Full Paper

RESEARCH *in* EDUCATION

Research in Education
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–18

DOI: 10.1177/00345237241282506
journals.sagepub.com/home/rie


How spatial considerations figure into aspiration formation and agency

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Abstract

As young people near the end of compulsory schooling they are faced with decisions about what future education, training and employment they will pursue. This paper argues that imagined future education, training and career prospects can have largely under-recognised socio-spatial dimensions. This claim disrupts received notions around careers decision-making as distinctly rational, based on academic strengths, skills, or talents. This spatial argument follows from a theoretically-informed analysis of interviews conducted with 15 young people living in England. Sampling was opportunitistic and the design flexible to enable me to explore the use of different methods which could foreground reflections on space and place. Interviews employed visual methods (including photo voice) to prompt young people to talk about their conceptualisations of places and spaces as well as future education, training and career considerations. Focusing in particular on three participants' reflections, I suggest that through a process of emplacement young people are constructing thirdspaces, a concept proposed by Soja. This process both supports aspiration formation and disrupts imposed structures or labels that might otherwise be deterministic of particular post-16 pathways and subjectivities. For three participants, I consider the ways their conceptions of spaces are implicit responses to cultural expectations, limitations and structures. These three participants are presented as developing what Yosso has called spatially-informed navigational and resistant capitals. Claims are made in the context of an analysis framed by an interpretation of agency in terms of the identity and implied subjectivities. The process by which a young person emplaces themselves in a possible future and the construction of imagined thirdspaces could be untapped cultural resources informing young people's post-16 decisions and planning which could lead them to build future pathways they themselves value.

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Keywords
Space, place, identity, careers, aspirations, sense of belonging, inequality, young people, critical theory and education, sociology

Introduction

The post-16 phase is the time when young people in England begin to pursue distinct pathways in furthering their education and training. This education and training landscape for 16 to 19 year-olds in England is multi-faceted and complex (Pring et al., 2009), offering possibilities for young people to enter a school sixth-form which may form part of their current school, or of another school, or to transfer to a sixth-form college or to a further education college. In principle, young people in England have various options available to them in curricular terms and all institutions offering further education could lead to higher education or university. In practice, university is for those on an academic track and the most likely choice of 'advantaged' families in the UK (Harrison, 2018: 1). In public discourse, pursing a university degree is chosen by those with 'high aspirations' (Spohrer, 2015) and distinct from a vocational path which does not have the same value as it does in countries such as Germany (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). Patterns of progression towards universities across Europe (Marginson, 2016) reveal a student distribution that is invariably linked to social structural inequalities (Reay et al., 2009), school policies and practices (Anders et al., 2018), geography (Dorling, 2012) and racism (Bhavnani et al., 2005).

Understanding young people's post-16 'choices' necessarily considers the influence of social ideologies, practices and structures (Ball et al., 2005). A more recent strand of research examines the process of educational decision-making as a complex interplay of structures and individual biographies (Walther et al., 2015). Individual factors are often interpreted with reference to Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* which posits individually embodied reflections of family social and cultural capital as implicit drivers of educational pathways (Hodkinson and Sparks, 1997; Rea, Crozier and Clayton, 2010). The recent 'spatial turn' (Gulson and Symes, 2007) opens up further avenues for theorisation and may point to some less visible ways young people enact agency as they construct their 'transition biography' (Heinz, 2009). I propose using the lens of 'figured worlds' (Holland et al., 2001) to conceptualise agency in terms of individual responses to social and cultural structures. The research frame I apply considers conceptions and perceptions of space (Soja, 1996) as among the cultural resources which young people may use to construct their orientation to their futures, their subjectivity, identity and *habitus*.

In what follows, I present data from interviews with participants to argue that their particular constructions of a possible future can be seen as responses to the wider social context and are a way they express control of their future (Appadurai, 2004; Evans, 2002). These agentic responses are examples of individuals constructing their desired pathways and intentions to achieve what they value and desire (Sen, 1999). In this conceptualisation of agency, the researcher's operationalisation (Sfard, 2013) of agency is not in outcomes

or achievements but in narratives, in the ways young people think about and plan their futures (Cuzzocrea and Mandich, 2016).

A spatial orientation to one's imagined future is presented as one way young people may be deflecting deficit discourses and holding high aspirations for themselves despite lower expectations and 'realistic' goals presented to them (Margolis and Romero, 2000). The spatially imagined futures presented here seemingly disrupt long-standing assumptions about how aspirations are formed (e.g. based on academic attainment and social networks) and how they could be supported. The analysis enriches rather than contradicts research which explores various complexities of educational progression, aspirations and social structures such as those linked to gender, social class and ethnicity) (e.g. Noble and Davies, 2009) as well as local forces, such as the family and friends (Brooks, 2003) and daily activities (Archer et al., 2013). Adding to the nuanced picture of progression through education and work of contemporary society (Furlong et al., 2011), I explore how space and place are part of biographical projects of the self (Woodman and Wyn, 2015).

The relevance of space and place

Spatial thinking is applied to educational research when the research considers 'where things are or where they happen' (Logan, 2012: 508). With regards to post-16 education, geography can matter in relation to travel distance to places of learning (Anders et al., 2018; Watson and Church, 2009). Some geographical locations for education and work may be unfamiliar or ways to reach them may be unknown, demanding of the individual a sort of spatial capital (Centner, 2008). Empirical evidence also indicates that aspirations can be grounded in specific places and associations (Stahl and Baars, 2016) and that people's connections to places have some influence on decision-making (Donnelly and Evans, 2016).

While spatial research is largely grounded in geographical places (Logan, 2012), I initiated this study with an added interest in socio-cultural institutions, such as places of work or places to study and train for work. I found that some concepts which have been applied in relation to geography could usefully also apply to considerations of socio-cultural institutions, and in relation to imagined futures. Take, for example, the concepts of boundaries and boundary crossers which is theorised in relation to a neighbourhood or locality (Lamont and Molnar, 2002) but could also apply to spaces for work and learning. Related theorisation such as ways that place boundaries can be symbolic, social and also political (Logan, 2012) may also apply. In a social sense, opportunities and experiences can shape perceived boundaries of places as well as imagined future spaces one might enter.

Symbolically, people may 'read' meanings from spaces (Cosgrove 1989). Such symbolic boundaries could explain a young person's rejection of Oxbridge as an option because they do not feel they belong, based on their reading of that space (Reay et al., 2010). Material conditions, such as the local economy, can create shared social networks and identities which influence trajectories of young people (MacDonald et al., 2005). Political boundaries in terms of young people's post-16 considerations may come into

play in the form of perceived territorial boundaries informing where they choose to continue their education (Donnelly and Evans, 2016; Kintrea et al., 2008). Following on from this is the idea that space and place can constitute experiences and personal meaning-making resources (Farrugia, 2014). This direction is the one I have taken, emboldened by Allen and Hollingworth's (2013) study of the complex ways that place and identification intersect to shape desires and intentions.

In summary, place is at once material and subjective, relational and socially constructed (Hopkins, 2010). Places, which are 'spaces with meaning' (Tuan, 1977: 73), can be relevant to a social constructivist analysis of identity (Holland et al., 2001). A place, defined by Agnew as 'meaningful location' (Creswell, 2004:), can be central to a person's self-identity. I understand location to refer to place but also 'space,' following Massey (2005). As Butler and Sinclair (2020) found in their review of education research, spatial approaches have been used to address questions of education policy, such as school choice, and have investigated educational contexts and young people's perceptions of place. However, there is a need for more research engaging with critical theories of place. I offer this study as an example of how education research can surface the ways young people challenge patterns of inequality which have been identified through previous research (Butler and Sinclair, 2020).

Theoretical framework

In this study, I explored the notion that educational and careers decision-making could be reflective of the ways a person makes meaning of different places (e.g. post-16 education, training and work environments). While recognising the ways spaces and places can be perceived as bounded 'containers' helpfully extends structural explanations for educational inequalities (Webb et al., 2017), I also wanted to explore whether theories which turn our attention to how spaces are lived and experienced (e.g. Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Soja, 1996) offered new ways of thinking about educational inequalities. I wanted to explore subjective interpretations of spaces and places, their boundaries and the meanings made of them.

To think spatially, I wanted spatial practices, or experiences of spaces, and narratives around places in the frame (Massey, 2005). Theorising space as a multiplicity of interrelations, Massey (2005: 9) views space not as clearly defined and bounded but as open and porous, reflecting different levels of scale (e.g. global and local) and 'stories-so-far' as well as stories to come. I designed the study so I could explore the boundedness of narrative while also appreciating the unboundedness of experience (Massey, 2005).

Keeping with a spatial practice lens, I found Soja's three dimensions of space useful (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996). Framing space in the following ways foregrounds the subjective experience and meaning-making, backgrounding materiality:

a) spatial practice or 'perceived space' recognises the 'lived experiences of space' and infers the material dimension of space;
b) representations of space or 'conceived space' encompasses 'conceptions of space' and refers to cognition and interpretation; and

c) spaces of representation or 'thirdspace' are the individual sense-making of perceived and conceived spaces which will be emergent, leaving open the possibility of deconstruction and re-formulations of spaces or places (e.g. their meanings).

Soja's theory opens up options for theorising agency in that if space is socially produced and constructed, social agents potentially reconfigure space through their sense-making (Harvey, 2000; Soja, 1996). For example, if a particular neighbourhood or estate is represented as dirty and uncared by some people, another person may reconfigure this conception through their lived experience, which perceives the space as home and a place of childhood memories.

However, in any account of social life, the role of structures cannot be denied, including the various spatial dimensions to how inequalities play out. Nonetheless, individuals have agency in how they negotiate those structures. This agency could come from a critical awareness of structures, an awareness, which may be embodied through experiences of oppression that prompt resistance (Freire, 1970). In this study, a spatial perspective and theories that suggest possibilities for agency (Harvey, 2000) may be found in the perceptions and experiences of space that are integral to identity (Dovey, 2010).

Viewing space and place as resources for identity aligns with the way that Holland et al. (2001) view identity construction and specifically the configuration of 'figured worlds'. That is, figured worlds are socially constructed cultural models which, when appropriated by an individual, become a frame through which identity is enacted and a future self is imagined. I use this theory of figured worlds to frame my understanding of how space and place can inform someone's future self-concept or narrative of 'possible selves' (Harrison, 2018; Markus and Nurius, 1986). I argue that the young people I interviewed show how three aspects of place: location, locale and sense of place (Creswell, 2004) figure into their decision-making. I highlight ways in which spatial practices and conceptions of space inform the construction of imagined futures.

Placing Soja's (1996) theory of space and Holland et al.'s (2001) notion of identity and agency together, places the lens on spatial meaning-making as a resource in the construction of a *figured world*. The identity curation posited in this study is akin to the narration of possible selves: 'what [a person] might become, would they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming' (Markus and Nurius, 1986: 954). I argue that not only does the socio-cultural context provide resources for the shaping of possible selves (Harrison, 2018), but spatial practices and perceptions of spaces can also be resources in the imagining of a future self and responding to structural constraints (their presence implied by the response).

The study

This exploratory study aimed to learn about post-16 considerations and their spatial dimensions from a sample of 15 young people aged 14-16 from schools in the North of England. In a series of interviews, I trialled a range of methods with the aim of learning about the spatial dimensions (Soja, 1996) to these young people's imagined futures. Photo

elicitation helped to explore something people often do not consciously reflect upon: space and meanings associated with spaces. As Harper (2002: 13) argues, 'photo elicitation interview seems like not simply an interview process that elicits more information, but rather one that evokes a different kind of information.' Other methods included place and narrative-focused interviews, in which the researcher prompted participants first to think about place and then to talk about their futures. Additionally, I used card-sorting to explore their impressions of different institutions of learning in their locale.

Data was collected between 2012 and 2015 in two different localities or Local Authorities (which oversee schools). Sampling was opportunistic, based on access to two Schools. The young people involved in this study lived in the three locations which are geographically similar with economic links. One city is large with a wide mix of housing and employment sectors, with a strong financial and professional services sector. Participants all lived in a residential communities close to the city centre with a mix of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds represented. The second and third localities are post-industrial towns situated along a large motorway, in between two cities. This locale also had good rail, bus and car links to each of these cities where both general and specialised further education colleges and multiple universities were located. However, the town where the school is located is small relative to the nearby cities and the range of industries and hence employment is relatively limited. Some regeneration has taken place and economic stimulation efforts are ongoing.

The opportunistic sampling approach is appropriate for this study, which does not aim to make generalised claims about aspirations in relation to where people live or their social background. Rather, my intention has been to theorise the ways space and place matter to imagined futures. Sampling aimed for diversity along dimensions that, within the wider educational literature, tend to be factors correlated with education and career choices (Ortiz-Nunez et al., 2011; Yosso, 2005). This includes predicted achievement levels, as assessed by their teachers, and their socio-cultural backgrounds. The localities selected were also located in what are known as 'low participation' neighbourhoods (i.e. where few young people progress to Higher Education). All schools, however, had high performing students. The sample was fairly gender balanced with 8 female and 7 male students. All were White-British apart from one male (John, Black, British, Caribbean) and one female (Karen, Black, British) from the city sample.

Methods

All 15 participants were recruited for at least one interview, which utilised visual methods and card sorting. Ten participants engaged in a photo voice activity (Wang and Burris, 1997) whereby the young people were given cameras and asked to take pictures of places they like to go or go regularly. Using photo elicitation methods, I showed them different work environments to prompt their reflections. For the card sorting methods I asked them to share their further education and training considerations in light of specific examples I had written on cards for them to sort into piles indicating that 'yes', 'no', 'maybe' they would consider going there, or 'do not know' them.

As I was sampling participants opportunistically, I was not beholden to a specific design but chose to vary the approach depending on engagement and availability. All but two participants, who I knew were only available for one interview, first attended a meeting where I could distribute cameras, explain the photo voice task, and gain informed consent. In the first school (5 participants), I arranged individual interviews, scheduled 2 weeks after the initial meeting, to ask about the photos they took, their school experiences and future plans as well as showing some photos of different workplaces for their comments. A couple of weeks later, I arranged a group meeting, where I took notes, to ask about places they go (referring sometimes to an online map) and to do the card sorting task (collecting each of their piles and noting their responses on a table later). They were also asked to add captions to their photos which I had printed. For the next two schools (4 participants from each), I decided I could explore more if the second meeting was also an individual interview instead of the group discussion. With those participants, we discussed their photos and the workplace photos or the researcher-prompted tasks, depending on whether they had taken photos at the time of the first interview or second interview. This gave some more flexibility which proved useful in the third school, where only 1 participant, Roland, had ultimately taken photos (and these were shared after our meeting by email as he had forgotten them on the day of the interview). Roland and another participant, whose parent was not comfortable with him taking photos in the neighbourhood, attended 3 interviews voluntarily as I had visited the school a further date to try to meet the other two participants again. All but one attended at least two interviews.

For the photo voice activity, my aim was not to generalise (e.g. to interpret personalities from choices of places they photographed). Rather, I wanted these images to provide depth to the interview, potentially sparking novel discussions around place and spaces as they perceived them. I coded the interviews inductively for insights into the ways space and place came into play when they discussed their possible futures. The specific ways they spoke about place and space, as prompted often by the card sorting or discussion of their local area and photographs, were then coded deductively using Soja's spatial theory. My intention was to explore the data with this question in mind: Are young people's imaginary futures spatialized and if so how? Further coding iterations considered expressions of motivation and intention to pursue a particular pathway (Evans, 2002). Juxtaposed with their schooling experiences, I interpreted expressions of agency in terms of identity (Holland et al., 2001). My final interpretive analysis considered ways participants drew on spatial conceptions while also contradicting wider discourses and expectations (Harrison and Waller, 2018).

Agency, emplacement and thirdspaces

Spatial considerations held meaning for all participants when discussing locations of colleges or cities where they might work. Cities and colleges had certain qualities and people associated with them, which sometimes factored into their assessment of their options. In talking about various cities and regions, some participants reflected on how they would either 'fit in' or considered them desirable places, either because of the people there or associations made (e.g. London is good for fashion). The spatial dimension I

found interesting and explore further here is 'thirdspace' (Soja, 1996) or their imagined future spaces.

I propose that these *thirdspaces* became resources they could use to emplace themselves in the spaces they desired for their future. I call this process of matching up personal meanings associated with places to one's sense of self 'emplacement'. I have interpreted emplacement as supporting motivation and expressions of agency in the enactment of identity (Holland et al., 2001). By contrast, conceptions of spaces could evoke boundaries which, when combined with self-identity, could lead to a rejection of that space. For example, Scarlet explained her rejection of hospital-based career: 'Cos I don't like the smell of hospitals….I don't like the sight of blood.' Anna rejected further studies in design because she did not like the Product Design course she took in her school saying, 'I didn't like it. …I think it's because people see it as a man's subject… Because it's all wood and metal, stuff like that.'

The interviews with three of the participants (John, Heidi and Roland) illustrate the construction of personally-meaningful *thirdspaces* which fostered their emplacement in an imagined future. Their spatial orientation to their future considerations illustrates how reflections on qualities of spaces can be resources in identity and agency (Holland et al., 2001). John, Roland and Heidi also show how subjectivities can 'rupture structures and received notions' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012: 7) of how young people should make education, training and career decisions. The photo voice method, used by these three participants, may have accentuated the sense of agency (Del Vecchio, Toomey & Tuck, 2017). However, I argue that the socio-spatial perspective driving agency for these three is distinct from the agency expressed by the other 8 participants. For those 8 participants, the photos were personal reflections of places they liked but these reflections were not connected to their imagined futures, which were largely linked to subjects they liked in school or cultural interests (e.g. music and dance).

Heidi

Heidi did not yet have a clear plan for her education and training once she finished school, located in the city. Her grades limited her options, as she had wanted to study art but was not allowed to given her grades. She had tried a hairdressing course but did not like it. She recently took up a work placement in the school's administrative offices which helped her to see her prior behaviour in school from a teachers' perspective. She would love to go to university.

She was clear that she would not 'fit in' at a college located in a town that she said was 'really posh'. She was less rigid, however, in her possible careers, considering a range of options based on spaces she associated with them (and their qualities) and if she believed they fit well with her personality. For example, she desired spaces that would be organised and clean. In discussing the online image of an office space with many desks, she reflected on how she likes the idea of dressing well and having her own office. She likes spaces with qualities that show 'hard work' which she connected to well-dressed people in a business office or dentist's office. She also likes the idea of working with needles and from this has been considering becoming a piercer (e.g. tongue, ear, nose) or a dentist, noting that these

are both vocations where being clean is valued. When shown a picture of a hospital reception area her first word to describe it was 'gruesome' but she added:

> 'I like stuff like that, not like in a sick way, more like, interesting, like to find out what's wrong with people but I couldn't tell someone like, like I gotta tell someone they got cancer or something, I'd hate that … I'm more like, good in an operation handing stuff, or like sewing someone back up… Just find it interesting, like having the needles and stuff.'

By orienting her future career considerations around socio-spatial qualities, Heidi was open to various possibilities. Her exploratory mindset was reflected in the photographs she took and talked about, focusing on places she had been with her mother outside of her locality.

Heidi helps to disrupt norms around post-16 progression which set boundaries and pathways in terms of prior achievement. Rather than concerning herself with formal structures (e.g. the different training pathways for a dentist and a piercer would normally structure opportunity), she considers common qualities of space and common tools (needles). She disrupts notions of status and prestige, which would position becoming a dentist above a piercer. Despite the prior limitations placed on her in terms of course choices, she is able to imagine futures based on 'conceived spaces' and the meanings she associates with these spaces (e.g. offices and hospitals). These conceptions came from lived experiences (e.g. having her tongue pierced, visiting the dentist and working in the school office). While she is not able to envision a future self who could develop skills in patient communication to work in a hospital, she has an inkling of an interest in a health-related profession. Her interest is limited by experience (e.g. related to the mouth) but is unrestricted by educational requirements and draws on conceptions of spaces to expand the options she envisions.

John

John presented himself as a pragmatic person who had given some thought to his career plans but had not yet decided on any one thing. He was doing well academically according to his teacher (also at the city school) and said he wanted to go to university but qualified this saying:

> 'I want to go to university if I know what I want to do, like, I'm not going to go to university if, just to get things and I don't know what I'm going to do when I leave university. Whereas I know I want a job. If I don't have to go through university to get that job, I don't want to go university.'

He indicated some conflicted feelings as he was conscious of the cost of university but also viewed the chance of getting a job with some uncertainty in the current economic context. While he would consider many options presented in the workplace photos (for example he 'would not mind' being an architect since they 'just like design the place'), he would not want to be building things or working on anything electric 'because I don't

think I'd be good at that.' He also ruled out doing what his father does as a chef in catering because he said it does not excite him.

John shows how spaces can be perceived as socio-spatial events rather than bounded and fixed places, and these can figure into an imagined future. This was apparent from John's photos and discussions of his future plans. John took a photo of his bike, which he rides 'everywhere', and another photo showed his two phones. These are not places in the traditional sense of a park or school, as I saw in most of the other participants' photographs. John's photo implicated spatial practices. A discussion of the photo of his bike revealed that he did not have brakes on his bike, metaphorically evoking a spatial practice of perpetual motion. A parallel metaphor was evoked of space as expansive from the photo he took of the view from his window at home, which he identified as his favourite because said he said 'I like you can see far, loads of buildings'. These images reveal a preference for open and unbounded spaces, which I also saw reflected in his imagined future.

John's future was not bounded by place, as suggested by his card sorting results: almost every post-16 option was a 'yes' or a 'maybe'. He also explained in his interview that he was considering two main business ideas – an online business and a mobile bike repair shop – which evoke spaces not restricted by fixed boundaries:

> 'I want to be self-employed now... just like running my own business...Something online.... Thinking far right back, having a bike shop...repair shop...I was thinking about that, like, I wouldn't want a shop but something where I have a van and then pick people's bikes up and then fix 'em and drop 'em off.'

When asked why he would not want a shop he said:

> 'With your shops you have to pay rent and bills and stuff and it just comes out your profit but online businesses are--have your own, you're working at home or something you know.'

John expressed an affinity for unbounded spaces (e.g. the Internet and his phones) and spoke of his relationship with places in terms of how he moves through them (e.g. by bike). He emplaces himself in careers that reflect this relationship and perspective on space. The homology between John's spatial practice orientation to space and his imagined future disrupts common assumptions that career decisions derive from school subjects you enjoy and choose to study in further education. Like Heidi, his performance as a student is not the prominent factor structuring his post-16 decisions. Rather, it is his internalisation of his 'spatial practices' or the 'lived experience of space' that mediate his imagined future. I see John's vision for an online business and his flexible approach to future pathways as giving him a sense of control over his career decisions in a context of economic uncertainty.

Roland

Roland had a clear idea about his career goals. He talked about wanting to be a computer programmer, with plans to apply for an apprenticeship or university. He planned to explore his options in more detail once he was finished with exams. From talking to Roland over three interviews I heard a young man formulating a plan for his future. While he had experience with computers and had done some programming, he had no experience of working in this field. However, this did not stop him from imagining his future in this career:

> 'There's a wide range though for that area [ICT] because there's software development which I wanted to do originally however if not I can just always jot down a few steps on the ladder. With the IT spectrum there's no beginning and end really. The beginning could just be basically teaching it and working your way up from that. So basically the technician in the school that does all the servers and working your way up and maybe even owning your own business itself.'

By viewing the IT field as unbounded, he sets his sights on a range of trajectories and refuses to be put off by a hierarchy in specialisms. Although presented as a series of back-up plans implying some uncertainty around what he can achieve, his 'ladder' metaphor seems to support an aspirational mindset:

> 'So like if you jump in at the top then you don't get it, you can go down a step, until you keep that job then work your way up. Whereas if it's right at the beginning, start right at the bottom it's going to be harder to work your way up because it, I think personally I wouldn't go for something that jumps in at the bottom.'

In his interviews, he implies that further training will help to position him higher up the ladder and hence is his motivation for pursuing an apprenticeship or university. He also positions himself as aspirational in the way he distances himself from young people in his locality (the post-industrial town), who he says lack aspirations. For the research, he chose to photograph areas where he lived that saddened him, areas with litter and liquor stores. When discussing his career goals in the context of also talking about where he has grown up, he said:

> 'I don't have aspirations to stay here my entire life because I know there are better areas out there but I can't just leave it all behind… memories…. It's also where quite a lot of my family is, like dead and alive.'

He exhibits agency in constructing 'thirdspaces' that provide him with the confidence he needs to formulate his career goals. His career goals are not related to an identification with school subjects but what he has taught himself, indicating another way he is different to his peers. This difference has seemingly weighed on him though and his desire for working in a place where he shares commonalities rather than differences is evident in his

reflections on different workspaces (e.g. an office, which he took to be a call centre, and a laboratory):

> 'I like the idea of just like being able to like work with chemicals, work in the environment where it's basically your own experiments, your own, own research, partner with who you want, who's got a similar interest... Whereas in a call centre it's just like loads of different people… loads of different characteristics and different interests… whereas in a laboratory, you're all there to do the same thing in all fairness. So you've got common interest, common ground and just genuinely something to talk about.'

I see Roland's aspirational future as a response to the threat of being stereotyped based on where he lives. His 'thirdspace' is the metaphorical 'ladder' which enables him to hold high expectations for himself, resisting the circulating discourses that apply to young people in his locality as low or non-aspirational (Harrison and Waller, 2018; Kintrea et al., 2015). From Roland's interviews, I propose that a process of emplacement can support a young person's commitment to a pathway and confidence in oneself.

Re-interpreting aspirations and agency

For this study, aspirations have been understood as personally meaningful possible futures (Evans, 2002; Harrison, 2018). From these young people we learn that future plans and decision-making may be informed by a process of emplacement and consideration for spaces one feels they would belong. Importantly, personally-meaningful spatial dimensions may be one way that possible selves are further elaborated and this elaboration, as argued by Cross and Markus (1991), can strengthen intentions. Moreover, configuring aspirations in spatial terms may provide young people with alternative cultural resources in a context where structures can constrain aspirations and identity. Activating young people's *thirdspaces* may help to access aspirations that are not necessarily performative (St Clair and Benjamin, 2011).

Dorothy Holland and colleagues (Holland et al., 2001) have argued that cultural identities are imposed as a result of socialisation within a given group (e.g. ethnic or class group). They also point out ways identity can be constructed in the moment. I propose that the 'history-in-person' (Holland et al., 2001: 18), conceived as the disposition or potentiality that is constructed in these moments, can have a spatial dimension. John's reflections suggest that spatial practices may also be formative of embodied dispositions or *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1992). Moreover, I argue that the three participants highlighted here disrupt particular cultural positionings through this process of emplacement.

The focus on conceptions and perceptions of spaces provides a lens through which to see agency expressed in ways that have been underappreciated to date. While Farrugia (2019: 714) has identified 'the cultivation of the self as a worker' whereby the young people he interviewed had 'incorporated aspects of themselves and their identities in ways that are unrecognised in the literature,' this small-scale study suggests that a spatial dimension of identity, expressed as a third space, can also be part of this self-definition process. This was evident in Heidi's imagined future created with reference to clean and

tidy spaces. For Roland, place identity is a resource inspiring resistance while spatial metaphors (e.g. aiming to enter at the top of the ladder not start at the bottom) provided a resource for self-realisation.

Nonetheless, precarity is evident across all the narratives, implicating a dependent relationship with the labour market. In that sense, their narratives represent a working-class subjectivity rather than the middle-class subjectivity, for which passion drives career success (Farrugia, 2019). John shows us a way to create a fissure in this relationship. John's homology between spatial practices, riding his bike everywhere, and imagining a mobile business venture, reconfigures the alternative to university which imagines a business *not* run out of a fixed location. In this way, John, like Heidi, veers away from the working-class subjectivity presented by Farrugia (2019) by not giving centrality to educational qualifications. Although Roland has (reasonably) latched onto education as a way to progress in his field of IT, all three of these participants cultivate their imagined futures in terms of spaces they believe would nurture them or be productive for them, rather than considering skills or capabilities they can offer the labour market. Spatiality and the process of emplacement, at first glance, appears to offer a way out of fixed identifications and narratives. At the very least a hybrid class subjectivity appears possible in the context of spatially configured identity work.

Parallel to arguments that discourse has the power to inform individual (contested) subject positions (Spohrer, 2015; Trowler, 2001), I use spatial theory (e.g. Soja, 1996) to argue that spatial imaginations can also become powerful resources in the construction of subjectivities. Although imagined futures do not necessarily translate into a reality, the creative formulation of 'figured worlds' can inform actions (Holland et al., 2001) which could set a young person on a pathway they may not otherwise have taken. A process of emplacement, which I argue could support the constructing of possible selves (Harrison, 2018), may therefore be disrupting the ways education and career patterns are structured. Third space capabilities may provide a sort of safety net for the self which is at risk according to Farrugia (2019: 721): 'when young people experience unemployment the capacity to realise the self as a subject of value is eroded, creating feelings of anxiety and worthlessness.' These young people have managed a reflexive self (Woodman and Wyn, 2015) that is not directly invested in the labour market but is a spatially-mediated investment in an imagined future they create.

While I view agency in terms of narrative and identity, with *thirdspaces* employed as resources in this subjective construction process, I recognise that social structures and circumstances shape life chances and opportunities (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). The plans projected by Heidi, John and Roland could be seen as naïve. Heidi will need access to a competitive university course if she wants to be a Dentist. John may find he has better earning potential with a university degree, especially if self-employment is not sustainable. And Roland's chosen field of IT will likely have specialisms with varying advantages and disadvantages such as pay and future opportunities. However, naïve thinking can be corrected through advice and guidance. Young people could be offered opportunities to experience and learn where the goal is exploring a field rather than performing for a grade, using pedagogies that promote a growth rather than fixed ability

mindset (Yeager and Dweck, 2012). Such experiences could tap into their (potentially spatially mediated) imagined futures.

What is more difficult to cultivate is the ways boundaries, for these three young people, can be fluid or disregarded (consciously or unconsciously). We could abstract from these participants a scalable pedagogical approach which involves questioning of the validity of imposed structures and narratives, followed by discussions around creative ways of conceiving *thirdspaces*. Heidi was disgruntled by her restricted options for school subjects, John was distrusting of university (which costs time and money) as necessarily the pathway to economic success, and Roland outright rejected the place narrative associated with his locality. A worthwhile direction for future educational practice is to identify ways to support the formation of *thirdpaces*, or narrated spatial-identities that are not 'sticky subjects' (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013) in response to prescribed or problematic narratives. A key facet of such a spatial-identity seems to be the evocation of the unboundedness of space. For Roland, Heidi and John, this spatial orientation helped create an openness from which to imagine a possible future.

My intention is not to suggest that these young people's subjective expression of agency dominates over structural constraints. Rather, I hope to show how exploring 'lay frames of reference' (Irwin, 2018) in the context of aspiration formation and career decision-making shows us ways young people are implicitly aware of constraints but can also imagine alternative *thirdspaces* (Soja, 1996). This is not agency in the sense of 'planful competence' (Heinz, 2009: 397). Rather, this is a spatially-informed agency that is employed in the construction of 'possible selves' (Harrison, 2018). This agency potentially supports the navigation of a complex and often constraining field of education. This capability, I argue, could help young people psychologically negotiate potentially unsupportive and constraining systems and contexts. Yosso's (2005) expanded concepts of capital, informed by Critical Race Theory are useful here. I believe the concept of 'navigational capital' known as 'skills of maneuvering through social institutions' (Yosso, 2005: 80), combined with a redrawing of socio-spatial boundaries, drives emplacement and offers a form of agency that may otherwise be out of reach. By asserting themselves as aspirational and mobile, crossing and even discounting boundaries, they are also exhibiting 'resistant capital' or 'those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality' (Yosso, 2005: 80).

Concluding thoughts

While the participants overall affirmed what we might expect, that places are imbued with meaning (Tuan, 1977) which can invoke boundaries around what is possible or desirable, this research identified other ways young people may be using spatial resources in aspiration formation. In particular, *thirdspaces* (Soja, 1996) may be a resource young people employ. In the three examples presented here, I suggest that *thirdspaces* are disrupting attempts to impose limitations, structures and low expectations on these young people. Moreover, we may take more notice of alternative productions of capital (Yosso, 2005) and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1992), produced not only through family, school and work experience, but also evolving in relation to spatial imaginations and spatial-identity work.

A spatially configured *habitus* could be seen as undermining structuring structures (Bourdieu, 1992).

Further research exploring how histories and wider processes are mediating configurations and perceptions of space and place (Holland et al., 2001), and how these *together* are shaping aspirations of young people, is needed. Action research could also further our understanding of how educators might support young people in developing navigational and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). Emplacement and *thirdpaces* could be narratives that counteract messages of low expectations which can become internalised and negatively impact self-perceptions (Cuzzocrea and Mandich, 2016). Taking account of these spatial dimensions, and discussing them in education and careers guidance conversations, may positively impact on the capabilities (Sen, 1999) that an individual has to make decisions about their futures, configured in ways that they value.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the University of Leeds for providing pump priming funding to conduct this research and Professor Jeremy Higham for the opportunity to pursue this research. The idea evolved over time as we worked together to develop research in post-16 education. Thank you to Jeremy and others, including Professor Yvette Solomon, who read and commented on earlier versions of the article. I am grateful to those working in education, in schools and the local authority, who facilitated recruitment to the project. Most importantly, I thank the young people for sharing their lives with me, even if just a small slice of that life.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the University of Leeds; Pump-priming.

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