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Abstract

Social inequality regarding gender and social class is a topic of interest in social research. However, the intersections between the two variables in the reproduction of inequalities remain opaque. In our longitudinal research project “Social Inequality in Higher Education” we aim to shed light on these processes in Spain. In this article we focus on the intersection of social class and gender in the transition from school to university, specifically on study choice. We comment on vocational study choice and its construction both in the transition to and once at University. We show several gender differences and possible intersections with social class, for instance regarding preferred sources of information, the accuracy of the information presented, and references to emotions. Thanks to our mixed-methods approach, combining focus groups and personal interviews from a longitudinal perspective, we are able to compare these methods regarding the gender and class differences they produce.

Keywords:

social inequality; HE; study choice; intersectionality

Introduction

Nowadays, social inequality, especially regarding gender and social class, is an almost compulsory aspect for consideration in any social sciences project. The times when researchers discussed which was the 'true' dimension of inequality (e.g. Martín Criado 1998) belong to the past, and several authors have outlined how to consider different dimensions of inequality simultaneously without imposing them (e.g. Winker and Degele 2009). However, the mechanisms of reproduction of social inequality in Higher Education (HE) are still opaque and the intersections of gender and social class

especially are rarely explored in qualitative studies. In our longitudinal project ‘Social Inequality in Higher Education’ we aim to shed light on the reproduction mechanisms of social inequality. In this paper we focus on the intersections of gender and social class in the transition from school to university, specifically regarding the factors involved in study choice.

Since Bourdieu and Passeron (2007) [1985] first published their study on university students in France in the 1960s, social class-specific inequality has frequently been discussed, studied and theorized. Inequalities in access to and success in HE do, however, persist even after the so-called ‘massification’ of HE, as the additional academics belong mainly to the middle classes (Rahona Lopez 2009). In Spain, the educational pyramid of the 1970s (CES 2009), with a small group of HE graduates at its peak (only 2% of the population in a context of little access to and low levels of education), has adopted the shape of a sandglass with few people at intermediate levels of education and many at both extremes. Just before the beginning of the current economic crisis in 2008, approximately two thirds of the young generation studied at university (Lassibille, Navarro Gomez 2009), leading to an exceptionally high number of university graduates at present. Figure 1 depicts how university attendance in Spain, and especially in Catalonia, is still above the European mean, although the numbers are currently decreasing with the rise in tuition fees (Idescat 2014). On the other hand, a second big group of young people did not achieve more than primary school qualifications (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte 2013). In particular, many young men abandoned their studies prematurely in order to accept highly-paid unskilled jobs in the strongly masculinized construction sector throughout the construction boom that preceded the current crisis, now affected by unemployment (García Montalvo 2012).

[Figure 1 near here]

As in other European countries, young women in Spain have come to outstrip young men in access to university, although the choice of certain degree courses remains gender-specific (Connell 2009). Especially in mathematics, science, and technology (MST) women have never achieved the same level of attainment as their male peers and their participation recently has been decreasing. Yazilitas et al. (2013) analyse research publications on gendered study choice in these subjects published between 2005 and 2012 in peer-reviewed journals and come to describe three main types of explanations for gendered study choice: micro-level, macro-level and institutional explanations. Micro-level explanations relate study choice to the psychology of the individual, arguing that girls show low self-efficacy beliefs, lack role models and are less interested in MST than boys. Macro-level explanations understand such individual differences as a result of socialization and culture and explain cross-national differences in women's pursuit of MST subjects between developed and developing countries with a female tendency to express their gendered selves in late-modern societies where individual expression and self-realization are highly valued and students are free to choose their studies. Institutional explanations argue that cross-national differences, even within developed countries, are the result of different education systems, whereby especially early tracking and freedom of choice cause girls to choose gendered tracks, perhaps because of the effects of puberty at the time of their choice (Yazilitas et al. 2013). Yazilitas et al. require researchers to develop a framework that considers all three levels of explanation. Coming from the multi-level intersectional approach developed by Winker and Degele (2009), we compare the types of explanations with the three levels considered by this approach: identity constructions, social representations, and structures. We argue that the intersectional multi-level

approach may function as the requested framework, although research applying it to analyse gendered study choice is still lacking.

Bourdieu and Passeron (2007:84) comment that the study choice of female students in the 1960s was conditioned by ‘traditional patterns of a gendered labour division’ and their lower objective chances of obtaining employment, tempting them to choose predominantly the teaching profession. Although they describe how the share of female students had risen since the turn of the century from virtually 0 to almost 50% in the 1960s, the authors consider female students as an exception to the described dynamics of the ‘student condition’ and do not differentiate their social class of origin, disregarding possible intersections. Students from lower¹ social classes and female students are described as more concerned with their objective future chances and therefore less able to immerse into the academic game of pretending and living their studies as a vocation in themselves. Furthermore, female students especially are described as ‘eager’ and ‘compliant’, ready to learn working techniques and, in consequence, rather different from the created image of university dynamics where students and professors frown upon techniques and effort, following the ideology of talent. In the last 50 years female occupation and university attendance have increased even further (Connell 2009) and in Spain, where female activity rates had traditionally been low, women’s activity has come to exceed the mean for the EU-15 of 67.8% in 2014 by approximately 1% since 2010 (Eurostat 2016). Even though the mean Spanish unemployment rate stood at 22.1% in 2015 (20.8% for men and 23.6% for women, respectively) much higher than the European mean of 9.8% (Eurostat 2016), these activity rates indicate that women do at least aspire to find employment. Women are still at a disadvantage when it comes to translating their educational qualifications into

1 Coming from the theory of Bourdieu, we speak of ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ social classes in the sense of a ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ accumulation of the different types of capital. We do not wish to understand ‘lower’ as ‘inferior’.

corresponding labour market positions and are much less likely to obtain leading positions and top-salaries (Connell 2009). For Spain, it was argued that female graduates were more severely affected by the economic crisis, as it takes them significantly longer to find employment with a condign contract (El País, 2015).

We can hence assume that the objective chances of finding employment are still lower for women, at least when only occupations with condign working conditions are considered. Following the idea of the inheritance of social positions (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007), we can expect that students from high social classes will, even in a context of economic crisis and high unemployment, face the fewest problems in their transition from university to condign labour and that students from the middle classes possess strategies to face forthcoming problems (Cooper 2013). Women from lower social classes are therefore the most likely to encounter problems and these ‘objective chances’ may influence their access to HE, their study choice and their perception of their studies. Faced with the economic crisis and rising tuition fees, the participation of women and students from lower social classes may decrease again, as students without certain financial resources do not actually have a choice, and women are especially ‘debt adverse’ (Cooper 2013:633). So far, the statistics do not show a significant difference between men and women in the decrease in university attendance (Idescat 2016), but the increase in the Spanish female activity rate (Eurostat 2016) may indicate forthcoming changes.

The continuous increase in students from lower social classes and, more pronouncedly, of female students over the decades could have led the student population to develop a more realistic image of its situation, possibly even changing its ‘academic ideal’ of a ‘game of free intelligence’ disconnected from the professional future, however slow and tenacious such a change is (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007:71).

Regarding study choice, or rather its retrospective justification, as Bourdieu and Passeron studied university students who had already taken their study choice, this could have two opposed implications: On the one hand, students could become more concerned with their future job opportunities, requiring more preparation and labour market orientation as well as professional skills and techniques throughout their studies. On the other hand, all students faced with a high risk of future unemployment could come to follow the tendency described for female students to ‘suppress’ a future that could render their present meaningless, as the sense of studies preparing for a future profession is lost if the chance to ever obtain the envisaged future profession no longer exists (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007:83). Research in the 1990s on female future orientations in Italy showed that young women did not construct a long-term future, relying instead on the ‘extended present’, because they coped with the necessity to combine the spheres of ‘paid work’ and of ‘care’ by maintaining maximum flexibility and ambiguity for their long-term future, relating to the long-term future only through daydreams (Leccardi 1999:12). If the long-term future became ambivalent and entered a crisis –the ‘crisis of the future’– like after the Second World War (Leccardi 1999), and if ‘objective chances’ are decreasing severely in the context of the socio-economic crisis that currently prevails in Spain, all students should be concerned with their future and stop pretending a disconnection of studies and future that characterized the ‘student condition’ in the study of Bourdieu and Passeron (2007). Instead of artificially disconnecting their activity from the future, current students –especially in undergraduate studies with vague professional opportunities– may do the opposite and artificially construct a relatedness of their studies to their future career in order to cope with their decreasing objective chances. The balance between the disconnection and connection of studies with the future described by Bourdieu and Passeron (2007) may

hence remain the same, but the forces may have been inverted as the efforts are now required to construct the connection instead of creating an artificial and temporary disconnection.

In a more recent study by Tavares and Cardoso in Portugal (2013), which we can situate within the framework of micro-level explanations described by Yazilintas et al. (2013), in justifying their study choice female university students were more likely to refer to the acquisition of knowledge, while male participants were more likely to refer to higher incomes. Female participants and students from the faculty of arts were more likely to refer to personal benefits, while male students and students from the computer engineering and pharmacy degree courses showed stronger economic rationale. The authors argue moreover that gender seems to influence the students' self-perceptions, which, in turn, influence their preferences for certain study programmes and may hence explain the persisting overrepresentation of males in some degree courses and of females in others. Considering these findings in the light of the theories of Bourdieu and Passeron (2007) and of Leccardi (1999), we can argue that the previously described female students show the tendency to suppress their future, ascribing a value to their studies that is relevant for them independently of professional preparation. Male students, in contrast, seem to be more profession-oriented, following an economic rationale that goes beyond job opportunities and requires concrete earnings. Instead of maintaining a balance between future connection and disconnection, we can then hypothesize that these students concentrate their efforts on one extreme, in the case of the female participants the disconnection from the future and of male participants the connection with the future. Unfortunately, Tavares and Cardoso do not provide any information on the socio-economic background of their participants so we cannot cross-reference social class with their findings.

Especially the decision whether to go to university or not and the choice of degree programme are crucial elements in the reproduction of social inequality and represent an incision that marks the future itinerary of young people in their transition to adulthood (Casal et al. 2006). Following the approach of Pais (2007) we believe that decisions are constructed in the retrospective in order to create a coherent life story. These constructions offer important insights into the habitus, as they are, according to Bourdieu (1992: 25): ‘the active deployment of objectively oriented ‘lines of action’ that obey regularities and form coherent and socially intelligible patterns, even though they do not follow conscious rules or aim at the premeditated goals posited by a strategist’. The presentation of a certain choice, be it the decision to go to university at all or a preferred degree course, is furthermore a performative action allowing the participants to negotiate and exhibit their identities, including their gender identity. We therefore consider that students’ narratives regarding their study choice are an optimal field for analysing the intersections of gender and social class in the processes reproducing social inequality in HE. The research question we aim to answer here is what intersections between gender and social class we can identify.

The Study

The longitudinal research project ‘Social Inequality in Higher Education’ follows a group of students from different socio-economic backgrounds throughout their degree course with annual interviews. It started its first wave of data collection in spring 2011 with 12 focus groups in public, semi-public and private High Schools in the city of Lleida and a rural town in Catalonia (Spain). The participants were asked to outline their plans after finishing High School, to give recommendations to peers regarding how to choose whether and what to study at university and how they imagined University.

The main socio-economic data and information on social divisions were assessed using a questionnaire in which participants were encouraged to disclose their contact data in order to participate in the following waves of data collection.

In autumn 2011, interested participants were contacted and a first wave of interviews was conducted. Due to an underrepresentation of certain profiles in the resulting interview sample, in particular of students from families of origin with low economic and cultural capital, that is to say from lower social classes in the sense of Bourdieu (1992), and/or with migration backgrounds, an additional socio-economic survey was used in spring 2012 to identify students with these profiles in first-year classes at the University of Lleida (Spain) and the selected students were included in the sample. In the 2011/2012 academic year, 21 interviews were conducted, 14 with participants from the focus groups sample and seven with additional participants. These interviews focused on study choice and experiences once at university. Since then annual interviews, and occasionally additional interviews, have been conducted with the participants.

For in-depth analysis of the interviews we employ a combination of the documentary method according to Bohnsack (2010) and the intersectional approach according to Winker and Degele (2009). The following table (Tab 1) summarizes the different steps, in which the shaded parts mark the steps from the intersectional analysis that were integrated within the documentary method. Our aim is to construct the typologies once the data collection is completed, revisiting the data from the different interview waves. Gender or any other social division were not used in the analysis as given variables for comparison in order to avoid imposing pre-conceived categories on the subjects and constructing ‘gendered’ results.

[Table 1 near here]

Below we show gender- and class-specific patterns concerning how the participants construct their study choice in regard to information sources, emotions and insecurities and the accuracy of the information given. Due to the use of focus groups in 2011, we are, furthermore, in a position to compare the accounts the same participants gave in front of their peers and the first-year interviews. We are hence able to comment on the intersection of gender and social class with the chosen data construction method.²

Results

For the reader's convenience, we summarize the main profile aspects of the quoted participants in the following table (Tab2).

[Table2 near here]

The vocational study choice in times of crisis: "there are many people and [there is] very little work"³

Previous research on the study choice of university students describes clear gender differences that could explain the persistence of gender-specific study choices, despite growing equality in access to HE (Tavares and Cardoso 2013). In our study, however, we could not identify a gender difference in the construction of the ideal study choice. All participants agreed on the decisive importance of interests and skills, constructing a vocational study choice in line with the 'ideology of talent' (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007). The participants described how their interest in a certain field grew or represented it as an innate characteristic, arguing that they had 'always' been interested in it.

2 Quotations are presented by first mentioning the self-chosen pseudonym of the cited participant, followed by the number of the Interview (e.g. Int1) or Focus Group (e.g. FG12) and the line/s where the quotation appears in the transcript (e.g. 1.100-110). If several participants appear in the quote, the pseudonyms are directly indicated in the quote.

3 Mabe, FG12, 1.377

From a very young age I always liked everything with buttons (.) that's what my mother always told me and (-) and well with playing with the play station (-) eh the first computer I had working (-) learning how to do little things (-) saying 'oh I didn't know how to do this and now I do' and well as' as you like this stuff (.) mobile phones electronic devices in general I like them a lot (.) and at the end I decided [to study] this (Jab, Int1, 1.43-48)

In some cases, study choice was portrayed as a direct result of the decision for a future profession so the preparatory and transitory nature of the university studies was highlighted. Bourdieu and Passeron (2007) argue that students' references to their future profession depend on the concreteness of the professional opportunities related to the chosen degree course. In our study, the participants who most related to their future professional identity were female participants who had chosen degree courses like social work and teacher-training that offer concrete professional images to identify with. As Bourdieu and Passeron (2007) commented that female students were more concerned with their professional future, we argue that another aspect in the choice of feminized degree courses may lie in the clear professional identity they offer.

I'm one of those people who can say that it's the degree course that I always wanted to do for example the dream (.) [Interviewer: hm] for me well a dream would be to be a social worker (.) because I' I'd like to dedicate myself to working with the' the problems eh economic problems the problems of the third world (-) [Interviewer: hmhm] to put it like this (.) with well what are NGOs or something alike (.) and then I believed that in order to educate myself for this profession (-) that I could do social work (.) [Interviewer: very good] and then I decided to do this degree course (.) (Irina Int1, 1.15-22)

The participants' concerns with their study choices show that they were aware of the importance of their decision of their future itinerary (Casal et al. 2006) and burdened their decision with the responsibility for their future happiness. The idea that their future was at stake 'forced' them to plan beyond the extended present (Leccardi 1999) and led to three main preoccupations: 1) to identify their vocation, 2) to enter the related degree course, and 3) to be successful in meeting the demands.

Edith: (...) I believe that they make us take a type of decision that tz (.) depends a lot on the age (...) because (-) I am 17 years old and I don't know what I will want when I am 30 or 40 (.) and now they make you choose a thing that (.) that in a certain way is what will determine your life (.) I don't know but it's like (.) what you will be what you will do (.) I don't know (.) I believe that it's something that you really need to think a lot and

maybe' (.) they make you' they force you to choose (.) and I don't know (.) but it shouldn't be like this (-) that (.) everybody needs their time or that's what I think (.) to choose (.) what they want to be (.) or at least to think what they want to be (.) I don't know (.) I believe that it's very difficult (FG 1, 1.80-87)

N.: but the thing is (.) you don't know (.) before you enter a degree course you don't know exactly what you are going to find (...) because you've never been there and then (.) maybe (.) maybe you you think you are sure that you are going to like this and then you get there and and (.) tz (...) well no' I don't' no I see that it's not for me (.) I don't like it and I don't see myself doing this (--) it's your future

Dori: I for example mathematics (.) I stink at mathematics (.) and I've seen that biomaths is on the syllabus (.) OK (laughter) maybe biomaths (.) (...) you say 'oh that's easy' (.) but maybe I get there and 'what's that?' and you can't (.) (FG 1, 1.223-233)

In particular Dori's comment could be interpreted as a relation to her self-efficacy belief, as she was convinced she is bad at mathematics and was worried that her MST study choice, biotechnology, might be mistaken because of this. Edith depicted her unwillingness and inability to decide already for the rest of her life and felt 'forced' to take this decision.

Regarding the economic rationale described by Tavares and Cardoso (2013), our findings are quite different. Income was neither mentioned in the focus groups nor in the first-year interviews. Future job opportunities as a criterion for study choice were a contested topic, receiving similar support and criticism from boys and girls. As they were only mentioned in the context of references to the economic crisis, the economic concern was not to select a profession with high earnings but to be able to make ends meet. Other than in Tavares and Cardoso's study, income was not seen as a surplus but as a minimum and turned, hence, into a worrisome aspect. This tendency could be related to the 'objective chances' in Spain, in particular the phenomenon of under-employment, as young people nowadays are not only likely to suffer unemployment, but moreover to be unable to sustain dignified living conditions when working (MacDonald 2011). The participants' future happiness depended on their ability to take a study choice that enabled them to subsist with a job that they like.

Jeni: I believe that you have to choose a degree course that has job opportunities in the future (.) because it's all about (-) about having a job in the future and being able to subsist (-) (...)

N.: I think that it's important that (.) that we find (.) job opportunities and that we do something that we most of all that we do something that we like because (.) I believe that if you study something that you don't like it's (-) [Liz: wasting your time] horrible (-) and moreover you won't do it anyway (.) (...) I believe that it's more important to do something that you like (.) and not so much (.) to do something (.) tz that that has many job opportunities even though it's very important today because it's difficult to find work (.) but (.) tz the job opportunities you also search for them yourself if you want to do something and if you have initiative well (.) you will find job opportunities (.) if not here then elsewhere [Interviewer: Do you mean in another country?] hmhm for example (FG 1, 1.46-67)

Mabe: I want to do INEF [sports faculty] and the people laugh at me saying that you won't you won't have work (.) and I first of all to start with (.) work it seems to me that for the moment nobody is going to have [work] (-) (...) because there are many people and [there is] very little work (.) and secondly (...) in INEF (.) there is as much work as on any other [degree course] (.) (FG 12, 1.375-378)

Faced with the inability to find an ideal study choice that offers them job opportunities in a field they like, our participants showed different strategies to 'disburden' their study choice. N. constructed her identity as opposed to the social representation of unmotivated young unemployed, reproducing public discourses that blame unemployment on the lack of motivation of those affected (Winker and Degele 2009) and construct solutions around activation and emigration (Lahusen et al. 2013). This may be surprising, at first sight, as she reaffirmed the negative labels ascribed to her peers, instead of rebelling against them as the *Indignados* did (Feixa et al. 2013; Soler, Planas and Feixa, 2014). However, there is certain logic in this strategy. As our participants did not possess any first-hand experience of unemployment and failure at the time of the focus groups and interviews and could easily assume that their success would last thanks to characteristics that differentiated them from young 'losers', so they would be among the successful even in difficult times. By reproducing the negative image of young unemployed, it became even easier to rely on their own future success and disburden the study choice. In other words, N. constructed her future as less insecure by constructing her identity as opposed to those who fail. Mabe also believed she is able to take her study choice regardless of future job opportunities, arguing that

they are equally bad in any field. With this she made a reference to the structural level - high general unemployment- to contradict social representations that describe some degree courses as more 'useful' and 'necessary' than others.

Emotions, stress and insecurities: “to hell with this degree course⁴”

Most focus groups started to dwell at some point on the stress involved in the last year in High School with the upcoming PAU (Catalan University Entrance Exams) and the transition to University itself. When analysing the orientation frames, we noticed that the topic was usually initiated by female participants, who were also much more likely to refer to emotions and insecurities and to construct their feelings as decisive elements in their study choice. In addition to the quotations in the previous section, the following extracts show that these insecurities and emotional argumentations were also present at the first-year interviews of the female participants, some of whom even constructed them as decisive elements in their study choice.

It frightened me a bit because I thought 'if I felt bad this year [in High School] and if I start to study a degree course like architecture that I know to be difficult (-) I will feel even worse for sure' you know? and' and I didn't want to go through this because the last year had been very bad already (-) and then I thought to myself and said 'well maybe I will do something else' (N. Int1, 1.21-25).

And I said 'I (.) I don't move to Tarragona (.)' (laughing) no I won't leave my home what would I do in Tarragona? (laughing) to hell with this degree course (.) (Xenia, Int1, 1.40-42).

At the first-year interviews, some of the male participants who had constructed their study choice as straightforward and secure in the focus groups admitted that they had felt stressed and doubted between different options.

At the moment I'm decided to study first of all I want vocational training (.) in electronics (.) design of electronic products (.) and then if everything goes well well a degree course in electronic engineering (Koala, FG1, 1.5-7)

I changed my opinion actually before I thought that I would study a (-) vocational training (-) but you see at the end the teachers and the parents and the friends and so on well they made me change my opinion (.) (...) I ended up studying a degree course in electronics as well (-) industrial electrics and so on (-) and well good (.) for now I like it (Koala, Int1, 1.7-13)

4 Xenia, Int1, 1.41f.

Pasta: yes but (.) they said that what would you want to do if it [the aspired degree course] didn't exist Jab: I've got two options in mind so that in case that I can't do one I'd do the other one (...) Interviewer: and if they removed both? Jab: certainly they' (-- they won't remove either of the two (FG10, 1.298-304)

Although the gender difference in the reference to emotions and insecurities was less pronounced at the interviews, the boys did not base their study choice on emotions as some female participants did and tended to relate them as background information and to use buzzwords like 'stress'.

You've got more time for you [in the university] (-) because moreover after High School which is so so much tension all the time you' you accept it gratefully (Nic, Int1, 1.259-262)

[Interviewer: can you explain a bit what has happened in your life since our focus group?] (..) well quite complicated because well (-- I did the third term (-) the end of the course afterwards the PAU (-) lots of stress studying (-) and afterwards as well hm from the ((1sec)) a bit more than a month waiting if regarding the scores I would enter the Pompeu [Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona] or not (.) and at the end yes (.) yes yes I had more than enough score and I did' did enter yes yes (.) (Willy, Int1, 1.7-11).

A possible explanation for this gender difference in the focus groups and its attenuation at the first-year interviews is an effect of the data construction method. If participants followed the ideal of a 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 2005) that does not suffer doubts or insecurities and remains cool and tough in the face of adversity, they might not be able to share any deviant ideas in front of their peers. Admitting solved problems in the retrospective is, on the contrary, in line with a masculine hero who easily overcomes difficult situations, so the moment of data construction is also decisive. The importance of displaying a certain masculinity/femininity in the school context is related to heteronormativity. Platero (2010) described how Spanish pupils who visually differed from the social representation of masculinity/femininity became the victims of social sanctions like homophobic bullying. This may lead pupils to exaggerate their masculinity/femininity in front of their classmates, especially if their position in the peer group is insecure. It is possible that male participants perceived the focus groups as a situation of 'emotional vulnerability' where they could face rejection and therefore

came to confirm gender stereotypes (Vogel et al. 2003). Such dynamics could lead to the paradoxical situation that male participants show less emotion, the more emotional and insecure they are. Focus groups are, therefore, not an adequate method to speak with boys about insecurities, emotions and unsolved problems.

‘Fact-based’ and ‘Person-centred’ information and information sources: “You should enter the different universities’ websites and compare [them]”

In the construction of their study choices and when recommending to their peers how to take a vocational study choice, our participants referred to different types of information and information sources. We distinguished references to two main types of information: ‘objective’ or ‘fact-based’ information, e.g. regarding access to different study programmes, the contents of these programmes etc.; and ‘subjective’ or ‘person-centred’ information about personal interests and skills that could be assessed by comparing the experiences of others or by receiving personality-based recommendations from significant others. Both types of information can be offered through personal (teachers, friends, family members, etc.) or impersonal (websites, books, newspapers) information sources and can be combined.

Regarding the type of information, we saw that male participants spoke more about ‘fact-based’ and female participants about ‘person-centred’ information in their accounts on how to choose a degree programme. Rather than a gender difference in the preference for types of information, this is likely to be an effect of the way in which the participants presented their choice in the focus groups described in the previous section. The male participants’ straightforward study choices only required ‘objective’ information in order to find the study course that best suited their vocation. The female participants were much more likely to problematize the previous step -to identify their

5 Pasta, FG10, l.77f.

vocation- and hence related to person-centred information, as they explained how they had attempted to find out what they might like.

You should enter (.) the different universities' websites (.) and compare I don't know (.) checking the study plans' I did this (-) ehm instead of looking for names or the places where they do it or for the marks well (.) directly go on looking through the study plans (.) and according to the subjects that you like more or (-) or something like this (Pasta, FG 10, 1.77-80)

Some people told me that (-) that because I am very meticulous that technology was' (-) was my thing (.) for my character and so on (.) on the other hand there were people who told me that they saw me completely in the social branch (-) I don't know (-) dealing with people (N., Int1, 1.488-491).

Our participants were affected by important legislative changes regarding access to university. In the focus groups, they considered the fact-based information around these changes highly significant; this topic had disappeared completely at the first-year interviews. From the discussion whether the teachers were responsible for informing them about these changes and comments regarding the outdated experiences of older friends, we see that our participants would have preferred personal information sources –teachers and friends– and were forced to rely on impersonal information sources instead.

Carol: we would have been grateful if they knew from the beginning (.) if they knew that the things were going to change (.) [Interviewer: hmhm] well if they had informed us how we should choose the subjects and how to do the things well [Interviewer: hmhm] Jab: but we were kids and we didn't notice what decision we were taking Carol: but that's because they didn't explain the situation to us Several others at once: no Jab: no but as well the teachers well it's the same (.) why should they waste time explaining a thing that they know we won't care about anyway Carol: nono but no that's not correctly done (FG10, 1.416-426)

Now they've changed everything with Bologna (.) and not even the advice of people who have been studying there for many years and that are those that are useful (.) well they are of no use to you (.) [Interviewer: hmhm] (-) and as we are among the first years (.) there are no people either who can advise you how to take the (-) the degree course (Jab, FG 10, 1.399-402)

This highlights the importance of social capital in the transition from school to university and may partly explain the reproduction of social inequality as students from families with low cultural capital are less likely to know people with personal experiences in HE (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007), so their access to information is

probably more limited.

As we did not elicit directly the process for obtaining information, participants were, furthermore, unlikely to mention their information sources or to mention only the final source. The following quote shows that the idea of consulting a certain impersonal information source -here a website- was the result of the recommendation of a personal information source, a teacher. This means that the importance of teachers and the social capital in general is probably even higher as moreover they act as mediators in access to impersonal information sources.

“The history teacher of last year (.) I told her well that I wanted to work (.) in summer as a volunteer in a work camp of Catalonia (-) and then she gave me a website and I saw that well that I had the possibility to go abroad for me it’s better to go abroad like this you can practise your English (.) and then I saw Germany (-) and I said well there we go (laughs) and that’s it that’s where I went” (Int1, Mabe, 1.)

In the previous section we mentioned a gender difference in the ability to disclose difficulties and insecurities regarding study choice. In combination with the importance of the social capital we identify in this section, we can add that the ability to employ it is decisive for the reproduction of social inequality. This means that especially boys with little social capital are likely to encounter problems, as their only contacts with academic experiences are probably their teachers (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007), who they may not be able to ask due to their reluctance to disclose their insecurities in the school environment.

The accuracy of referred fact-based information: “the numerus clausus is nothing significant”⁶

The intersectional analysis includes the step to search for additional information about structures mentioned by the participants (Winker and Degele 2009). The inclusion of this step in our analysis allowed us to compare the levels of accuracy with which

6 FG1, 1.168

participants referred to structures. We found that most focus groups showed confusions and misunderstandings about structural aspects like the PAU, degree courses, university entry etc. Only in the focus group at the private school (FG12) were these topics presented in more –and more accurate– detail as the participants knew, for example, how to improve their chances by taking additional exams in subjects they did not take at High School. It must be pointed out that FG12 was the last focus group, so it is possible that these participants possessed better information only because they had had more time to receive it. However, it is also possible that the private school participants possess better access to information due to greater support at school or being mediated by their social class of origin, as private schools tend to include more students from families with high levels of cultural, economic and hence social capital than public schools (Dávila et al. 2008). We had expected to encounter homogenous socio-economic backgrounds by selecting private, semi-private and public schools, but our questionnaires showed that the focus groups included participants from different backgrounds. Participants with low cultural capital of origin were rather passive in the focus groups. This reservation might be the result of group dynamics described by Bohnsack (2010) when mixing participants from different social classes in a focus group, as the participants whose practices are different from those of the dominant culture may feel insecure. Such dynamics may also play a role in the drop-out rate we experienced between the focus groups and first-year interviews, as the participants from the non-dominant culture may have had less positive memories of the focus group and hence not have taken up the invitation to participate in further interviews.

In several focus groups, the participants interacted with each other correcting inaccurate interpretations or outdated information cited by others. This indicates that the participants did not comment on these aspects prior to the focus groups and did not use

each other as personal sources for fact-based information.

Spin: for example the' (-) the numerus clausus (.) they aren't they are not updated until months before because (.) they always change (.) they say 'well let's raise them two tenths let's lower them' and that's... Koala: but the numerus clausus is nothing significant Spin: no but (.) facing the PAU [Koala: it's only the' only'] (at the same time) in order to know whether to take more optionals or not (...) Koala: it's simply the (at the same time) (--) simply the score of the last person who entered that degree course the year before (FG1, l.165-172)

Cara: I'd like to give advice to Juan (--) the information he's got is a bit outdated (--) because teacher training [for physical education] has disappeared Juan: but they don't know (.) it's not yet decided Cara: nono the thing is (.) you've got to do (.) primary school teacher (.) 4 years (.) the normal one and then one specializing Juan: OK (FG10, l.124-129)

Spin mentioned on another occasion that she got informed through impersonal information sources, reading 'a couple of pages' (FG1, l.122f.). Judging by her comments, she may have seen in her search that the required score to enter her aspired degree course changes every year and considered it important to know the score she would need this year. This shows that although she found out and read about the *numerus clausus*, she did not understand how it works. Koala, on the other hand, did not aspire to go to university at all at the time of the focus group, so one could assume that he did not need to find information on the *numerus clausus*, but he was anyway able to correct Spin's erroneous interpretation. Koala did not mention his information source, but we can interpret Spin's confusion as a sign that major misunderstandings may occur when students are left alone in their search for fact-based information and do not receive guidance on how to understand important concepts.

In the other example, Cara informed Juan that his aspired degree course had disappeared; she most probably possessed such information because she herself had planned to study the same degree course and devised a plan B when she found out that this option was no longer available. Her presentation of the new options was not completely accurate either, as she argued that one has to study four years before choosing the specialization in sports, whereas this specialization is chosen for the fourth year. Again, we do not know Cara's information sources, but we can assume that Juan used personal information sources or outdated impersonal information sources, although this is less likely as at least university websites had already been updated at this point.

Juan is a male participant whose responses in the socio-economic questionnaire did not allow for a classification of his social class. It is possible that he only attempted to construct a straightforward study choice in front of his peers, although he had not yet

done any research and did not decide at all. The confrontation with Cara showed that this strategy included a high risk of failure, as he was left even more vulnerable when Cara uncovered the inexistence of his aspired degree course. In the focus-group situation, he was unable to use Cara as an information source, reacting instead with a quick withdrawal.

The two examples show that neither the sole use of impersonal information sources nor the sole reliance on personal information sources lead to accurate information, as important concepts may remain diffuse or the information may be outdated. Obviously, an unfortunate combination of both sources may worsen the situation even further. It is hence necessary not only to ensure that pupils may find the information they require through the source they prefer to use, but also to avoid possible problems, by providing additional information on concepts and by ensuring that at least teachers, as the personal information source *par excellence* available to all pupils, possess updated information to share.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our results show several possible intersections of gender and social class in the study choice. As we have seen, study choice is for most participants a vocational decision, based on person-centred information about their interests and skills and fact-based information about degree courses that coincide with these interests. The preparatory nature of university studies for future professions is highlighted, possibly as a result of the generally lower objective chances that put the connection between studies and future career into doubt and require additional efforts in order to ‘re-connect’ the studies with the future.

In our focus groups, female participants were much more likely to consider their study choice as a decisive element for their long-term future, in concrete their future happiness, than male participants. Several female but none of the male participants described difficulties in identifying their interests and skills, to know if they would be

able to meet the exigencies of certain degree courses and to enter an aspired degree course. Conversely, the male participants in the focus groups tended either to present an aspired degree course that they could be sure to enter or discarded university studies completely. These differences indicate that male and female students show gender-specific strategies to cope with the decreasing objective chances: The female participants ascribe a high importance to their study choice, 'burdening' it with the responsibility for their future in a difficult economic context and problematize their ability to achieve the desired future by worrying about being able to 'identify' what, for them, is the optimal study choice and to enter and succeed in the aspired degree course. Conversely, the male participants do not question their own abilities but deny having any insecurities, constructing their future as relatively secure despite everything or abnegating an interest in the future.

In order to understand these gender patterns, we can hypothesize certain influences based on the theories of Bourdieu and Passeron (2007) and Leccardi (1999). On the one hand, it is possible that the female participants show this self-critical tendency because their 'objective chances' for a condign professional future are still lower than those of their male peers. Their studies are more disconnected from their future and in order to re-connect them, they need to find an explanation for their foreseeable bigger difficulties that 'must', in a certain way, lie in themselves as any structural explanation would undo their efforts. The male participants may be less affected by the decrease in objective chances and hence less worried or may be unable to admit worries and insecurity in front of their peers, as they might perceive such admissions as little 'masculine'. Considering the severity and scope of social sanctions afflicted on young people who visibly dissent from social norms as 'heteronormativity' in the Spanish school context (Platero 2010), male and female students should be

interested in performing a gender identity as normative as possible in front of their peers. Following Connell's theory (2005), identification with a hegemonic masculinity may, furthermore, offer advantages to male participants that could serve to compensate the disadvantages of an insecure future. Our hypothesis for future research is, hence, that girls and boys cope differently with an insecure future, girls by considering the connectedness of their future success to be a matter of their own abilities and boys by relying on –and possibly exaggerating– their masculinity.

Both strategies imply dark sides, as girls may worry even more and ascribe failure intrinsically and boys may be unable to articulate worries and request support. Some female participants disburden their study choice by arguing in the focus groups that their objective chances of employment are equally low in any field, by presenting their study choice as being in a field with good job opportunities, despite the crisis, or by constructing their identity in opposition to young unemployed, reproducing social representations that ascribe the reason for unemployment to a lack of motivation. Male participants may be able to break their self-imposed silence and request support from out-of-school social contacts, especially their parents, or even within the school context in one-to-one conversations with friends and teachers, avoiding performing in front of the peer group.

Our analysis is an example of an intersectional multi-level analysis (Winker and Degele 2009) of gendered study choice and we can see how it may serve as the theoretical framework required by Yazilintas et al. (2013): Economic crisis and unemployment (structural level), are related in public discourse to certain social representations, e.g. that unemployment is the fault and responsibility of the unemployed, which in turn influence identity constructions, as some participants

construct their identity in opposition to this representation. Other representations, e.g. the idea that you will be successful in any field as long as you are interested and good at it, which is, furthermore, closely related to the ideology of talent described by Bourdieu and Passeron (2007), enable the participants to construct identities that serve as solution strategies to cope with their insecure future. The concepts of masculinity and heteronormativity are other examples of social representations that can become resources in the construction of identities. Institutional explanations form part of the structural level, whereby micro-level explanations are clearly centred on identity constructions. Macro-level explanations relate to all three levels as they consider how ‘socialization’ and ‘culture’ –terms that require further thought, but that we can relate to the levels ‘structures’ and ‘social representations’- influence identity constructions and individual decisions.

Regarding the intersection of gender and social class, we can suppose that the image of hegemonic masculinity may be class-specific, as the tacit knowledge of individuals differs along this dimension of difference (Bohnsack 2010), and that students from families of origin with low cultural capital may employ the compensatory effects of performing a hegemonic masculinity in the school context earlier than others, as they are more likely to experience problems in the educational system (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007). If the reservation to disclose insecurities was mainly limited to the school context and the peer group so that students were able to request help from out-of-school social contacts, boys from social classes with low cultural capital would be especially disadvantaged as their out-of-school social contacts are less likely to have taken HE studies, hence offering less relevant support in the transition to university. Social capital is, therefore, a crucial factor in the reproduction of social inequality, especially in the intersection with gender.

In order to facilitate the transition from school to university, we consider it important to offer pupils accurate information through personal and impersonal information sources and to guide them in their use of both. Several participants relied on impersonal information sources because they did not receive the required information through personal information sources, and so teachers especially were criticised. The teachers' role as social capital is hence not only crucial for pupils with less social capital, but for all pupils in general, as teachers could act as reliable mediators between impersonal and personal information sources, supplying their pupils with accurate and up-to-date information. Teachers should be trained and supervised in their support of the transition to university both within the class room and in one-on-one interviews, as they could compensate for the limited social capital of students from families of origin with no or little contact with HE and could enable boys to speak about their doubts. However, if only private schools offered such improved support, this would accentuate social inequality even further, as students at private schools are more likely to come from higher social classes (Dávila et al. 2008). A functioning tutoring system in all schools could, on the other hand, be beneficial for all students regardless their social class and without attaching a negative stigma to the students who require additional help.

Some authors argue that students from lower social classes only start HE thanks to the additional support of their teachers who 'push' them into university and are therefore more likely to fail once at university as this personalized support is no longer given (Brinkworth et al. 2009). Our approach argues against such a deficit perspective. Students with less economic, cultural and social capital do not necessarily need more support than others, but the students with more social capital already receive the required support through their social contacts outside school. As long as the educational

system expects students to solve such issues as study choice and adapt to university on their own and devaluates and stigmatizes students who require support, the higher class orientation of the educational system described by Bourdieu and Passeron (2007) will persist and social inequality will be reproduced.

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