Discussing higher education choices: differences and difficulties

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ABSTRACT

Social psychological studies have long emphasized the importance of openness, disclosure and the sharing of plans for the future to young people's friendships. Recently, similar claims have been made within sociology, but applied to friendships and other relationships practised at various points *throughout* the life-course. From both these perspectives, it would be expected that as young people come to make decisions about their post-18 destinations, their deliberations would be discussed with close friends. Indeed, various large-scale surveys of the factors affecting young people's higher education choices have indicated that friends may play an important role in this process. However, while these have provided a useful measure of the proportion of young people who discussed their choices with their friends, they have been unable to illuminate the content and length of such discussions, the number of friends with whom discussions were held, or the nature of the friendships of the young people in the sample. Using qualitative data drawn from a two-year, longitudinal study with young people between the ages of 16 and 18, this paper illuminates the nature of such conversations with friends and others in the wider peer group. It argues that, contrary to the implications of previous quantitative studies, conversations about higher education courses and institutions were extremely limited. In seeking to explain the reasons for this it will highlight a number of difficulties young people had in talking to their friends about higher education, focusing largely on the significant differences between friends and others in the wider peer group, which were brought into sharp relief by the decision-making process. On the basis of this evidence, it suggests that discussions about higher education were inherently problematic for almost all the young people in the sample, and for this reason were avoided.

Keywords: universities; degree subject; choice; friends; peers

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INTRODUCTION

In their study of young people's higher education (HE) choices, Reay et al. (2001a) note that: 'higher education applicants are located within a matrix of influences which are best represented by overlapping circles of individual, family, friends and institution' (para.1.6). However, although recent research has discussed thoroughly the impact of social class (Pugsley, 1998; Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Ball et al., 2002), ethnicity (Ball et al., 2001; Reay et al., 2001b) and, to some extent, gender (Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Reay et al., 2001b) on the decisions young people make about their post-18 options, the influence of young people's friends and peers has remained under-theorized. Several of these studies have certainly alluded to the role played by friends and peers in young people's higher education choices (Roker, 1993; Reay, 1998a; Ball et al., 2001; David et al., 2001), but the nature of the influence has not been explored in any systematic way. Similarly, a number of surveys of the factors that affect young people's HE choices have suggested that a large proportion of students do discuss their decisions with friends (Roberts and Allen, 1997; Connor et al., 1999; Moogan et al., 1999). Indeed, Roberts and Allen report that over 70% of their sample had discussed their choice of both course and institution with their friends, the most common source of influence after that of the family. However, these quantitative studies have given little indication of the length and content of such discussions, the number of friends with whom discussions were held, or the nature of the friendships of the young people in the sample. This paper attempts to address this gap in the literature, by focusing explicitly on HE discussions with friends and peers.

It would seem that a focus on young people's informal relationships, and particularly their friendships, may help to illuminate further their decision-making processes. Indeed, the importance of disclosure and openness, particularly about current plans and hopes for the future, are articulated clearly within social psychological studies of adolescent relationships. Moreover, the peer-orientation of young people is widely assumed within much of this literature. In the 1960s, Parsons (1964) argued that the importance of peer relationships lay in the psychological support they provided for young people as they passed through a transitional stage of the life cycle, and similar claims pervade many contemporary studies (Youniss and Smollar, 1985; Hendry et al., 1993; Bukowski et al., 1996). It is commonly held that as young people enter adolescence, so the nature of their friendships changes; they develop new forms of intimacy with their friends that include 'a more exclusive focus, openness to self-disclosure and the sharing of problems and advice' (Hendry et al., 1993, p. 115). Intimacy is therefore central to this understanding of adolescent friendship, and intimate conversations, in which personal information is shared, are argued to give young people 'a better understanding of other people and a broader perspective on the world' (Berndt, 1999, p. 57). If the assumptions of these studies are accepted, it seems highly likely that higher education choices would be discussed by young people with their friends and peers. Indeed, Berndt suggests that conversations about life plans are an important part of the intimate friendships formed during adolescence. Discussing plans for the future and asking for support and advice about HE choices would seem to be an obvious way in which the emphasis within the social psychological literature on self-disclosure and the affirmation of identity could be played out.

Similarly, various sociological studies of friendship have emphasized the importance of disclosure and openness about life plans to the practice of such relationships. It has been claimed by sociologists such as Beck (1992), Giddens (1992) and Pahl (1998) that recent

years have witnessed the rise of a new type of friendship, which Giddens has labelled the 'pure relationship'. In contrast to previous forms of friendship, such a relationship is maintained only for as long as it satisfies the needs of the persons involved. Thus, it refers: 'to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it' (Giddens, 1992, p. 58). Central to the pure relationship is an emphasis on openness, disclosure and emotional communication. Indeed, Giddens and others claim that talk—the basis of making the relationship work—is predicated upon a process of active trust and a willingness to open oneself up to the other. Within this model of friendship, particular prominence is given by some theorists to the relationships forged by young people. Pahl (1998), for example, suggests that in contemporary society, where neither employment nor family relationships may be able to provide a sense of security, 'those friends whom people have known since school or college serve as anchor points in their lives and can help to provide emotional integration and stability' (p. 103). However, the extent to which contemporary friendships do, in practice, resemble the 'pure relationship' is highly contested. Critics have pointed out that friendship continues to be constrained by the norms of heterosexuality, as well as by the social divisions of class, gender and ethnicity (Jamieson, 1998), while its form and content are strongly influenced by the circumstances under which it is constructed (Allan, 1998). Nevertheless, the dominance of ideas associated with the pure relationship, within popular discourse as well as sociological debate, suggests that it may be fruitful to explore the extent to which young people's friendships are consonant with this model. If such relationships are widely practised by young people, it seems likely that the disclosure and discussion of higher education deliberations would be an important part of such friendships.

This paper engages with some of these debates about young people's friendships, which have been conducted within the disciplines of sociology and social psychology, as well as within education. More specifically, it explores the extent to which young people did discuss their post-18 options with their friends and peers, and illuminates the nature of such conversations. It argues that, contrary to the implications of Roberts and Allen's (1997) and Connor et al.'s (1999) research, discussions about higher education courses and institutions were extremely limited within this sample of young people. In seeking to explain the reasons for this, it will highlight a number of difficulties the young people had in talking to their friends about higher education, focusing largely on the significant emerging differences between friends and others in the wider peer group. It will argue that discussions about HE were inherently problematic for almost all the young people in the sample, and for this reason were avoided.

RESEARCH METHODS

The paper draws upon data gathered as part of a qualitative, longitudinal study of young people's friendships and higher education choices, conducted between September 1999 and September 2001 at 'Emily Davies College' (a pseudonym), a large sixth-form college in the south of England. Fifteen young people and their friends were the focus of the research (see Table 1), and in-depth interviews were conducted with them each term over the two-year period. In total, six interviews were conducted with each young person. The

Table 1:   Characteristics of the young people involved in the research

Name	Social class	Highest educational qualification obtained by mother	Highest educational qualification obtained by father or step-father	A level point score*
Becky	IIIN	O Levels	O Levels	38
Charlotte	II	O Levels	Degree	28
Clare	IIIN	O Levels	BTEC	18
Jenny	II	O Levels	O Levels	repeating year
Jim	II	O Levels	BTEC	12
Liz	V	O Levels	O Levels	18
Lucy	II	None	None	24
Mark	II	Certificate of Education	A Levels	14
Paul	I	Certificate of Education	Degree	26
Rich	I	Degree	Degree	2
Sarah	II	O Levels	A Levels	16
Simon	II	A Levels	A Levels	20
Steve	II	O Levels	O Levels	16
Sunita	II	O Levels	O Levels	18
Zoë	IIIN	A Levels	A Levels	36

*This is based on the tariff that was used widely by universities and colleges in the UK at the time the Emily Davies students were making their applications. An A grade was equivalent to 10 points; a B grade to 8 points; a C grade to 6 points; a D grade to 4 points; and an E grade to 2 points.

interviews covered a variety of topics including their: experiences at college; plans for the future; thoughts and decisions about higher education; lives outside of college; and relationships with friends. These were supplemented by: interviews with members of staff at the college and local careers advisers, an analysis of relevant HE-related documents, produced by the college; and observations of HE-related events (such as a talk to parents about HE choices and a meeting for students interested in applying to Oxford or Cambridge). The young people who took part in this research generally obtained exam results higher than the college average,[1] but did encompass a reasonably wide spectrum of attainment. In common with most of the other students at the college, they had attended local state secondary schools and came from families with little experience of higher education.

While the HE system in the UK clearly has its own distinctive characteristics (some of which are discussed later in this paper), an exploration of decisions made by these young people in the south of England is likely to have relevance in other parts of the world. In common with the UK, many countries have witnessed a significant expansion of the number of university places over recent years and also the increasing marketization of the HE sector. Indeed, research conducted elsewhere (for example, in Australia (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001) and America (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999)) has started to explore the HE choices of young people under these new conditions, and this study articulates with some of these debates.

THE ABSENCE OF DISCUSSION

Evidence from the Study

Throughout the two years of the longitudinal study, almost all the young people claimed that the subject of higher education, in terms of both course and institution, was not one they had discussed in any great detail with many or, in some cases, any, of their close friends. In many ways this was surprising, given what quantitative studies of HE choice have indicated about the importance of friends and peers in the decision-making process (Roberts and Allen, 1997; Allen, 1998; Connor *et al.*, 1999; Moogan *et al.*, 1999) and also what many of the young people had told me about the nature of their friendships. Indeed, the contrast between the young people's descriptions of the closeness of their friendships and their reluctance to talk about HE was marked:

Steve: I haven't talked much about it with him [Mark] at all really. I don't know what he's thinking of doing or where he's going. It's never come up in conversation.

RB: Is he still someone you'd call a close friend?

Steve: Oh he's a close friend; it's just something that never comes up really. (Interview 3)

Several students remarked on this contrast themselves. For example, Becky and Mark commented:

Becky: It sounds weird, that I'm not talking to my closest friends about things that are probably going to affect the rest of my life but it's just that I feel a bit uncomfortable talking to them about, you know, 'Oh I'm going to Oxford and do this and what are you going to do?' 'Oh, I don't know'. (Interview 4)

Mark: I thought a lot of people, like my friends, would talk about it while they were doing their UCAS forms, but no one really said anything. I don't know [why] really. (Interview 4)

Furthermore, when higher education had been talked about with close friends, it was in almost all cases only *after* decisions had been taken and was usually prompted by specific events such as handing in UCAS forms or receiving offers. Paul claimed that: 'I didn't find out where people had applied 'til after I had applied' (Interview 4), while the following comments were typical of the young people's reflections on the timing and nature of university-related talk:

RB: Why do you think you haven't talked about it much with that group of friends?

Jim: . . . I think it's 'cos UCAS is out of the way now. All the forms have been sent off and we're not really . . . we just don't talk about it. (Interview 4)

Sunita: I've told them [friends] that I'm doing these things and that's it really. I didn't mention some other ones like Bath when I was trying to decide and I was thinking of Sheffield but never mentioned it. (Interview 4)

Lucy: Someone will say 'Oh, I got an offer through' and we'll say 'Oh, where?' and that will be it. (Interview 4).

RB: Is that something you've talked about quite a bit?

Zoë: A bit when it was like the UCAS time but not so much now 'cos I've kind of put it behind me, like applying and everything. So I don't really mention it that much. I don't really think we mentioned it that much before either . . . just a quick 'Oh what do you want to do? Where are you applying?' sort of thing. (Interview 4)

Even in the autumn term of the young people's second year at college, when many tutor periods were devoted to higher education applications and most young people were giving serious thought to the courses and institutions they would put on their UCAS forms, the amount of time spent discussing choices was extremely limited. The same pattern was repeated in the following term, when most of the students received offers or rejections from the higher education institutions they had applied to and were required to decide on their firm and insurance offers. The pattern was also common across the whole of the sample of young people from Emily Davies college: none of the gender differences in conversations about HE noted by Reay (1998a) (with young women more likely than young men to discuss their decisions with friends) were replicated in this study.

The Rhetoric of Individual Choice

During the interviews, when the young people were asked to reflect on the reasons why they had not talked much about higher education with their close friends, some were unable to provide any clear explanation and, instead, seemed surprised that it had not been a more common topic of conversation. Others, however, emphasized what they perceived to be the 'individual' nature of decision-making about HE and the importance of this. In response to specific questions about the influence of friends and family on higher education decisions, many of the young people talked primarily in terms of individual choice, claiming that others had had very little involvement in their decision-making processes. Sunita's and Paul's comments were typical:

Sunita: I didn't want them to like influence me, [to] tell me where to go or something. I wanted to make that decision for myself. I know you can listen to people and at the end of the day make your own decision but I didn't want somebody to say 'Oh, that's a rubbish university' or something, or 'I've been up there, it's not nice' and put me off. (Interview 4)

Paul: I don't think I'll be swayed by where any of my friends go. I don't want to go to university just because my friends have gone there 'cos I'm not doing their degree. I'm doing my own degree. (Interview 3)

This strongly reflects Reay et al.'s (2001a) findings in all but one of the schools and colleges in which they conducted research: in only the further education college did students perceive the HE decision-making process as a collective endeavour. It also echoes the assumptions about the importance of young people making their *own* choices that were made by many of the middle-class parents in Pugsley's (1998) study.

However, the interview data indicate that although the rhetoric of the importance of 'individual choice' was frequently drawn upon by the students to justify particular decisions with respect to friends, decisions not to discuss HE choices were linked strongly to the nature

of relationships with friends rather than merely a positive desire to make an 'individual choice.' From this perspective, the young people's recourse to individualistic explanations of their own actions can be seen as a reflection of the assumptions that inform much educational policy (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001), as well as the language frequently employed in public discourse by politicians and educationalists (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996) and, in the context of the college, by teachers and careers advisers. In many ways this supports Furlong and Cartmel's (1997) assertion that throughout the education system young people are increasingly expected to negotiate the pathways they take as individuals rather than members of a collectivity. They go on to suggest that this is a result of: the construction of education as a consumer product; the variety of routes and qualifications available to young people; and changing political ideologies (away from the understanding of education as a means to increase equality of opportunity and towards the introduction of free market principles). Indeed, evidence from the UK and abroad suggests that young people frequently downplay the significance of structural factors in their lives and, as a consequence of this, individualize their own successes and failures (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2002).

I will argue in this paper that it is possible to understand the apparent reluctance of the young people to engage in conversations about higher education without assuming that it is the result a positive desire to make an 'individual choice'. In doing so, I will draw on some of the reasons put forward by the young people themselves but also on other evidence, provided less directly by the students, when they were talking about their friendships and the wider peer group within the college. In particular, I will suggest that at least part of the explanation is related to the way in which the process of higher education choice emphasizes differences between friends.

Over the two years of the study, differences between friends and peers in several areas were highlighted, often by the young people themselves. These included differences in: academic attainment, values, subject areas and the timing of HE decisions. While differences do not necessarily lead to difficulties in talking about HE choices, some of the differences did seem particularly problematic for the young people concerned because of the ways in which they threatened the perceived equality of their friendships. This was exacerbated in some cases by the hierarchical judgements made by the young people about some of these types of difference. Although few of the differences discussed in the following section were created by the process of HE choice, or by the young people's experiences at sixth-form college, they do seem to have placed new tensions upon existing friendships. Indeed, the process of HE choice seems to have played an important role in making explicit previously latent differences. It was these emerging differences that made talking about HE with close friends difficult for many of the young people in this study.

HIERARCHICAL DIFFERENCES

Much of the sociological literature on friendship emphasizes the centrality of the perception of equality between those who consider themselves to be friends. For example, Allan (1996) claims that:

> Friendship, in whatever form it takes, is defined as a relationship between equals. That is, within friendship there is little sense of social hierarchy or status difference. Instead the emphasis is placed firmly on similarity and equivalence. Whatever the social differences

outside the tie, at the core of friendship is the notion that friends regard and treat one another as equals within it. (p. 89)

This section will demonstrate how various aspects of the process of HE choice posed a direct threat to this equality by creating or foregrounding differences between the young people.

Differences in Academic Attainment

One of the most significant differences between friends and peers was that in academic attainment. Although several of the young people claimed that they had been aware of differences in academic attainment within their friendship group before arriving at Emily Davies College, it was only when embarking upon the process of HE choice that these differences gained such significance. Predicted grades determined, to a large extent, what courses and institutions could be considered by individual students and, thus, were seen by the young people has having serious implications for future careers. Becky articulated this well:

> I mean we have always been different in that I've sort of been, you know, higher up in classes and grades and everything, but it's never really mattered. She [best friend] has felt as though she had to try and live up to the same standards because she was my best friend and everything but, you know, it got to a certain point when she realized [there was no point] bothering. But now it's back to that point only it's much worse 'cos it's such a difference: her being here in college for a third year and me going to Oxford. (Interview 5)

These differences, highlighted by HE choice, were exacerbated in some friendship groups by the relatively recent emergence of academic differences. For example, Zoë and Charlotte's friendship group seemed to be predicated upon common levels of high attainment. Both young women emphasized this in the early interviews when I asked them what were the best things about being part of their particular friendship group:

> Zoë: . . . we're all sort of—this will sound quite big-headed—clever people so we're all on a par with one another. Nobody feels inferior in that way. You might be friends with someone who didn't do very well in their exams and they might not feel happy with you and you might not feel happy with them. (Interview 1)
> Charlotte: They are all really clever so it's competitive and you're pushed forward all the time. If you get a bad grade they are not going to judge you. They are very understanding and have bad days as well. (Interview 1)

However, by the end of their first year at Emily Davies College differences were apparent:

> RB: Would you say they are predicted the same sort of grades as you?
> Charlotte: Yes. They are all predicted As and Bs. Although the more we've been here, the more our grades have separated out. Like Zoë's the one with all the As, As, As and there are a few people who get lower grades and I am somewhere in the middle . . . it's strange because normally we all used to get exactly the same results and now it's a lot more varied. (Interview 3)

The difficulty of talking about HE options with friends of a different attainment level was emphasized by almost all the young people at different points throughout the study. They were concerned not to 'brag' about their own attainment and likely HE prospects if they had achieved grades higher than their friends. Equally, those with lower grades were also reluctant to talk about HE with their friends because it emphasized these differences:

Jim: Like with people in my classes, like in my physics class, I don't like to talk to people 'cos I don't want them to judge me, like say, 'Why [are] you doing physics?' I don't want them to think I'm not good enough or something. So I'd rather not. I don't like talking to them about it. (Interview 4)

Differences in choice of institutions

Not only were the young people aware of the differences in academic attainment between themselves and their friends, but many anticipated that this would lead to them attending different 'types' of university. Numerous studies (Brooks, 2003) have highlighted the hierarchical nature of the British HE system and the distinction between 'Oxbridge', 'old' universities and their 'new' counterparts that is frequently drawn by employers, students and their parents[2] (Ainley, 1994; Brown and Scase, 1994). The basis upon which the young people at Emily Davies College categorized universities and colleges differed both between friendship groups and between individuals. Nonetheless, almost all employed some kind of ranking system to differentiate between institutions and most made some link between academic ability and type of HEI. Steve was explicit about how he perceived this relationship. In the second round of interviews, he claimed that within his friendship group there were three 'bands' of ability: those who got As and who were 'pretty much up there'; a 'mid-range band', who typically achieved Bs and Cs at college (and in which he located himself); and a third band of young people, for whom a C grade was a considerable achievement. He then mapped these bands on to three equivalent groups of university, with the expectation that the differences in the attainment of his friends would be reflected in the differences in the status of the HEIs they attended. Once these hierarchies had been constructed, it seemed that they served to suppress discussion of certain HE choices within some friendship groups. Indeed, Steve went on to claim that:

On some aspects people are bothered, yet on another plane people don't really want to talk about it because they don't want to be seen as probably inferior. I, myself, wouldn't look on anyone less if they said they wanted to go to Southampton Institute or somewhere which, let's face it, isn't up there really, but I think quite a few of us are quite self-conscious in what everyone else thinks of us. (Interview 2)

Differences in Choice of Subjects

While the majority of hierarchies were constructed around perceived academic ability and/or institutional status, for some young people the status attached to particular subjects was also important. Zoë and Charlotte's friendship group seemed to be highly sensitive to the status of degree subjects, but much less aware of the reputation of higher education institutions. In

part this can be explained by the subject focus of the group: almost all members had, on entry to Emily Davies College, been keen to study medicine—and had generally changed their minds only when they felt that their grades would not be high enough to gain entry to this particular course. This appeared to have made discussions about universities problematic.

> Zoë: I decided I wanted to be a doctor in Year 8 and have stuck with it all the way through. And then in Year 9 Sinead was like, 'Oh, I want to do medicine' and then we all got our results and she got amazing GCSE grades—all the teachers were like, 'Now Sinead can be a doctor!' And then Charlotte wanted to be a doctor and so we all wanted to do medicine. I'm the only person who has actually stuck with it. (Interview 3)
> RB: Have you talked to her [Zoë] about courses at other universities?
> Charlotte: No. It hasn't really come up 'cos we want to do . . . well, not different things, 'cos Zoë wants to be a doctor, but we have different ideas about what we want 'cos I'm not really sure about being a doctor and she definitely is, so we don't really compare them. (Interview 3)

Within other friendship groups, there was also a small number of subjects to which a particular status was attached. These included media studies within Paul's group and classical civilization within Mark and Steve's group. Both subjects were seen as of low status within the respective groups and individuals who expressed an interest in studying them were often teased.

The Significance of Difference

The identification of differences does not, of course, necessarily entail difficulties. However, the differences between the young people in the areas discussed above were imbued with greater significance because of the hierarchical nature of the judgements that the young people attached to them. Differences in academic attainment, higher education institution and, for some, proposed course of study at HE and future career, were not seen as value-neutral. In almost all friendship groups, differences in these areas were explicitly or implicitly ranked.

Through the construction of hierarchies (of institutions, degree subjects and levels of academic attainment), friends and peers exerted an important influence on young people's decisions. However, it is also the case that such influences served, simultaneously, to restrict conversations about higher education. As the young people engaged in the decision-making process with regards to HE, they became more aware of the differences between themselves and their friends, and it became more difficult for them to discuss HE without undermining the perceived equality of their friendships. Indeed, in contrast to some other studies of young people's friendships (Holland *et al.*, 1993; Mac an Ghaill, 1994), maintaining a perception of equality appeared to be equally important to the young men and the young women (and is discussed further in another paper from this research—see Brooks, 2002). In relation to issues such as attainment, likely place of study and, for some young people, course and career, it was not simply a matter of making different choices. These differences were positioned hierarchically, thus putting substantial pressure on the perceived equality of many friendships.

Even when young people were not sure of their own positioning, they were acutely aware of the consequences of making claims about it. For example, several students were concerned to ensure that they were not perceived by their friends and peers as over-confident, aspiring to too high a position on the hierarchy. Both Paul and Sunita revealed that there were some aspects of their choices that they were reluctant to share with friends because of the possibility that they might fail to achieve their goals. Such concerns highlight the importance the young people placed on their friends' opinions of them. While Paul had told his friends about his decision to apply to Southampton, he was much more reticent about Oxford:

> Paul: . . . to a certain extent I don't want to tell everyone that I went to Oxford on Tuesday to the open day 'cos then [they will] think, 'Oh, you're going to apply to Oxford' . . . They just assume that just because you go on the open day you'll apply there or you'll want to go to it . . . I don't want to build myself up for a huge fall. (Interview 3)

Similarly, when asked why she had not talked about her choices much with her friends, Sunita stated that:

> Sunita: Because I feel stupid when I say something and do something else . . . you say all these things but at the end of the day you're not really sure what you'll do and you don't want to say something, 'I really want to do this' and you get really rubbish grades and end up doing something else. I don't want to end up looking stupid! (Interview 3)

The hierarchical nature of educational markets has been highlighted within the literature on secondary school choice (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Lauder and Hughes, 1999) as well as within studies of HE (Ainley, 1994; Brown and Scase, 1994; Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Reay *et al.*, 2001b; Ball *et al.*, 2002). This may suggest that by the time they embark upon the HE decision-making process young people already have an acute awareness of issues of difference and how this relates to educational choice and selection. However, I would argue that the process of HE choice is different from that of choosing a secondary school or sixth-form college in several important respects. First, young people themselves are much more likely to be actively involved in choosing a higher education institution than a secondary school due to the age difference and the requirements of the application process. Second, the level of selection differs markedly between HE and school or college. Although Emily Davies College did set minimum requirements (in terms of GCSE grades) for most of its courses, none of the young people had difficulty being accepted. Thus, level of GCSE attainment relative to friends would have carried little significance for most of the young people in terms of entry to particular courses (or institutions). Furthermore, as around 70% of young people now go on to full-time, post-compulsory education (rising to about 91% of those with five or more GCSEs at grades A⋆–C) (D*f*ES, 2001b), the post-16 transition was not a particularly significant one for these young people: few had many close friends who had chosen to leave education after their GCSEs. For these reasons, young people's higher education choices can be seen as qualitatively different from those they made about their sixth-form education and help to explain why differences, such as that in academic attainment, came to carry a new level of significance.

Few studies that have focused on educational choice have alluded to the importance of maintaining a mutual perception of equality in friendships. The exception is Ball *et al.*'s (2000) research in which brief mention is made of the difficulties 'high-achieving Rachel' faced talking to her old school friends about her higher education choices 'because she did not want to sound as if she was bragging' (p. 80), particularly when her friends did not have the same choices available to them (see also Brooks, 2002). The differences in attainment between friends at Emily Davies College were often not as great as those between Rachel and her friends who had 'scraped through their GCSEs and are scraping through their A Levels' (p. 80). However, for some of the Emily Davies students, comparison with friends was potentially more difficult because they involved some 'repositioning' for those who had previously considered themselves to be 'high achievers' (particularly in the case of Zoë and Charlotte's friendship group).

NON-HIERARCHICAL DIFFERENCES

Throughout the interviews the young people also highlighted a number of other types of difference that, they claimed, had served to restrict their conversations about higher education. There was little evidence, however, that these were positioned hierarchically, in the same way as the differences discussed above. The exception to this was the construction of subject difference: whether or not hierarchical judgements were attached to this varied between friendship groups.

Different Subjects

Across the sample as a whole, subjects and specific courses were generally not 'ranked' by the young people in the same way as higher education institutions (although there were a few notable exceptions, discussed above). The evidence from the students suggests that it was the instrumental or pragmatic nature of such conversations that was of more concern. Charlotte was typical of many when she explained that she had not engaged her friends in talk about university because they were planning to do different things and thus would not be of much practical help to her:

RB: Have you talked about universities much with her [close friend, interested in teaching]?

Charlotte: No, 'cos I'm not interested in teaching. It doesn't really interest me . . . it's just if they are doing different courses it's a bit irrelevant. (Interview 3)

This was echoed by others who suggested that, unless their friends were applying to do the same subject, there would be little point in discussing their choices. For example, Paul claimed:

It's a bit difficult to discuss universities and courses when they are completely different courses to the ones you . . . I mean [a friend] was thinking of doing media. Well, I can't say one university is better for media and marketing than another because I just don't know. But with people who are doing law, you can discuss it with them and say, 'Why did you choose that?' (Interview 4)

Different Stages of the Decision–Making Process

Throughout the two-year longitudinal study there was considerable variation between the young people in the point in time at which they gave serious consideration to their HE options and thus, in many cases, the point at which higher education was discussed. Although this differed between friendship groups to some extent, there were also significant differences between individuals within the same group.

Evidence of Difficulties

Throughout the first year of their A Level or GNVQ studies, several young people claimed that they had not discussed their higher education choices with their friends because none of them had started thinking seriously about their options. For example, in the summer term of the first year, Sarah explained that 'It's hard to maintain a long conversation based on universities because we really don't know much about it at all' (Interview 3). However, there were also some young people who had started thinking about higher education but who felt they were unable to talk to their friends about it, as they were not at the same stage of the process. Becky and Zoë highlighted the differences within their friendship groups:

Becky: I don't think any of them have been to any open days at all and I'm sort of taking days off here, there and everywhere to go to open days and they're like saying, 'We haven't even thought about it. We didn't even realize they were now'. (Interview 3)
RB: Why do you think you haven't talked about it much with your friends?
Zoë: I think 'cos they haven't really done much to do with it . . . because we all . . . all of us aren't at the same stage, that's probably why. (Interview 3)

This became a much more prominent theme when the young people reached their second year: by then most had been required to start thinking about higher education because of the impending deadline for UCAS applications. Despite these common deadlines and a common college HE programme, many claimed that one reason they had not discussed their choices with their friends was because they were at different stages of the decision-making and/or application process. Zoë, again, speculated:

I guess 'cos I had my UCAS form done so early they got to talk about that and I was like, 'Oh well, I've done mine', [that] kind of thing. (Interview 4)

The 'Distance' of HE

In many ways, these differences in the timing of HE-related activities and choices, and thus talk, were determined by how distant the young people perceived higher education to be. Those who considered it a long way off had less motivation than others to think about their options, make decisions and talk about it with their friends. For example, at the time of the second round of interviews (during the young people's second term in the college), those

who had started thinking seriously about courses and institutions all considered higher education to be relatively close. Becky and Zoë were typical of this group:

Becky: I started to feel quite nervous, thinking about it [university] being so soon, that we have to start thinking about it and applying, and just the thought that you're not going to be at college for very long. (Interview 2)

Zoë: It's getting . . . I know you're not applying till next year but you still have to start thinking about it so you don't leave it all to the last minute. (Interview 2)

Furthermore, at this point several students indicated that they were already drawing on their 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1997) to identify and pursue specific activities which they felt would strengthen their university applications. Zoë had begun work in an old people's home (in preparation for her application to read medicine), and Simon talked about taking up a sport to signal his 'rounded personality'. For others, however, higher education was a distant prospect and a low priority. Jim claimed:

It's quite a way away. Well, it's not really but I think it is and I really don't think it's worth worrying too much about at the moment. (Interview 2)

In Jim's friendship group and in some others, conversation instead revolved around more immediate concerns such as coursework, exams and social life. In many ways these differences reflect those revealed by Ball *et al.* (2000) in their study of young people in Greater London. They argue that the future was not of equal importance to all their respondents: some were 'planners' while others showed 'a disposition towards the present, a sense of deferral' (p. 145), placing emphasis instead on leisure and pleasure.

These differences in outlook were maintained throughout the study. For example, during the fifth round of interviews (during the spring term of the second year), when most of the young people were coming to a decision about their firm and insurance offers, several of the 'planners' were already giving serious consideration to their plans for when they *left* university:

Becky: Now that I know that university is sort . . . well, it's not like completely sorted but it does all seem like fairly finalized—now I've just got to get the grades and I'm going there. Now I've suddenly started thinking: 'What am I going to do after I leave?' So I had a free [lesson] the other day and no one was around so I went on the computer in here looking at postgraduate courses in journalism and things like this. (Interview 5)

In the accounts of these young people, the reflexive 'life planning' discussed by Giddens (1991) and du Bois Reymond (1998) is played out. Their life plans, or the 'substantial content of the reflexively organized trajectory of the self' (Giddens, 1991, p. 85), were on-going projects throughout the two years of the study and serve to distinguish them from the other young people in the study. Indeed, the differences between these young people and the others involved in the research provide a good illustration of du Bois Reymond's distinction between 'choice' and 'normal' biographies.

Amongst the students at Emily Davies College, there was a strong correlation between level of attainment (in terms of GCSE grades and predicted A Level results) and such

considerations about time and life course. Previous studies have highlighted strong class-based differences in relation to conceptualizations of 'educational life' (Bernstein, 1997) and acquisition of cultural capital (Allat, 1996; Brown, 1997; Reay, 1998b). Pugsley (1998) has also provided a convincing account of how young people's perceptions of the 'distance' of HE and their planning processes with regard to university entry differed markedly according to their social class. However, in this project, such attitudes were more evidently associated with academic attainment than with either social class or level of parental education. A possible explanation could be that the young people were working with different time frames; the high achievers had always been certain that they would go on to higher education and so choosing a university seemed like an obvious next step, the natural progression from college. For others, who had not been considering higher education from an early age, it may have seemed more of a significant move, very different from college. This is supported by evidence from four students (during the three interviews in the first year) who stated that they were unwilling to think about higher education because it involved making significant decisions about their futures. These anxieties certainly help to explain why some young people did not discuss higher education in any depth with many friends and peers during their first year at college.

Differing Amounts of 'Free' Time

The timing of talk was also related to the amount of time the young people had available to start thinking about their HE choices and to research various options. Differences here were more common between friendship groups than within them, and also showed a correlation with academic ability. In the first year at college, many students stated that they had had little time to devote to thinking about higher education because of coursework, exams and/or problems coping with the volume of work. For example, during the third round of interviews, several students explained how they had decided not to go any open days because they believed that their college work would suffer:

RB: Have you visited any universities yet?
Jim: No . . . I couldn't miss college 'cos we have been doing a lot of work lately and I couldn't afford to miss it 'cos it's a whole day. (Interview 3)
RB: Is that something you are thinking about, going to visit any universities?
Liz: Yeah but where they're all . . . they're all now, aren't they? And like I said, we're starting our coursework so we haven't had any time 'cos you've got to miss college so . . . (Interview 3)

Again, differences corresponded to academic ability, with the higher achievers (such as Becky, Paul, Charlotte and Zoë) attending more open days and spending more time on other higher education-related activities. Steve represented the extreme of this end of the continuum:

RB: Would you say it's something you've been thinking about a lot this term?
Steve: I would say 'continuously'. Even before the exams, when I was revising, I was picking up prospectuses and thinking, 'If I could get that grade, that would bring that course into the equation'. It was quite distracting, actually. (Interview 3)

Such differences can be explained in terms of differing priorities, with the 'high achievers' believing that HE-related research was more urgent than did their peers (in line with the evidence about the different perceptions of the 'distance' of HE, discussed above). However, it appears that even when other students came to think it was important to start giving serious consideration to their HE options, they had less time available to devote to relevant activities and thus their 'time deficit' was widened. While some were having difficulty finding time to read prospectuses and attend open days, others were, in contrast, pursuing a number of extra-curricular activities which they would draw upon in their UCAS personal statements: Zoë, Charlotte and Paul all shadowed relevant professionals. In addition, Zoë worked in a nursing home throughout her time at Emily Davies College and Paul spent an hour a week working in a voluntary capacity for a local member of parliament (he applied to read law and politics).

Thus, while the college's HE programme may have presupposed a common timetable for HE applications, the HE-related activities that the young people took part in, and their attitudes to the future, ensured that many perceived themselves to be at a very different stage from their friends. The evidence from the young people suggests that, again, it was difficult for them to raise issues about their HE applications because of these differences. Paul articulated the feelings of many of the students when he described the importance of being perceived as at the same stage as his friends:

Paul: People are quite cagey about it. They don't like to say too much.
RB: Why do you think that is?
Paul: I don't know. Probably 'cos they don't know what stage everyone else is at.
RB: Why do you think they are being cagey about it?
Paul: Because they don't want to be perceived as slack if they haven't [thought about it]. And they don't want to be perceived as being too knowledgeable about all these places [if they have thought about it]. (Interview 3)

The Significance of Difference

The differences discussed in this section were not positioned hierarchically by the young people and, for this reason, may not appear particularly important when considered on an individual basis. However, when combined with the other emerging differences between close friends discussed previously, they may have gained greater significance. It seems that as the students became aware of the emerging differences between themselves and their close friends, and the assumption of different places on emerging hierarchies, they chose to foreclose a number of possible conversations that may have highlighted these differences. For example, an awareness of other differences may have affected the degree to which the subjects other people were interested in were perceived as 'similar' or not. Compared to most of their peers, Zoë and Charlotte appeared to have a lot in common. However, both emphasized the way in which they perceived their HE choices as different:

RB: Why do you say you've got less in common with them [close friends]?
Zoë: I have. I think it's really hard to explain. I guess because, even though we're kind of doing similar subjects, I mean we're . . . it seems that we're not, [that] we're doing completely different subjects. (Interview 4)

Furthermore, it would seem that by avoiding discussions with those perceived as at a different stage of the process, interested in a different subject or with different amounts of time to spend on the decision-making process, young people may have viewed the role of their friends in a very pragmatic way. By excluding those constructed as 'different', the students seemed to be defining an instrumental role for their friends. Higher education was reserved as a topic of conversation for close friends only if they served some 'pragmatic' purpose. This appears to be a good illustration of Roberts' (1995) 'structured fragmentation': although young people's life chances (and thus their higher education opportunities) remain, to a large extent, structured, the individualistic way in which young people conceive them 'reduces solidaristic sentiments and conceptions of mutual interest' (p. 116).

DISCUSSION

This paper has shown that the young people at Emily Davies College did not discuss their higher education deliberations, or indeed their choices, with their friends at any length. This contrasts with the high profile given to peer and friend influences in previous quantitative studies of young people's higher education choice. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily inconsistent with such findings. Roberts and Allen (1997), for example, state that over 70% of their respondents had discussed their choice of both subject and institution with their friends. However, as I noted earlier, they make no claims about the content and length of such discussions, the number of friends with whom discussions were held or upon the nature of the friendships of the young people in the sample. Indeed, it would be difficult for a quantitative study to provide this level of detail. The research at Emily Davies College would suggest that while a majority of students may tell at least some of their friends where they are planning to apply and for what subject, Roberts and Allen's statistics (and those that have emerged from several other quantitative studies) mask both the complexity of the process of talking about HE choices with friends and the often problematic nature of such discussions.

In reflecting on his study of the patterns of consumption of young people, Miles (2000) notes the importance the young people in his research attributed to emphasizing the *individual* nature of their actions (in this case, their purchase of consumer goods). Savage (2000) has also discussed the reluctance of his respondents to use the labels of social class because 'taking the label too seriously would undermine their main aspiration to be an individual agent, not programmed to act in any particular way' (p. 113). Strong similarities emerged at Emily Davies College: the importance of 'individual choice' with respect to higher education choices was emphasized throughout the young people's narratives. Few believed that their friends had influenced their own choices in any way, and they clearly viewed such influences in pejorative terms. Furthermore, in addition to this pervasive language of 'individualization', there was little evidence of any detailed discussion about universities or courses between friends. Very few of the young people had used their friends as a source of information about HE institutions and courses, or as a sounding board for emerging ideas.

This evidence may appear to support the theory of individualization proposed by theorists such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991). They assert that since the 1970s, and as a result of specific historical developments in the labour market, 'people have lost their traditional support networks and have had to rely on themselves and their own individual (labour market) fate with all its attendant risks, opportunities and contradictions' (Beck, 1992, p. 92) and go on to suggest that the individual, rather than the family (or other social group) has become

the means of social reproduction, mediated by the market. The young people in this study certainly made extensive use of the language of individualization, reflecting the rhetoric widely employed by both education professionals and policy-makers (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). However, although there is strong evidence that the young people did not engage their close friends in discussions about higher education very frequently or, often, at any length, a detailed analysis of the data suggests that it cannot be explained simply in terms of Giddens' and Beck's individualization thesis. Instead, I have argued that they avoided conversations about their likely HE choice because, for many of them, such discussions were often extremely difficult. Many of these difficulties stemmed from the hierarchical judgements that the young people made about differences (particularly those concerned with academic attainment, higher education institution and, to a limited extent, degree subject). Such hierarchical judgements served, in many cases, to undermine the perceived equality of the friendship tie, or at least to emphasize previously latent differences, and for this reason were avoided. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) claim that by placing undue emphasis on the individual nature of decisions, underlying and continuing class relationships are obscured, what they describe as the 'epistemological fallacy of late modernity' (p. 5). This term has resonance within the present study: taking young people's claims about the importance of 'individual choices' at face value may serve to obscure the tensions inherent in many of their friendships.

In part, the hierarchical positioning of HE options emphasized in this paper can be seen as a result of increasing levels of competition between friends and peers. Indeed, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) have also noted the competitive focus to many conversations about university between the American young people involved in their study of HE choice. These trends may be explained by the competitive culture of many educational institutions (Lesko, 2001) and, possibly, by the awareness of the wider institutions of social and economic reproduction that is heightened during 'youth' (MacDonald et al., 2001). However, Savage's (2000) work also provides a convincing explanation of some of the sensitivities around educational attainment and likely higher education destination that were evident among the Emily Davies students. In his discussion of working life in contemporary society, he maintains that the last three decades have witnessed a shift in modes of class awareness,[3] which have resulted in a decline in vertical comparisons (i.e. with those perceived to be 'above' and 'below' one in the hierarchy of social classes) and a simultaneous increase in horizontal comparisons, with those judged to be of the same social position. He goes on to suggest that 'those close to you are also those you are most in competition with, and in some respects are those with respect to which you define yourself' (p. 143). Within this model, competition with friends and peers is emphasized and becomes an important means of defining oneself. Thus, while there have been few other studies of the impact of young people's friends on processes of educational choice (and none concerned specifically with higher education choice), the similarities between the hierarchical ranking of friends highlighted by this study, and the competition amongst peers discussed by Savage suggest that an acute awareness of differences between friends may be increasingly common.

The overwhelming evidence that the young people in this study were not sharing with many of their close friends their thoughts and decisions about what many of them claimed was a very important stage in their lives also provides a strong contrast to many of the assumptions that pervade social psychological studies of adolescence as well as sociological theorizing on the nature of relationships at the beginning of the 21st century. As I discussed previously, debates about the 'pure relationship' have recently assumed an important place within the

sociology of friendship. Within the terms of this conceptualization of friendship, sharing of life plans takes on an important role (Pahl, 1998). It would be expected therefore, that if the friendships of the young people in this study resembled 'pure relationships', openness about and disclosure of higher education plans would play a significant part in the practice of their friendships. However, as this paper has shown, very few of the Emily Davies students discussed their deliberations about the universities and courses they were thinking of applying to at any length with their close friends. This was apparent throughout their two years at sixth-form college, and applied equally to: young men and young women; relatively high achievers and relatively low achievers; and members of all the friendship groups involved in the research. Although most of the young people did tell at least some of their friends where they were applying and for what subject, this was generally after they had completed their UCAS forms and thus when most decisions had already been taken. Prolonged discussion of potential options was notably absent from the friendships of these young people. As discussed above, the young people found such discussions very difficult because of the differences they highlighted.

Thus, it seems that this study offers little support for the claim that late modernity has witnessed the emergence of a new form of friendship, one that is predicated upon openness, disclosure and the sharing of life plans. Instead, it supports Jamieson's (1998) contention that the constraints placed on friendships by social divisions, amongst others, 'illustrate how far removed everyday friendships are from the "pure relationship"' (p. 105).

While this research helps to contextualize previous quantitative studies of HE choice and raises some questions about current theorizing in relation to both processes of 'individualiza–tion' and the practice of friendship, it may also have implications for the way in which careers education and guidance is delivered, in schools and colleges and/or under the auspices of the new 'Connexions Service'. Contrary to some of the assumptions that are made about the role of friends in popular university guides and some careers guidance material, my research would suggest that it is unwise to assume that friends and peers offer an effective method of disseminating information about higher education courses or institutions. As demonstrated above, friends rarely discussed their university choices in any detail, largely because of the differences such conversations highlighted, and in only a few cases did the young people cite their friends as direct sources of information about HE. This may indicate that teachers and careers/personal advisers cannot assume a 'cascade' model of information flow, even between close friends. Moreover, it suggests that any careers activities in schools and colleges based on group work or discussions with peers may be very difficult for young people because of the tensions between friends that such conversations appear to exacerbate. This is not to advocate that advisers strive to 'individualize' the process further; indeed, Reay *et al.* (2002) have shown how a minority of students in their study benefited from a 'collective' process of HE-decision making. However, it does suggest that advisers need to be mindful of the 'differences and difficulties' that, for many young people and their friends, seem to be brought into sharp relief by the process of HE choice.

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NOTES

1 For students who took A Level exams in the summer of 2001, the mean A Level point score for the college as a whole was 16 (DƒES, 2001a). This compares to a mean of 20.4 for the young people who took part in this research.

2 For example, when Brown and Scase (1994) asked managers (as well as teachers and members of the public) to name their top ten universities, only 12 university names were mentioned amongst the responses. Thus, the authors assert that employers 'maintain a cognitive map which places Oxford and Cambridge at the top and work down' (p. 44).

3 Savage argues that, over the last 30 years, a working-class sense of individual identity has been replaced by middle-class modes of individualization. He maintains that an emphasis on the autonomous (male) individual was central to working-class culture in Britain and suggests that this has now been replaced by a new form of 'self-developmental' individualization, based on particular kinds of middle-class employment relations. Instead of seeing this as a break with the past, Savage argues that class cultures have been powerful in the past, and are so now, through being individualized in various, historically-specific ways.

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