: '*it's kind of a rite of passage to go straight from [university] to a South London house-share and a crummy job*' (Interview 4). Stacey relocated after her final exams in 2010, taking up an unpaid internship in a publishing house, assisted financially by her parents. Since Stacey and her younger brother had both now left for university, the family home in Millthorne had been converted into Bed and Breakfast accommodation, which was part of her parents' retirement project, further signalling, and indeed consolidating, the rupture of the family home-space and Stacey's motif of onward mobility.

Mum and dad instantly said 'go for [the internship]'. They saw what a good offer it was and that it be incredibly valuable for me and for getting a foot in the door. So, yes, they agreed to support me with rent and things whilst I was in London. I don't know that it was ever really a conversation really. It had to be done and they knew that.

Going home was, therefore, no longer an option for Stacey, even if it had long since ceased to be a desire. Despite this rupture, Stacey's parents were still very much involved in her decision-making, albeit in the implicit, removed way that had become characteristic of their relationships.

Ashley: The comeback

Ashley is also White British and was the first in her family to attend university. She was much more tentative about mobility, and her experiences reflect the more common pattern of comings and goings, disruptions and non-sequential mobility engagements that many women accumulated over the course of the project. From the outset, Ashley approached the idea of leaving her mother and older sister with hesitation. The three women lived close, overlapping lives in the small terraced house they had shared since Ashley's parents separated over a decade earlier. Despite a closeness, their relationships were underpinned by the absences and presences of different timetables and obligations:

We're like ships in the night most of the time. There's always a note in the kitchen from one of us. It's nice though. (Interview 1)

Ashley was not one for excessive socialising and spent most of her time with her boyfriend, who lived and worked locally. Nonetheless, rather than progressing to the local college with many of her school friends, Ashley decided to travel further afield to attend Hillside Sixth Form, where she felt she would be pushed academically and better prepared for the demands and changes that university would eventually bring. Life at Hillside was initially a bit of a struggle; she endured a long commute and although academically she was doing well, friendships were awkward and hard to get off the ground. Ashley quickly began to understand herself as someone who took their time with relationships. Despite her reservations, she accepted a place at a Russell Group institution in the Midlands, determined to 'live away and do the whole thing' (Interview 1).

Ashley's experiences at university were mixed. Friendships came slowly and in some cases not at all. She did not settle in her university accommodation, which she shared with five others. She felt rushed by the accelerated intimacy on campus and so retreated to her room. Very quickly, Ashley's thoughtfulness and shyness were interpreted as rudeness and an unwillingness to bond as friends. The conviviality shown to her soon came to an end.

I feel like [flatmates] are laughing at me a lot of the time. Sometimes I don't even want to come out of my room. I just can't face the [. . .] I keep thinking 'what's wrong with me?' You're meant to meet your mates for life at uni aren't you?

As a way to overcome her feelings of loneliness, Ashley enrolled with an employment agency and began to work casually around the city, mixing with locals and encountering new, non-student spaces. The flexibility of this work suited Ashley; she was able to earn money and support herself financially without being tied to a particular contract or routine, and she was becoming more familiar with the city space. She even made friends with a mature student enrolled on one of her modules who was working with the same agency. This relationship developed at a pace that Ashley was happy with and, being local to the city, her new friend placed fewer demands on Ashley in terms of staying around at weekends. As Ashley's return trips to Millthorne gradually became more

regular, the act of mobility itself instilled within her a sense of self-esteem and accomplishment, and provided a space for her to reflect upon and understand the transformations taking place in her life.

At first I was dead nervous. I'd never set foot in [Birmingham] New Street. It is huge! But, you know, over time I've gotten more used to it, I feel more at home making the connections and whatnot. And I'm getting quite good at getting the cheaper tickets. I feel a lot more confident in myself than before [attending university]. I like that time too, like I can get reading done for seminars or sometimes just recharge, get ready for home and think about stuff . . . It's me time. (Interview 3; emphasis added)

Ashley left university with a first-class honours degree and returned to live in Millthorne, buying a house in 2011 with her boyfriend, in a relatively affluent and sought-after area of Millthorne. The biographical motif of absences and presences— of coming back home—was as strong as before, and reflected her ongoing negotiation of different needs and desires (work and career; personal relationships; connections to place) and the role of everyday mobilities in the negotiation of these:

You know, I've done that, that living away thing and it was fun and good and I did like it. But I've had that experience and, well, I know now that I'd rather have a nice home here, see family and travel out to work than do it the other way around. [. . .] I kind of feel that, to an extent but it's not a big deal, that [her boyfriend] has also, you know, been here and I've been away and I have to, like, recognise that. (Interview 4)

Mira: The long game

Mira identified as British Muslim and did not seek the kind of mobility that is privileged in discourses of HE participation. Instead, her engagement was more tentative and structured around regular journeys which connected home and university in routine ways. Academic achievement was central for Mira and her family and, thus, she also attended Valley Sixth Form. The transition from a high school in which Muslim students were a significant majority to the ostensibly White spaces of Valley were challenging for Mira; however, she felt it was good preparation before moving on to study a degree in primary teaching at a post-1992 institution in a nearby city.

Mira has family origins in North Africa and she reflected on the mobilities that had shaped her family biography since her mother, father and wider kin network migrated to the UK in the 1980s. Her family had worked hard to establish a sense of connection and community in the local area of Millthorne, where they and other minority ethnic families lived. Surrounded by her extended kin, Mira described a close network that she was reluctant to move away from, at least in the short term. The everyday informality of family intimacy was central to Mira's life, and in her interviews she described family meal times with her grandparents and reflected on the role she played in caregiving at home. Thus, following her older sister, who was the first in the family to study at university, Mira chose to remain living at home whilst attending a local university.

Although studying locally, Mira's experiences were far from cosy or familiar. Her journey to and from university involved two separate train rides and a connecting bus to the out-of-town campus she attended. Additionally, Mira's programme involved placements within schools around the North West and, unable to secure a local school, she was required to travel for over two hours each day to attend her assignment. Far from being immobile then, Mira became accustomed to the local public transport network and mobility was a part of her everyday experiences of HE. Although this was sometimes a hindrance, delaying family meal times and causing Mira to feel tired, this newfound mobility brought new affective qualities to her friend relationships:

We are all in Manchester but only two of my friends actually live over there, and we aren't at the same campus because we do different courses. I think this makes things feel differently . . . because we meet for lunch once or twice a week and we go into Manchester shopping if we have time off uni. I would never do any of that on my own so it's lovely to have them around. (Interview 3; emphasis added)

Just as the emotional content of friendships was transformed through negotiated comobility, so too were the dynamics of home. During her first year of university, Mira's sister left home for six months to work as a volunteer midwife in Africa, and this experience of absence transformed the emotional and relational qualities of home, bringing into sharp focus the reality of change and departure that lingered on the horizon. Indeed, it was not long after her graduation that Mira's sister was married and left Millthorne permanently and, as a consequence, Mira became more central to the practices of care and support at home. This repositioning as a result of her sister's mobility weighed particularly heavily because Mira was, herself, in a long-term (although clandestine) relationship with a young man whom she had met whilst at school. Although she wanted to share the news of her relationship with her family, she was also very worried about what this would mean for her; knowing that marriage and home-leaving would be hastened once their respective families became involved. During her fourth interview, Mira reflected on the ways her imagined future (as a wife and mother) had shaped her orientations towards (im)mobility during and after university:

In a way, you know, like I have always known that I would leave home and enter a new family [through marriage]. So even though I, well not hugely, but sometimes I thought about leaving home [for university] but as I've said before it was never a big deal for me and I am a real home bird. So, well. How do I explain? Like, I haven't minded being here, especially for mum and to be honest, and when the time came [to get married] it hit me hard that my life was going to change, irreversibly. And it's not just me, me going, leaving, like, I truly believe it's been the hardest thing my mum has had to cope with. She tries to hide it from me but I sense her sadness all the time. I am so loud and talk constantly, there's a kind of big gap in house now I'm gone. My brother, sons are different aren't they? . . . When my sister moved out I became a bit of a focus, a focal point. I knew it would be doubly hard when I left. (Interview 4)

Although living only 10 minutes away from her family and working within a local school, Mira's mobility away from home was a key moment—for the family and for her sense of self—and the anticipation of this had framed her decisions about university-related mobility.

Relational mobilities within the field

The HE field, like any other, is a social space in which various forms of power circulate and where 'agents and institutions individually or collectively implement strategies in order to improve or defend their positions in relation to other occupants' (Naidoo, 2004, p. 459). This might include developing or maintaining certain mobility practices that are more conducive to maximising economic capital and, thus, symbolic gain and power, such as moving away to attend an elite university in the UK or overseas. The three cases certainly reveal how different pockets of this highly stratified field engender different constellations of mobility—historically and geographically specific forms of movement, narratives about mobility and mobile practices (Cresswell, 2010)—that go beyond mere notions of 'staying local' or 'going away' to include everyday commuting and urban dwelling, occasional mobilities that connect home and away, and moments of stasis and rootedness.

Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) claim that the field of HE now incorporates 'elite, mass and universal features all at the same time, with different parts of the system functioning in different ways, and

serving different purposes' (p. 121). The three cases illuminate these different functions and purposes, and the game-like characteristics that establish both norms and tensions. Stacey's account of the presence of international students and her plans to study abroad is telling of the ways the elite or more traditional quarters of the field define and value mobility—that is, in terms of one-off migrations over distance. However, what is also evident is the way that, once at university, even the most mobile students can find themselves following 'a fairly well-worn path around the place', and invest in moments of prolonged stasis and sameness. The need for embeddedness, connectivity and the routineness of place is often overlooked in discussions of middle-class mobilities, and yet mobility always exists in relation to some kind of fixity, or mooring. Thus, it needs to be recognised that students, regardless of their social class position, can be at once moored and immobile, or indeed mobile and moored (Adey, 2006).

Elsewhere in the field, in newer or less traditional institutions, different constellations of mobility emerge. Mira's reflection on her friendship group's practices is an example of the ways everyday mobilities to and from university, and a mixing of university and urban spaces and home, is more commonplace for students in post-1992 or dual-sector institutions. Thus, there are different expectations about study abroad programmes, and students may rely more heavily on digital and virtual mobilities, rather than corporeal or geographical movement, to access their courses and feel embedded at university. Research has shown digital mobility—social media, online tools and 'apps' for students—to be an important resource for first-generation entrants, allowing them to establish and inhabit alternative spaces and different fields (family, economic, HE) simultaneously, which can be essential for feelings of belonging and fitting in (Timmis et al., 2015). This is a reminder then to consider the different facets of mobility (Urry, 2008) when thinking about student geographies, and not to focus too heavily on residential moves or 'distance travelled' as evidence of students' mobilities. Indeed, the imagined mobility of postgraduate study in Canada was as significant for Stacey's narrative of belonging in the field as being physically distant from home.

Of course, these different dimensions of mobility overlap and give meaning to one another. Ashley's determination to 'go away' to university and 'do the whole thing' reveals the ways in which imagined mobility and narratives about what constitutes 'proper' student mobility powerfully influence everyday mobility practices and decision-making strategies. For Ashley, who felt somewhat out of step with the culture of her Russell Group institution, and whose social and emotional capital were not particularly portable, there were clearly tensions and a deep sense of ambivalence in terms of the ways imagined notions of student mobility contrasted with her own experiences. Ashley's case thus demonstrates the disconnect between the rather superficial depictions of student mobility as existing within the clearly defined field of HE, and the much more complex mobilities that many students must negotiate in order to traverse and link together the multiple fields in which they operate.

From this perspective, it becomes possible to understand Ashley's pull towards home and to non-student spaces as complex and agentic rather than as representing predisposition to immobility—an 'immobility habitus—or a lack of mobility capital. On the contrary, this is an example of mobility capital put to use in different ways and to different ends. Ashley benefited significantly from both her actual and potential mobility—her 'motility' (Kaufmann et al., 2004)—not only in terms of the extra money she earned from her agency work and the social networks she accessed there, but also in the accumulation of emotional capital 'on the move' between fields that boosted her self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. Thus, mobility capital should not be merely understood as inherited familial resources, which specifically take students away from home; but, rather, as a dynamic matrix

of access, competence and appropriation of mobility that may form links with, and may be exchanged for, other forms of capital (Kaufmann et al., 2004, p. 754).

These cases demonstrate, then, that we should not lose sight of the diverse ways in which students engage in and value their mobility and how the stratified field of HE creates opportunities and challenges for this diversity. Staying close to home is so often understood to be linked to ‘tastes of necessity’ (Bourdieu, 1986) rather than tastes of ‘luxury (or freedom)’, particularly for minority ethnic women (Smith, 2007, p. 424), meaning that British Asian and British Muslim women like Mira are presented as valuing the sameness and stability afforded by limited mobility. However, as Mira’s case illuminates, what appear to be local, safe or familiar choices are actually often acts of resistance and even indulgences in luxury (i.e. meeting for lunch, shopping in the city). Indeed, studying locally can often lead to new, everyday mobilities around the city and home area, which have an impact on the ways relationships registered, emotionally: making them feel differently, to use Mira’s own words. Therefore, even though commuter students, particularly those like Mira in newer institutions, might be ostensibly regarded as local, they will likely encounter ‘new, unfamiliar, or previously prohibited locations within the city’, which challenge and reframe their everyday experiences as students and their ‘consistent’ geographies of home (Holton, 2014, p. 829).

Mobility decisions as emotional acts

Because most studies of student mobility focus on individual decisions and destinations, the collective dimensions of mobility, absence and presence are often overlooked (Jensen et al., 2014, p. 364). The three cases reveal how orientations and practices of mobility emerged within personal collectives—families, friendships, households, couple relationships—which engendered explicitly relational and emotional negotiations that built up over time. Ashley’s biographical motif of return—the desire to come back home both temporarily as a student and permanently as a graduate—reflects her emotional relations of connection to a collective. Thus, even though returning to Millthorne complicated her experiences as a student and resulted in a lengthy commute once she entered full-time employment, Ashley was mindful of the balance of mobility obligations within her partnership and that her boyfriend had done his fair share of waiting around. This kind of emotional reflexivity is central to the ways many women graduates make decisions about where to live and work after exiting university (author, 2016), so that whilst there are always practical concerns to be considered (local labour market opportunities, access to employment and housing), it is emotional concerns that give credence to the ways these are interpreted (Holmes, 2010; Burkitt, 2014).

Mason (2004) maintains that decisions about, and practices of, mobility emerge through sedimented relational negotiations, trade-offs and critical moments in personal histories. This is certainly evident in Stacey’s case; her biographical motif of getting out and getting away was central to her narrative of mobility throughout the life of the project and her mobility decisions were often framed by the shifting emotional commitments within her family collective since she departed for university in 2006. It certainly became clear in Stacey’s interviews that proximate informal support was not on the menu in her family and whilst I am not suggesting that she had no other options or that her family were unsupportive, her decisions to remain in situ at university, travel abroad during holidays and move to London as a graduate must be understood in this emotional and relational context as well as relating to her academic credentials and her stocks of cultural, social and mobility capital. It is important to recognise also that Stacey’s mobility practices, although increasingly separated from family, took on shape and meaning within the context of her friendship group—who moved together in a ‘temporal convoy’ (Gillis, 1996, p. 43) towards ‘crummy’ jobs in London.

Indeed, moving away from home or acting independently from kin need not be read as growing individualism or as the emotional neutrality of middle-class students and graduates like Stacey. Mason (2004) makes the point that individualism often manifests in the telling of stories about migration and mobility, and yet emotional connections to others (however difficult these may be) often remain central or certainly appear as footnotes to action. Stacey's narrative of her onward mobility to London is one of agency and self-determination; however, her parents' retirement project is always in the background and their unspoken commitment to help her financially shows how obligations and feeling rules develop incrementally and over time within families (Finch & Mason, 2003), as the bedroom-clearing episode demonstrates. As Smart (2007) maintains, the emotionality of past experiences is important reflexive decision-making; 'we resort to [the past] knowingly and unknowingly, it frames and contextualises the way we negotiate the present and the future'.

Mira's case offers a slightly different, and perhaps more embedded or proximate, example of the ways family negotiations build up over time to inform mobility practices. Her case is telling of the ways women often carry the 'burden' of care and support within families, with sisters and brothers assuming different roles and responsibilities that were structured by and structuring of their mobilities. The sibling dynamic in Mira's case challenges the idea that mobility capital is necessarily inherited intergenerationally (see Cairns, 2015); indeed, her sister's decision to travel to Africa impacted upon Mira's desire and obligation to be proximate, making it apparent that resources for mobility play out in complex ways in lateral relationships, which are underpinned by power differentials and complex family politics (Davies, 2014). By focusing on the emotional and relational dynamics of family relationships, and not just the downward transmission of class-based resources, it becomes possible to understand how siblings within the same kin network might make different choices about university-related mobility.

Recognising students and graduates as acting within and in response to their wider familial associations and emotional connections alerts us to the ways in which the lifecourse transitions of others can often become central for individual (im)mobilities. Mira's sister's departure, overlapping with her mother's anxieties about an impending 'empty nest', were fundamental to her reflexive decision-making (Holmes, 2010) and informed the timing and disclosure of her own relationship and subsequent mobility out of home. Similarly, Stacey's case illuminates the ways in which mobility, role transition and the flexibility of the life course play out within families, shaping individual mobility trajectories (Findlay et al., 2015). This case shows the precarity of young adulthood intersecting with the growing trend towards 'productive retirement' and, crucially, how this impacts upon support for different kinds of mobilities within a network.

A focus on emotion also provides ways to move away from a view of student mobility as significant only for its exchange value. These three cases—though particularly the working-class and first-generation entrants, Mira and Ashley—are examples of the broader (use) value of mobility for students' emotional wellbeing and for connecting the various spheres of experience that constitute everyday life (Holton and Finn 2017). Ashley's case is a particularly powerful example of the ways in which students' travel time and use of mobile spaces become 'a technical and social assemblage to manage feelings of pressure and letting go', offering 'personal space for contemplation, planning and work' (Jensen et al., 2014, p. 370). Thus, contrary to depictions of the disadvantaged commuter-student (Christie, 2007), everyday mobilities can be forcefully enriching; something that has been largely ignored in discussions of students' everyday travel.

Conclusion

This paper has illuminated the many and varied practices and interactions that make up 'student mobility' within the stratified field of HE. In doing so, it continues to trouble the binary of class-based models of students' decision-making, in which they appear as either local/non-local mobile/immobile. The three cases show how we too commonly mistake different kinds of mobility for immobility (Adey, 2006) when discussing student geographies and, crucially, that university-related mobility is not the preserve of a particular group of students, but a 'highly differentiated activity where many different people move in many different ways' (Adey, 2006, p. 83). Recognising such differences and complexities is increasingly important in a policy context where notions of flexibility, acceleration, distance and proximate learning are brought to the fore of debates about HE choice in the UK (BIS, 2016). Thus, it is crucial that scholars engage critically with the binary concepts that have become so embedded in this discourse.

Whilst the HE field plays a significant role in organising and making some forms of mobility possible, normal and valuable, it is students' and graduates' personal networks which sustain, direct and give emotional context to mobility practices during and after completing university. The cases are examples, then, of the ways an emotionally infused reflexivity (Holmes, 2010) becomes incorporated into the inherent dispositions of students and graduates as they move increasingly within and across different social fields (Adkins, 2003; Sweetman, 2003). Emotions have implications for students' access, competence and appropriation of mobility; thus, if concepts like mobility capital are employed, this must be conceptualised as much more than the intergenerational transmission of mobility preferences or the familial inheritance of a 'rich mobility history' (Cairns, 2015, p. 33). Not only does this view consider only some (elite) forms of family migration and movement as constituting such a rich stock of experiences (i.e. writing out the significance of international migration that leads to a desire for proximity and continuity in place as a positive act), but it also neglects the ways in which students negotiate their motility (actual and potential mobility) in dynamic and non-linear ways across the student trajectory and into graduate employment.

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