

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Spatial structures of student mobility: Social, economic and ethnic 'geometries of power'

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Abstract

There now exists a growing literature on educational mobilities, and this paper contributes to understanding the way contemporary youth imagine the geography of the United Kingdom and how this translates to their mobility intentions. Using Giddens and Massey and drawing on a unique multi-sited qualitative dataset, we examine how these flows can be understood as embedded within narratives of the self that are situated within a particular spatial structuring of social, economic, and ethnic difference. The multi-sited dataset provides a unique opportunity to see the simultaneity of these social relations across space, mutually shaping, and reshaping each other over time. We illustrate how embedded within imagined mobility narratives are deeply unequal structures of economic power, (re)producing oppressed and dominant positions across social and geographic space. Geometries of race and ethnicity are also shown to structure the ways in which different ethnic groups look upon the geography of their university choices. The patterning of these imagined spatial flows around the United Kingdom at the point of university entry can be interpreted as one further manifestation of deep-seated geometries of power that pervade social life.

KEYWORDS

Giddens, Massey, power, space, student mobility

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper contributes to the growing interest in the geography of higher education, especially with regard to the nature of localities within which universities are situated, how these relate to broader spatial power imbalances, and imagined regional or place-based identities. We draw on the UK context, which represents a geographically significant case study country owing to its diverse internal geographies. The United Kingdom is an example of a country where geographically uneven patterns exist in economic development, income, and inequality. Social and ethnic groups are unevenly spread across the geography of the United Kingdom. The four 'home' nations of

the United Kingdom also create spatial diversity in terms of language, social policy, and national identity. It therefore represents an ideal country context to study the ways in which the spatial flows of young people relate to imagined geographies of place.

Research in human geography has contributed important insight into young people's perceptions of geographic space, their spatial orientations and preferences, and the nature of place-based identities more generally. There is a large and diverse body of work on attachment and belonging in relation to place, encompassing different spatial scales of analysis, such as neighbourhood, town, city, region, and nation (Goudy, 1990; Hall, Coffey, & Williamson, 1999; Valentine, 1997; White & Green, 2011). Although much of this work is

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qualitative, providing richly detailed accounts of these specific spatial units, there also exist larger-scale quantitative work, with Gould and White (2012) carrying out one of the first studies (originally published in 1974) that attempted to quantify British school leavers spatial preferences, in terms of the regions they perceived positively and negatively.

Other work has taken a race-based perspective in examining the significance of place, exploring questions around racism encountered across diverse geographic spaces (Bonnett, 1996; Bressey, 2016; Webster, 2003), and the whiteness of space and white privilege (Lawler, 2012; Rothenberg, 2008; Slocum, 2007). In the context of educational research, there is a body of work examining the educational encounters and experiences of students of colour, exploring higher education and elite university settings, and in relation to their mobility trajectories to university, including the ethnic composition of their origin and destination geographic locations (Ball, Reay, & David, 2002; Dumangane, 2016; Gamsu, Donnelly, & Harris, 2018; Khambhaita & Bhopal, 2015).

We contribute to this work by further exploring the wider power structures within which youth's perceptions of place are situated, especially in terms of the social, economic, and ethnic divisions that pervade social and geographic space. The participants in our research are young people on the cusp of entering university; a significant life event, often regarded in the public imaginary of English higher education (Holdsworth, 2009a) as a time when young people move away from home, and so is likely to bring to the surface these latent underlying spatial perceptions and preferences. Indeed, the research presented here underlines the deep-seated spatial divisions and spatial structures that manifest in the way contemporary British youth frame their transitions to university.

There is now a well-established body of work on the geographies of education, and our paper offers a further contribution to research on student mobilities and the migration of youth across geographic space. Work on educational mobilities has unpacked the idea of mobility in a number of interesting ways. There is work on the flows of students across geographic localities and countries, both *internationally* and *intranationally*, which has picked apart the extent and nature of these movements. There is a large body of work on the international flows of students; outward from particular regions, such as Europe and East Asia; and more global in scale (Christie, 2007; Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes, & Skeldon, 2012; Holdsworth, 2009b; Prazeres, 2013). In the UK context, research on the outward international movements of UK students has evidenced links between international student mobility and the reproduction of social class advantage (Brooks & Waters, 2009; Holloway, O'hara, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Waters & Brooks, 2010). Looking at the internal migration of students within the United Kingdom, work has addressed distance travelled and leaving home and regional patterns in student mobility (Duke-Williams, 2009; Singleton, 2016). Research has also dealt with a more ontological questioning of the construct *mobility*, exploring interesting questions around the liminality of movement and the emotive and affective dimensions to *being* mobile (Finn, 2017; Holton & Finn, 2018). Other work has illustrated the problematic way in which

neoliberal discourses around 'aspirations' and the knowledge economy construct 'immobility', which is considered to be a 'hindrance' to life chances (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013). Elsewhere, the complexity and the gendered nature of mobility in a peripheral, Northern region of Sweden have also sought to nuance the notion that immobility automatically implies a lack of capital (Forsberg, 2019). Our work builds on these critical accounts of what it means to be 'mobile' and 'immobile', by focussing on the way uneven spatial structures are embedded within how young people look upon their choices of *where*, geographically, they choose to study.

Much of the work looking at the internal flows of students within the United Kingdom has been based on large quantitative, datasets, and when a qualitative approach has been adopted, it has tended to be based on single-site case study. For example, Hinton (2011), Donnelly and Evans (2016), and Ward (2015) have each explored processes of university choice and educational experience in relation to specific Welsh localities. Similarly, Holdsworth (2009a) analysed how working-class 'scouse' local identities affected students attending an academically selective university in the city of Liverpool, and Bathmaker et al. (2016) examined similar issues in Bristol. The work of Clayton, Crozier, and Reay (2009) in their studies of the experience of working-class students across universities in Britain comes closest to a multisited, relational understanding of how university choice and experience is mediated by different local and regional geographies. They explore how student mobility is rooted in particular distinctive economic and cultural geographies of place. In one instance, they describe how a British Asian student opted to attend a university in the Midlands where he would not stand out as a student of colour and which would be similar to his upbringing in a working-class part of a city in the north-west of England (Clayton et al., 2009, p. 164). More generally, the in-depth and rich qualitative work that has examined higher education choice has largely been carried out in a single region, town, or city. This makes it difficult to see wider power relations that exist, especially those that are geographic in nature, for example, contrasts between north and south, or Wales and England. The qualitative dataset used here includes data collected from 20 diverse localities stretching right across the United Kingdom and so offers a glimpse into the underlying spatial structuring of social and ethnic inequalities. Indeed, the study began with the explicit purpose of bringing a geographic perspective to examining questions of higher education transition. We begin by theorising spatial structure, the self, and geographic mobility and outlining the theoretical ideas that frame our analysis presented later.

2 | THEORISING SPATIAL STRUCTURE AND THE SELF

In understanding the role played by place in shaping the geographic movements of university entrants, we combine Giddens' (1991) work on identity of the self with Massey's (2005, 1994) conceptualisation of space and place. Giddens' work on identity of the self helps to explain the often unconscious ways in which social practice and action

is rationalised and how choices or behaviours are part of long-term trajectories and imagined futures. Massey helps us to spatially situate the self and help explain how place and the specific constellation of social relations it embodies, structures the ways in which people look upon their (im)possible geographic destinations. Furthermore, Massey helps explain how an act of mobility is in *itself* laden with unequal power relations. By combining Giddens' work on identity of the self with Massey's spatial perspective, we hope to provide a more holistic framework from which to make sense of the geographic destinations of university entrants.

We first describe the relevance of Giddens' work on identity, before theorising how a spatial component could be combined through incorporating Massey's ideas on space, especially 'power geometry'. We begin with Giddens and move on to Massey and provide thoughts on the ways in which both can combine to provide a complimentary theorisation. Giddens' idea of ontological security describes the self-identify each of us manufactures about who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going—our 'narrative of self' we hold and carry with us. Giddens' (1991) conceptualisation of the self contends that we each hold a standard (and arbitrary) set of answers about aspects of our person, for example, our gendered/sexualised selves, what it means to have a 'good life', and what it means to be a 'son', 'daughter', 'wife', or 'husband'.

The existential question of self-identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual "supplies" about herself. A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though as it is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self. (Giddens, 1991, p. 54)

Holding these 'narratives of the self' is necessary to avoid states of anxiety, and these narratives are unconsciously drawn on as we journey through life, expressing desires, preferences, and making choices. Giddens refers to this as our 'practical consciousness'—our sense of self that guides our daily activities and ultimately the course taken in life. Anxiety is a central element here; it is an unconscious and what Giddens calls 'free-floating' kind of anxiety that is not about any specific threat or immediate external danger, but rather internalised threats to do with our self-identity—which compel us to hold on to what is familiar and known. One of the manifestations of this sense of self is the collection of habits, behaviours, and forms of conduct, which are important to maintaining this self-identity and providing ontological security of the self.

Inherent within higher education choices will be narratives of the self, as young people unconsciously navigate themselves towards paths that are in line with their 'practical consciousness' of who they are as a person, what they are about, where they belong (and do not

belong), and where they are going. Belonging here is understood to have both *social* and inherently *spatial* elements; we see belonging as being shaped 'through being both at home and away and through the dialectic of roots and routes' (Urry, 2000 132-133). In terms of the focus of our analysis, the spatial preferences of young people for higher education study, and their (im)mobility intentions, will likely reflect their sense of self in terms of *where* they belong, who they are, and what they imagine they will be in the future. It is reflective of their perceptions about what is valuable in life and valued by them. For example, being intimately connected with family and in close immediate contact with family members is something that is valued by many (Finn, 2017). Occupying positions in dominant and dominating institutions of society (such as elite universities) could be valued more by others. These narratives of the self are inevitably interconnected with social structure and power within society. Any understanding of an individual's sense of self that is not placed within the context of classed, racialised, and gendered power structures will likely be limited.

The narratives of the self at the point of entry to higher education are located within power structures that are interwoven with spatial inequalities and dynamics. We attempt here to *spatialise* Giddens' ideas around narratives of the self, by combining them with Massey's understanding of space and place, showing how power relations circulating across space shapes young people's narratives of the self. From Massey's perspective, place is conceptualised as a particular set of social relations; connections and disconnections to the multitude of identities (including cultural, social, gendered, and sexualised); and structures (including economic, political, and religious) in constant circulation and creation across space. In this sense, places are seen as unique 'pauses' within space.

Thus, the spatial is socially constituted. "Space" is created out of the vast intricacies, the incredible complexities, of the interlocking and the non-interlocking, and the networks of relations at every scale from local to global. What makes a particular view of these social relations specifically spatial is their simultaneity. ... Seeing space as a moment in the intersection of configured social relations (rather than as an absolute dimension) means that it cannot be seen as static. (Massey, 1994, p. 265)

Massey's work provides one way of theorising the role of place as a mediator in the higher education choices of young people. It enables an understanding of how place—interpreted here as a unique configuration of social relations circulating in space—can come to be important in shaping the migratory choices of young people for university. Choosing the 'right' kind of geographic location may be about locating in a particular place that is (dis)connected to a particular configuration of relations circulating in space, for example, locating in a place connected to certain classed or ethnic relations. These preferences could be driven by the need to maintain an individual's narrative of the self, a desire to be connected to particular resources, and identities that will help craft an individual's idea of their future self (Giddens, 1991). In

beginning to develop this theorisation, we provide some examples in this paper of how certain unique spatial constellations figure heavily in the minds of young people when they are making their university choices.

In this way, we attempt to show how university choice may be a mix of choosing the 'right' university and course (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001) and also migrating to the places with the 'right' kinds of connections (and disconnections) to particular identities and resources. More generally, this calls into question what we mean by 'migration' and the breadth of meaning imbued with terms such as 'mobility' and 'immobility'. But it must also be recognised that these social relations conceptualised by Massey are not neutrally configured and are held together by structures of power.

Moreover, and again as a result of the fact that it is conceptualised as created out of social relations, space is by its very nature full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation. (Massey, 1994, p. 265)

Taking this further, her analysis of the 'power geometry' of mobility of people and flows of capital highlights the following:

For different social groups and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation to the flows and movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (Original emphasis. Massey, 1994: p 60)

To illustrate her point, Massey provides examples of dominated groups in society who are passive in their experience of global flows (on the 'receiving-end'): the economically marginalised buying food from a Chinese take-away, or logging on to YouTube to listen to music produced overseas. The very nature of space-time compression means quite different things dependent on social structure and the positioning of individuals in relation to it. Dominated groups are experiencing a kind of globalisation that is qualitatively distinct from those who are controlling these flows across space. The 'initiators' of flows and movement, or rather those in control of it (in much the same way as the controllers of capital, the 'ruling class'), determine the extent and nature of these flows and control what news is heard, which music is listened to, and what leisure activities are enjoyed.

Using Massey's lens on the power geometries of space, we seek to rethink how power is exercised in relation to students' decisions about spatial mobility for university. As Forsberg (2019: 328) notes, it is not only Massey but also Ahmed (2014) and Cresswell (2006) who can be

drawn on constructively in thinking about how power and mobility are intertwined. In both cases, mobility both reflects and creates inequities of power. Looking at broad patterns in the migration of student within and beyond the United Kingdom, it is clear that relocating to a different part of the country (or internationally) to attend university is something that is not experienced equally by all sections of society—and continues to be the preserve of largely privileged groups. In Massey's terms, it is the privileged groups who are really in control here; they are the ones who can turn migrating away to a distant university to their advantage. In one sense, their movement actively decreases the power and influence of dominated groups, who do not move, and are unable to access the sorts of institutionalised capitals and resources in locations that are either socially or spatially inaccessible (or both).

The power geometry is also significant for how places themselves come to increase or decrease the power and influence of different groups. Massey's arguments about power geometry and time-space compression originally made in relation to processes of globalisation, but we see no reason why they may not be applied to understand power imbalances on a narrower geographic scale. Indeed, in many ways, countries as spatially diverse as the United Kingdom represent their own microcosms of the social, cultural, and economic inequalities Massey was theorising about. Although it is not possible with our dataset to evidence any possible long-term impact of individuals locating in particular places, it is certainly clear that intentions to locate are caught up with a desired or imagined future self (Giddens, 1991). We show later how such narratives of the self likely have implications for the kinds of power and influence different groups may have in the long term. Elsewhere (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018: 976), we have argued that student mobility for higher education is intrinsically political, with students' decisions embedded in narratives that are shaped by and recreate deeply uneven economic, cultural, and symbolic geographies. In this paper, we wish to explore how students' narratives and anxieties reflect these uneven geographies of power. In the context of student mobility, there are multiple ways in which student mobility involves both control and reflects and reinforces pre-existing power relations, which we are able to examine more closely here through a rich and multisited qualitative dataset.

3 | METHODS AND DATA

We draw here on data from a substantial qualitative dataset collected as part of a 3-year programme of research on the spatial imaginaries and higher education mobility intentions of young people (aged 17/18) across the United Kingdom. This wider dataset includes interviews with over 200 young people and 40 teachers across 20 different UK locations. The programme of work sought to bring a geographic perspective to debates around higher education and social mobility, and so the sampling of our fieldwork sites was crucial. Locations were purposively selected to represent diversity in geographic location, including inner-city locales, rural areas, coastal towns, and postindustrial locations—and stretching across all four corners of the United

Kingdom, with each reach of England represented and the three 'home' nations of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. The schools selected were themselves diverse, and included not only both private ($n = 5$) and state ($n = 15$) but also variety in social class and ethnic composition of the state schools. Our sample is socially and ethnically diverse, representing the diversity of young people in the schools (we selected based upon demographic information collected from questionnaires). Given the size and scope of this wider dataset, it would not be possible to do justice to the data in any analysis presented here, and so in what follows, we draw upon particular cases of students from five of the case study schools. These cases act as 'windows' into the phenomena in question, to observe and illustrate the deep-seated power imbalances. The full details on their social class and ethnic backgrounds are provided alongside the data presented.

Data collection involved an initial 'mapping exercise' (see Donnelly, Gamsu, & Whewall, 2019) for the purpose of selecting participants and producing a visual aid that could be used within the interview process (for participants to 'speak to'). The vast majority of young people were intending to apply to university and were on the cusp of making their application. In terms of the mapping exercise, participants were presented with a map of the United Kingdom and asked to colour-code it according to the following key: green, 'places where you would prefer to live for university'; red, 'places where you definitely do not see yourself living for university'; orange, 'places where you would not mind or are indifferent about living for university'; and blue, 'places you do not know or haven't really thought about.' (See Figures 1–3 for examples of completed maps.) The mapping exercise was administered to participants by their teachers during either tutorial time, lesson time, or break periods. Clear instructions were given to teachers about how to administer the map, in order to ensure they did not bias the data collection process. Importantly, the map was completely blank, with no place names and county/national borders, so that participants' geographical perceptions were not framed for them; rather, they are permitted to *show* the researcher their subjective geographies. In applying this tool, we recognise that some may regard a map as imposing a particular frame of reference that does not permit the elicitation of subjective geographies. However, it is important to point out that the map is used as part of the interview process in our research, and acts as an orientating and starting point for discussion about young people's imagined geographies. These methodological questions are more fully addressed elsewhere.

The project amassed over 1,000 highly creative and colourful maps from participants across the 20 locations. Participants varied in how they approached the exercise, some colouring in all spaces of the maps, others only partially completing it. Some took the exercise very seriously and produced richly detailed maps, creating descriptions at a granular level of detail about their spatial preferences, aversions, and geographic biographies of themselves and their families. The maps were used in the research process to select a sample of research participants to carry out semistructured interviews with them in order to more fully understand their spatial imaginaries and mobility intentions. These interviews were orientated around their map, which was used to allow participants to speak about *their* geographic preferences and aversions

from their own perspective. We began each interview with the simple questions: 'tell me about your map'. Follow-up questions attempted to hone in on particular aspects of their map, for example, asking them about particular areas they had shaded in certain colours. The semistructured interviews also covered a range of other topics, including family experiences of university, subject and university choices, and the school's involvement in their choices. However, it was giving participants the opportunity to 'speak to' their maps that produced the luminous and 'thick' narratives that are drawn on in this paper.

In what follows, we use these data to examine the unequal structures of power that are embedded within young people's accounts of *their* geographies and their immobility/mobility intentions. Giddens and Massey are used to help make sense of how young people frame where they see themselves 'fitting', in terms of their identity of the self, within the context of deep-seated spatial structures of power that pervade the UK context. The unique multisited dataset allows us to illustrate the boundaries and attachments to place that young people construct, which reflect historically rooted imbalances and inequality. We first examine these imbalances culturally, socially, and economically, before moving on to their racial and ethnic dimension.

4 | SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC GEOMETRIES OF POWER

Embedded within young people's spatial imaginaries are deeply unequal structures of social and economic power, (re)producing oppressed and dominant positions in space. The focus on geography allows us to situate analyses of educational mobilities within an understanding of spatial hierarchies between the towns and cities students live in and where these universities are located. The spatial flows around the United Kingdom at the point of university entry can be interpreted as one further manifestation of deep-seated geometries of power that pervade social life.

The geographic places in which young people identified with (and presented as desirable locations for university) were often interwoven with their identity of self and imagined future self. A striking example is that of the young people in the north of England. This identification with your immediate locality, sometimes presented as being 'trapped' in place, has often been perceived as something associated with lower social class groups, but we found cases cutting across the social class spectrum. As in the work of Forsberg (2019) and Finn (2017), normative assumptions around immobility and a lack of power during the transition from school to work or university hide more complex realities. We explore this by drawing on two of our northern students; Alex, who attended a suburban comprehensive in the north-east, and Dan, who attended an elite independent school in the north-west.

The qualitative map produced by Alex (Figure 1) indicates a strong preference for the north of England, with little differentiation between the diverse localities and regions of the north, but a very firm green line is drawn separating the north from the rest of England. Interestingly, Scotland and Wales are indicated as 'unknown' to Alex, although he is ambivalent about the midlands and Southern England. Narrating

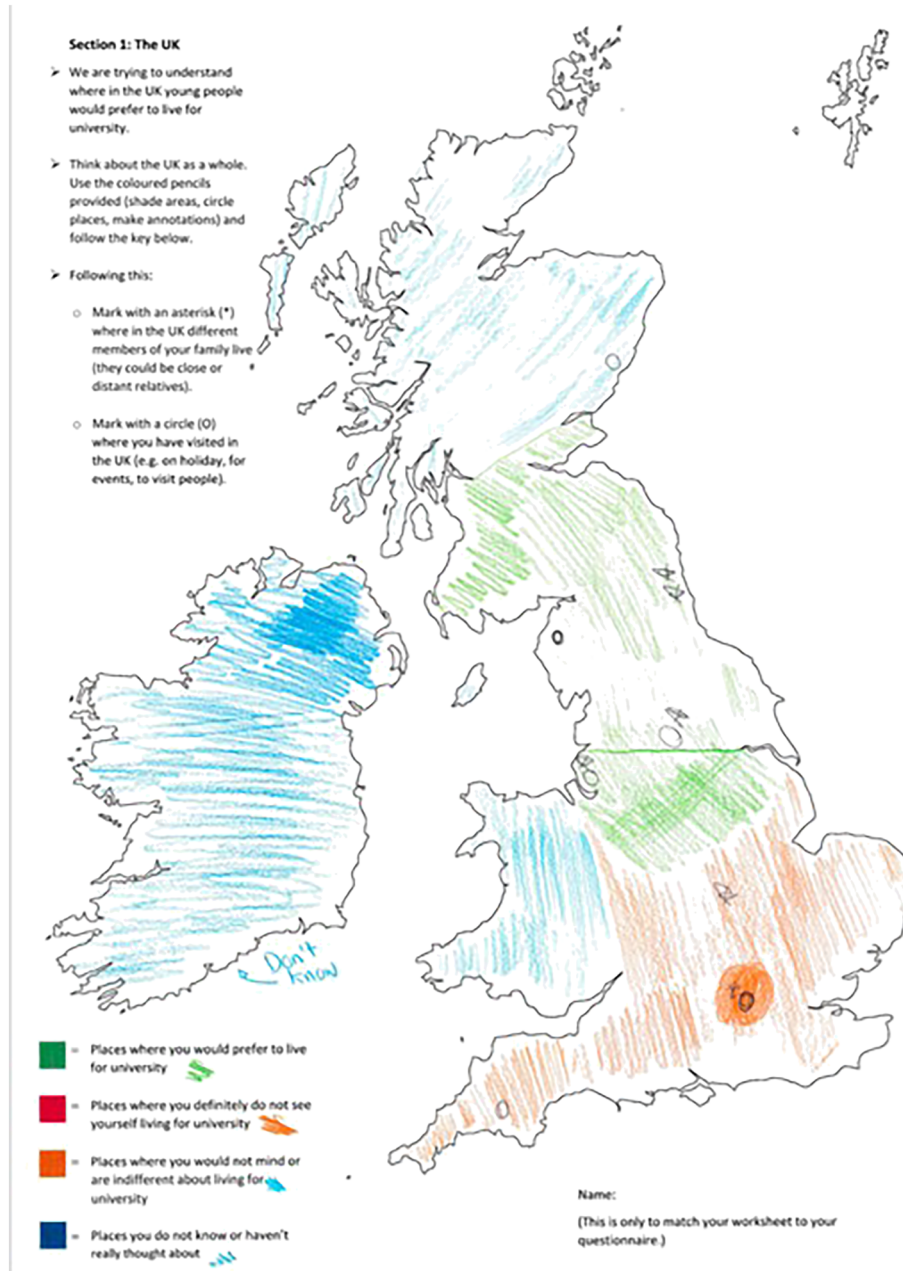


FIGURE 1 Alex's map (Kings Hill School)

his map during the interview, Alex imagined the 'north' as a distinctive geographic space:

What's made you feel like you don't want to go too far [for university]?

Um, I just like the north, and I'm from the north, and it's just much more, I dunno, it's the north. And I prefer it to the south; I mean I've been to London a few times [...]

What is it about the north that?

I dunno, just I'm from the north! Yeah, I just, I dunno, I've just always wanted to stay north.

Yeah. How would you describe, like the difference between the north and the south as you say?

Um, definitely the cost of living's so much cheaper up here. Well not, so much cheaper, but definitely cheaper. Um, they just sort of, there's a better sort of community spirit around it all. Um, you know everyone, and if you, and if you need people in your village. And if you went down to like, sort of south, London area, and the suburbs down there you might not, as many people. [...]

Coming back to the north south stuff again, and the community spirit a bit, could you tell me a bit more about it like, what do you mean by community spirit?

Um. So, like the miner's gala, I don't know if you've heard of it? Yeah.

The miner's gala every year, and people come together from all over, sort of the north of England. I mean most of it is usually for

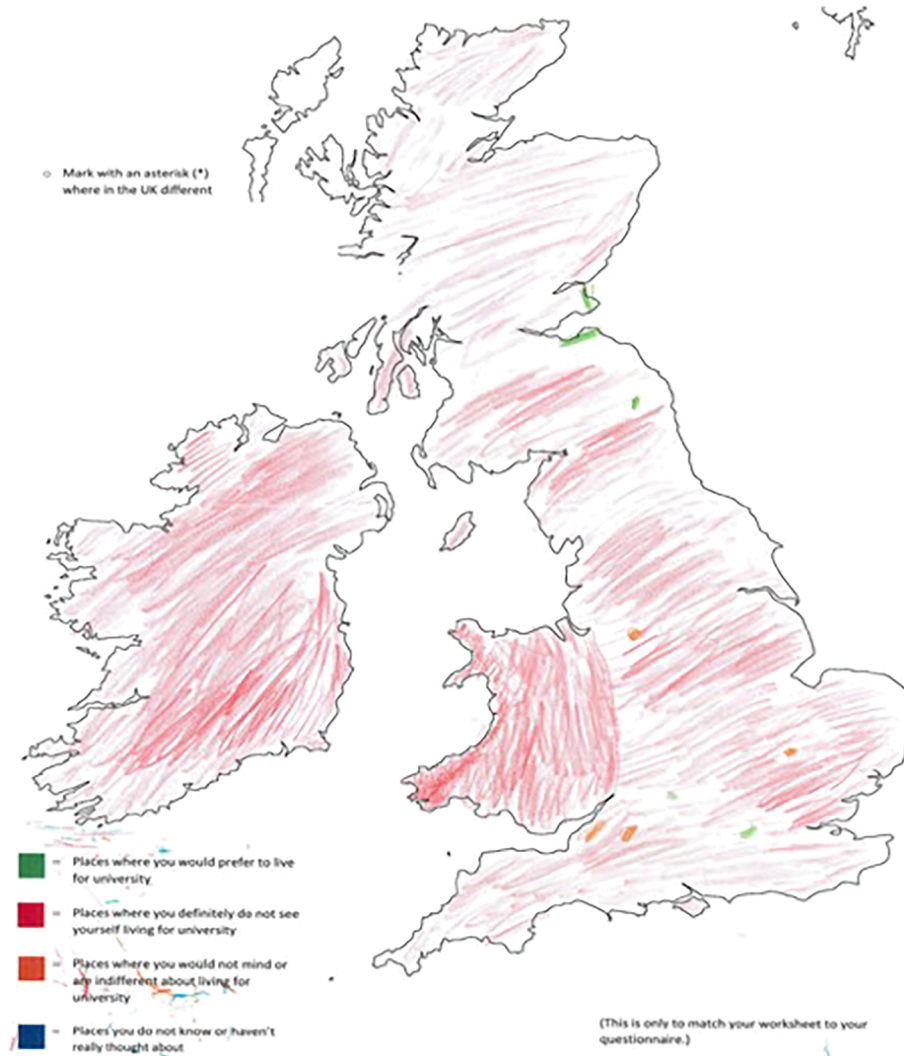


FIGURE 2 Samuel's map (St. Alexander's School)

the alcohol, but (laughs) it, it is true! There are people, I mean, I'm sort of part of, so I played, I played in the brass band for two years as part of it, and there's people that we've been going down with, that have been drinking at like nine o'clock in the morning. But you don't sort of have that in, in like, further down south, it's all, it's all the mining communities. And that's the aspect of it that we've got that they don't necessarily have. (Alex, *White British, NS-SEC 1, Kings Hill School [suburban comprehensive school, North-East of England]*)

Dan, in his account of the 'north', goes further contrasting it in stronger terms with a perceived 'south' of England:

... there is an awful lot of gentrification down south in London especially in the working class areas where as up north it is not as, it doesn't seem as serious an issue, I have seen it happening in a few areas like Salford Quays for example and [inaudible] but it, it doesn't seem the same level of like attitude or superiority up north, it is kind of warm, all in the

same boat together kind of thing. So you have people in Manchester, people walking in suits, and then some of them will stop and talk to homeless people, who are obviously addicted to certain drugs and buy them a sandwich or buy them a drink and it is that kind of I have got your back and I would say the community thing that I don't think you have in other areas

In the areas you talked about in terms of metropolitan areas?

In terms of yeah and in terms of the cities, I think Manchester ... cause cities don't have that community spirit where I think Manchester combines it quite well like ... "nah are you alright mate ... how are you doing pal" to people you have never met before whereas I think in other cities it would be a bit like, in London it would be you know "what are you doing speaking to me" It is a bit more apprehensive. (Dan, *white British, no family experience*)

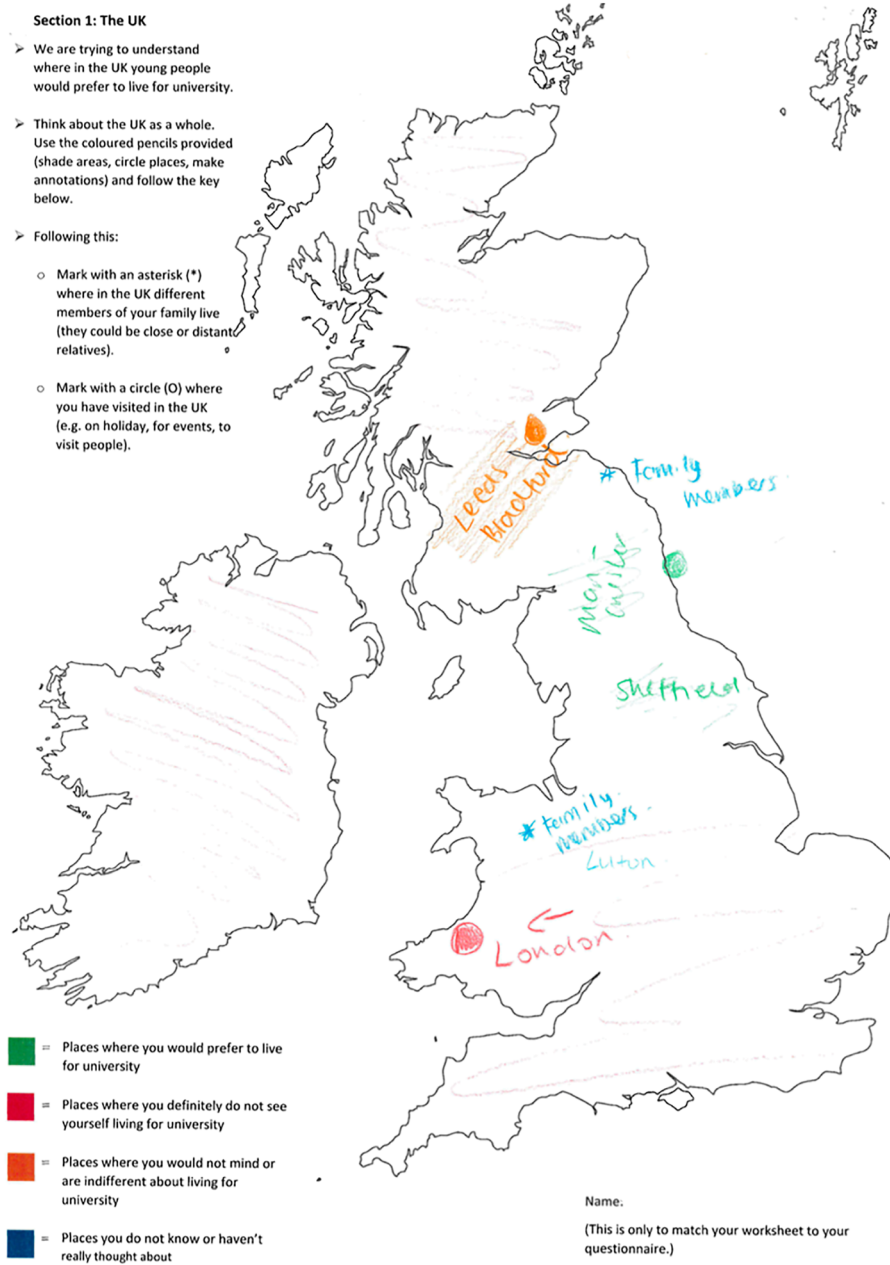


FIGURE 3 Dunya's map (Huddersley Academy)

of HE, *Brasenose School* (independent school, Greater Manchester))

The 'narrative of self' Dan and Alex construct here is intertwined with what they perceive to be 'northern' culture. They disassociate themselves from what is perceived (and constructed) as a cold, individualistic, and unfriendly 'south' and align their identity with the warm, communitarian and friendly 'north'. The biographies and narratives of the self these two young people exhibit, as conceptualised by Giddens (1991), are about being 'northern', which to them means being a person who is caring, has communitarian values, and is friendly to strangers. As Giddens (1991) contends, these are manufactured identities of the self created by the young people to provide them with a sense of existential security of who they are and what they are about; it provides a kind of

ontological security. This security and the broader sense of spatial belonging are not necessarily based on straight-forward, historical ties to a local working-class community—Dan is a bursary student at an elite fee-paying school in the north-west, Alex's parents are Liverpoolian, and one of them is a medical professional. In each case, there is not an immediate and straight-forward relationship to historical classed identities within a particular locality or region. This suggests partly that there are more complex forms of spatial belonging closer to the 'elective belonging' described by Savage et al. (2005), but although there may be some degree of distance between each of the two young men and the local and regional identities they refer to, in both cases, they associate geographical identities of northernness with forms of sociocultural and political life associated with solidarity. In that sense, they are perhaps closer to the 'resistant aspiration' that Bright (2011) describes amongst

young people in former coal-mining communities. Despite the deep structural change in politics, economics, and culture since the 1980s, there is still a lingering influence of earlier political and cultural forms, even if they may be idealised here. London and the South more broadly are presented as the geographical and cultural political counterpoint, and if Dan and Alex were to critically question this narrative they have constructed and open it up to a rigorous questioning (e.g., by experiencing places in the 'south' more and finding contradictory evidence), it could expose the fragility, complexity, and contradictions within such narratives. This is what Giddens (1991) describes in terms of the human need to maintain our ongoing narratives and biographies to protect against states of anxiety. Indeed, both Dan and Alex ultimately chose universities in the north of England, which could be to some extent linked to a need to maintain this narrative of self into the future. Of course, many other students may move away and maintain self-identity in other ways, through friendships, clubs, or societies, for example.

To understand these narratives of the self more fully, they must also be placed within the context of broader 'power geometries' and the unequal structuring of economic power in a wider sense. It is striking that both Alex and Dan only mention the 'south' (of England), and not any other part of England, or other 'home' country of the United Kingdom, when narrating the 'northern identity'. In a relational sense, the 'north' of England was defined here through its difference to the 'south'—being 'northern' is an expression of *not* being 'southern'. It is likely that this is suggestive of the ways in which an economically dominant south-east of England has historically dominated areas in the north, which have over a very long period been made peripheral to the institutions of cultural, economic, and social power that cluster in the south-east (Robson, 1986; Martin, 1989). As Massey articulately describes, the northern regions of England have always stood in a culturally and economically subordinated position to the dominant south. Even in past times when the factories of the north produced enormous economic wealth, their means of production left them judged to be in a culturally and socially inferior standing to those in the 'south'—epitomised by novels like *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens. In the present day, we see this at least partially manifest in Dan's account, where he refers to the 'superior' attitude of the 'south', implying an inherently political dimension to his sense of self. Of course, 'north-south' divides of this kind are overly simplistic and shield more complex spatial power relations. The key point here is that these young people's narratives of the self, which are so intimately tied up with what they perceive as 'northern' culture, are likely built upon historically embedded 'geometries of power'.

The multisited nature of our study allows us to grasp the simultaneity of social relations that Massey speaks about, evident in the diverse spatial vantage points from which people look upon geographic space. In other words, and most relevant to the discussion here, it provides a more complete picture not only of how those in dominated regions and place view space but also those located in the dominant spatial locations. We can gain a deeper understanding of the 'northern' identity that Dan and Alex speak about above by looking to their counterparts who occupy a dominant position within geographic and social space. For the students at the two private

English boys' schools in our study, students' choices were embedded in a very distinctive and consistent elite subset of prestigious universities. This institutional subset overlapped and was embedded within distinctive geographies of places of political, cultural, and political power. At St. Alexanders Boys' School, we can clearly observe these geometries of power in Samuel's map (Figure 2).

Durham is a nicer place than Swansea. And so because uh, those universities were in cities where I had deemed with my experience to be like nicer cities there, and because I knew people there, and I felt like the fact that also their courses were rated higher meant that I'd prefer – I'd prefer to go to those universities kind of outright.

What do you mean that Durham and Edinburgh are nicer places? Uh, just kinda I've kinda, I've seen them [...]. And I've kind of like, I've only spent a couple days, I've only spent one or two days visiting Cardiff and I just like, I just I liked, almost the feel of the cities. Like, Edinburgh felt a lot cleaner? I don't know if that's the right word to say it, and also it's a lot closer to London, I think, than like Swansea, so I kind of, kind of felt more at home there. I just prefer the feel of that.

In what ways is it a lot closer to London or?

Well because a lot of students from London, um go to Edinburgh, and it's almost like, been described as this like, middle class, um, city, very similar- in a very similar way to London. And so, I just felt like there were a lot of like, a lot of similar amenities sort of. Yeah. Oh so you mean a lot closer in terms of like-

Yeah, like- similar. Probably. It's obviously not closer in vicinity.

Yeah yeah. Similar in terms of the amenities that are there and – Yeah, and like uh, just kind of, almost the kind of look of it as well. It almost seemed a bit similar. [...] just cuz like Edinburgh's like where all the parliament buildings are in Scotland so like kind of similar in that way, if you understand what I'm saying? [...] and it just seems like a centre, to be honest.

Right. What do you mean a centre?

Well because it's like, where the parliament is and its, um, yeah that's basically what I meant yeah. (*Samuel, white British, NS-SEC 1, St. Alexanders Boys' School, [Independent school, London]*)

For Samuel and other young people at St. Alexanders Boys' School, the narrative of the self they crafted for their present and future selves was that which involved being connected to cultural, social, and political positions of power. They routinely discriminated between places where possible universities were located, discerning the way these places were connected (and disconnected) to different sets of social relations across space. When Samuel is talking about the 'feel' of the cities, Edinburgh being 'cleaner' and closer to London, he is talking indirectly about the connectedness to particular social relations that Edinburgh has over Cardiff and Swansea. He is talking here about their closeness *not* in a proximal distance sense, but in terms of them being close in their similar connectedness to particular social relations. It is these social relations Samuel desires and sees as reflective of his own sense of self. Progressing to university was a moment when it was necessary to maintain his present and future self and

seek out these social relations that come to cluster in particular places.

The link made here by Samuel between Edinburgh as a political centre and being able to imagine himself in those environs underlines explicitly Massey's (1993) emphasis that mobility always involves positioning oneself or being positioned in relation to power. The institutions and locations that Samuel names are situated within a particular subset of elite locales with historic associations with an English-British ruling elite. By elite, we refer here to the London-centric (but not completely London-dominated) class fractions that hold dominant positions of power across different cultural, economic, and political fields (Cunningham and Savage, 2015). Edinburgh's location as the seat of Scottish government with a large private school system and a substantial, historic financial sector has always played a significant role in the formation of elites both within Scotland and across the United Kingdom as a whole (Anderson, 2013, p. 450). Elsewhere in interviews at St. Alexanders, several students from the school mentioned having visited Edinburgh for the fringe festival, a cultural event that tends to draw a largely white middle-class audience (Friedman, 2011). Durham's college system comes closest to replicating the architecture, traditions, and culture of the Oxbridge college that has been and remains central to the formation of the British ruling class (Joyce, 2013). The comfort and feeling of being 'more at home' in Edinburgh compared with Swansea emphasises how the narratives of ease are tied into a specific geography of elite locales, which are centres for a particular form of elite and middle-class culture. Whilst complex, the strength of middle-class culture, a substantial banking sector, and a very large private school sector pull Edinburgh far closer to the Anglo-British elite, with its heartland in the south-east of England (Nairn, 2011: 243), than most provincial or other Home Nation cities. It also indicates the distinctions between the Scottish and Welsh capitals, which may share the political and administrative apparatus and institutions of devolution but have very different relations to Anglo-British elites. These elite connotations are in direct contrast to places such as Swansea or Cardiff, postindustrial cities with no historical or contemporary ties to the English-British elite. We use Anglo-British or English-British here drawing on Nairn's (2011) description of the predominantly English nature of the British ruling class/elite. Despite the principal concentration of the British ruling class in the south-east of England both now and historically (Cunningham and Savage, 2015), this English predominance is tempered by the geographical distribution of elite ties through Oxbridge and the boarding school system. Educational mobilities have always worked to tie certain class fractions from across the Home Nations and the English regions into this south-eastern English cultural, economic, and political nexus of elite power.

Amongst the students that we interviewed at St. Alexanders Boys' School, considering attending an elite university and entering elite geographic spaces (as well as explicitly and implicitly rejecting dominated geographic spaces) was discussed in a tone of naturalised ease and comfort. It is also worth considering that whilst this discourse of ease in relation to moving through elite spaces expresses a position of dominance and power, it also underlines the essential insularity and highly selective nature of the geographical reach of students in the most elite British schools (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Wakeling &

Savage, 2015). Their attitude was also present in discussions of international university choice, where (and as found by Waters and Brooks (2010)) students' discourse of how they were choosing universities was not strategic, or the object of intense effort, but was instead described as a simple range of expected outcomes:

I'm still kind of half and half between the UK and US universities. and one of my big factors there like between applying for like Harvard and Stanford, is Stanford has a big open campus while Harvard is very much locked into a town and to a city so for me I would, I'm definite, I'm like hardly even thinking of applying to Harvard even because of that reason actually.

Yeah, yeah. And what made you start thinking about US universities?

Um, it's kind of - my family is originally from the US so it's kind of like, the return to that kind of thing and also the lifestyle as well so What is it about lifestyle in the US

Kind of like the sunny beach lifestyle I guess

The West Coast

Yeah, exactly.

And, and I guess yeah your, your parents were Berkley and UCLA Mm[...]

and your sister's at Stanford

Yes

(Luca, mixed race, NS-SEC 1, St. Alexanders Boys' School.

[Independent school, London])

Luca's ease and his discourse around the 'choosing' between Stanford and Harvard underline how his own background is deeply embedded in the global circuits of elite higher education. Sharply contrasting this, a student from our Liverpool state school, who wished to study film, had researched the costs of studying in the United States at UCLA in California or Toronto in California:

I had a look at a few scholarships but getting a scholarship seems a lot harder than getting the £50,000 because scholarship there is a lot less scholarships going for the film than there would be for a sports scholarship. So there is around on average I think it's 100 kids in total get a scholarship for film study in the whole of the US, not just UCLA, so it seemed a lot less likely. And I thought what way can I get around this to get money for the 50,000 to pay or do I earn 10,000 a year and pay yearly, which again 10,000 dollars a year is still expensive but it's doable. It would just be pulling at strings of where would I get the money from what and even if I did get over there it would be getting a job to earn money and make a living while I'm at the uni, and for jobs in America you need experience which is why I've started working in Wetherspoons for example. [...] even though [it has] the status of dream aspirations it is my dream aspirations but it's very hard to get to compared to the UK. (Emphasis added. Daniel,

white British, no family experience of HE, Bootlefield School [Our emphasis. comprehensive school, Liverpool])

The contrast in tone here is marked with these 'dream aspirations' not a realistic prospect. This is reinforced by his inaccurate estimation of the price of the UCLA course, which costs \$31,949 for non-Californian residents. The detail of costs and scholarships that is taken for granted, and absent, element in Luca's discussion of studying at an elite American university, weighs heavily in Daniel's discussion, underlining the impossibility of such a path. Instead, he described a more realistic course as attending Exeter to study film with Liverpool John Moores or Edge Hill as his back up. In the event, none of these options were possible, and he began an engineering course at a college in Liverpool. The contingent, ad hoc nature of his choices and preferences were present in his interview and are reinforced by the contrast with his final university 'choice'. The geographical setting for his decision-making further underlines how students' choices are embedded in local and regional geographies.

'Power geometries' are clear to see here, with these examples providing a window into the system of social relations that maintain uneven spatial structures and a glimpse into who really is in control of mobility (Massey, 1994). The anticipated national and international mobility of Samuel and Luca fits into a broader deep-seated geography of uneven development and their repetition of historic sociospatial trajectories of the elite. Mobility here is entirely prescribed by the power of accumulated wealth and cultural capital embedded in family backgrounds, the schools these students attend, and the broader geographical context in which they live.

5 | ETHNIC GEOMETRIES OF POWER

Educational research has shown how ethnicity, and the 'whiteness' of educational and geographic spaces in particular, is significant in structuring the experiences and encounters of minority ethnic groups (Bhopal, 2018; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Dumangane, 2016; Warikoo & De Novais, 2015). Warikoo and de Novais (2015) found that white students who previously lived in white segregated neighbourhoods were likely to be influenced by the 'colour-blind frame' of their lives before university and have a lack of awareness of the ways in which white students dominate campus life. Dumangane (2016) examined the experiences of black men attending elite British universities and showed how feelings of acceptance and experiences of racist stereotypes were linked to the geographies of university campuses and the cities within which they were situated. Building on this research, we examine here what are referred to as ethnic 'geometries of power', in terms of the processes by which the whiteness of places restricts mobility for students of colour compared with the notable absence of race in the accounts of white young people. Unequal ethnic power relations that pervade society and space manifest themselves in the qualitatively distinctive ways in which different ethnic group frame the geography of their university choices. Race and ethnicity impact on the ways in which young people narrate their geographies of the United

Kingdom, and the (im)possibilities of movement across places that vary in their (dis)connectedness to relations that exist across space.

It was not uncommon within the narratives of our participants from lower social class groups to geographically confine and frame their mobility intentions in terms of *where* they knew people. This likely reflects the greater risk associated with university entry for lower social class groups, with these connections providing a sense of safety and security. In one sense, the prospect of leaving school and transitioning to university represents a potential threat to an individual's ongoing narrative and sense of self (Giddens, 1991). Choices about *where* to study are contingent upon the story of the self, what we tell ourselves about who we are, what is important to us, where we are going, and the place where we need to be to enable this. There is a threat to the self because certain locations could disrupt this ontological security; this ongoing story we craft about ourselves. Looking at our data, the ways in which familial connections and relationships framed *where*, geographically, young people imagined studying was especially acute for British Pakistani and British Bangladeshi students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. We examine this issue more closely here in relation two of our schools: Huddersley Academy (West Yorkshire) and Tower Chapel School (London).

One of the primary reasons for selecting our West Yorkshire school (Huddersley Academy) was that our analysis of HESA¹ data from 2012 entrants showed the vast majority of students from this school opted to attend the *same* local university. This despite there being a number of universities within commuting distance, with a mixture of pre-1992 and post-1992 provision, represents a wide realistic set of choices for students with different grades. Looking at the ultimate destinations of those we spoke to, it was clear that nobody left the area at the end of sixth form, with many being forced to repeat their A-level or attend local colleges (due to low exam achievement), and only two out of the 10 students we spoke to progressing to university—again, the same local institution. However, when we spoke to our participants during their first year of sixth form, some did mention the idea of moving away for university, as an imagined possible future option. But in their list of possible places, there was more often than not a familial association to the framing of their conceivable geographic destinations, as evident in Dunya's map (Figure 3).

In speaking to her map, Dunya talks about the fear of moving too far away but how Manchester (around an hour travel distance from home) is a real possibility:

Yeah, it's scary. Especially in London when it's so big. Mmmm.

Loads of different people. That's why I'd like to stay like Manchester area 'cus its more comfortable.

More comfortable?

Like, I do know... I have some family members there so I've...I know people from there.

Why's that comfortable then...?

¹The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is the organisation responsible for collating information from higher education institutions across the United Kingdom, and we draw on data obtained relating to the census of the student population.

'Cus I know, like... I'm not good at, like, making friends and stuff like that. Well I'm good at making friends but I'd be like really awkward at first.

Yeah.

Yeah. So I don't like socialising much.

Yeah.

Especially if I'm going to a new place and I don't know anyone there.

Yeah.

So, like, if you know someone from there, they can, like, urm, what's the word? Like, show you to, like, to they're friends and stuff like that. You get involved with other people.

Yeah. Yeah, and yeah. Urm, so you already know some people in Manchester?

Yeah my family is there. My aunt, my mums' sisters.

Right. So, urm, your brother goes to uni. (*Dunya, Asian British - Pakistani, NS-SEC 4, Huddersley Academy School [comprehensive school, Yorkshire]*)

Similarly, Tahir frames his thinking of possible geographic destinations according to places where he knows people.

Yeah. And do you just want to talk through, like, your map and how you decided and came to...like, your thought processes when you were filling it in?

Yeah, basically the green which is places where I prefer to live for university was my hometown, London, and Scotland. I felt like those were the closest and I dunno safest places for uni. Like, 'cus I've been to London few time 'cus I've got family over there and Scotland as well. So I know I've got... I will always have like... I don't have to branch out as much. I'll just have my family there to, like, support me. (*Tahir, Asian British - Pakistani, NS-SEC 3, Huddersley Academy School [comprehensive school, Yorkshire]*)

Both Tahir and Dunya ultimately did not progress to university at all and were forced to resit their A-levels. However, in describing their maps and *where*, geographically, they imagined themselves moving for university, their narratives of possible places are entirely couched in those where they have family connections. For Tahir and Dunya, these places were 'safe' spaces for university study because of these connections. Elsewhere, the students talked about close relationship with family members and their wider family network. In a Giddens sense, these relationships were spoken about as a key part of their sense of self, who they were, and what was valuable to them. Their framing of university choices around such familial connections can therefore be interpreted as maintaining this sense of self, ensuring that their ontological security is not disturbed by a move away from important ties and relationships. For the white privileged students mentioned above, familial networks were not mentioned at all in their framing of possible places. For them, their sense of self may entail quite the opposite; it may be about moving to new places, seeking out new connections, and not being grounded in any one place.

The differences evident in these narratives connect with what has been found elsewhere in relation to the 'risks' associated with university for different social class groups (Reay et al., 2001). They must also be seen in light of other research showing that South Asian (Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani) young people (especially girls) are more likely to stay living at home when studying at university than their white peers (Khambhaita & Bhopal, 2015). The accounts from our participants must also be taken within the context of the broader uneven geographies of race and ethnicity, which are reproduced through the higher education choices of different ethnic groups (Gamsu et al., 2018). For other ethnic minority participants, especially Muslim girls, there was sometimes an expressed desire to locate in a geographic place where they did not feel 'out of place'. One of our London state schools, Tower Chapel School, is located in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood of London. In talking about place and possible geographic locations of study, Bipasha is highly conscious of her own ethnic identity, in a way that our white British participants were not:

You were saying before about being close to London and feeling sort of secure and safe

Yeah

What do you mean by -?

um, compared to for example I went North [of] London once and how I get looked at or how people talk to me or think like, I'm very different and I'm not someone they see every day.

Yeah

But in London it's not like that for example where I live, [area in London], and outside [area in London] people don't look at you that way it's like, it's a bit normal to see

Mmm

yeah even, even white people, how they treat us in the hospital and everywhere, in London it's different to people in that part, in, elsewhere.

What do you mean it's different, can you say how you think it's different?

It's just that they talk to you as if they know you, they understand you it's like, you're similar to them but if you go elsewhere it's like, I find it difficult to speak to you, I'm not sure if I can communicate with you that well

Yeah. It just people from around this area are used to us, and we're used to them so it's like, we're more closer we understand each other

Bipasha, Asian British - Bangladeshi, no family experience of HE, Tower Chapel School (comprehensive school, London)

Bipasha talks of white people where she lives 'knowing' her and not 'othering' her through everyday interactions (such as trips to hospital), in a way that she perceives white people in other geographic locations would. The fact that Bipasha alludes to her ethnic identity in the context of discussing *where*, geographically, it might be (im)possible to move for university, is likely a manifestation of racialised and ethnic geometries of power. As discussed earlier, university choice can be understood here as a mix of choosing the 'right' course/institution and also migrating to a place with the 'right' kind of connections and

ties to wider space (Massey, 1994). For Bipasha, it is a place where there perhaps exists ties and connections to a mix of different ethnic identities, which ensure she does not feel out of place and is able to maintain her identity and sense of self (Giddens, 1991). The narratives of our white participants make no mention of their ethnic identity or how this might be perceived by others when describing possible locations for university study. This illustrates how the white ethnic group, especially white participants from more privileged backgrounds, were the group really in control of mobility over geographic space. Even in ethnically diverse localities, unequal power relations across different ethnic groups mean that white groups have agency in a way that ethnic minorities do not, reflective of the forms of 'white privilege' evidenced elsewhere. These examples underline the fact that different ethnic groups do not experience (im)mobility or perceive the range of (im)possible geographic destinations open to them, in quite the same way.

6 | CONCLUSION

We have explored here how social, economic, and ethnic imbalances evident across space manifest themselves in young people's imagined geographies and their consequent mobility intentions. The analysis contributes to the established body of work on the nature of place, belonging and attachment, and the burgeoning literature on geographies of education, especially student mobility research. Our work sought to bring an explicitly geographic perspective to understanding student mobility, examining how the internal geography of the United Kingdom is imagined by youth, and going beyond their immediate locales to capture the complete spatial structure wherein they are situated and embedded. To do this, the mapping method proved a useful means of accessing how young people from diverse localities understood and perceived; it elicited *their* geographies of the United Kingdom. We can see from the data presented here that young people's geographies of the United Kingdom vary according to *where* they are speaking from, in terms of their geographic location, social class, and ethnicity.

Giddens and Massey provided a theoretical lens to interpret how mobility intentions are embedded within a 'narrative of self' that must be understood within a broader set of power relations. Mobility can be reflective of different sets of historical and deeply embedded unequal power structures to do with geography, race, and class. In one sense, they are reflective of historically unequal economic geographies of power, with postindustrial areas of the north peripheral to the dominance of London and south-east. This dominance was felt and noticeable within the narratives of a number of our participants in northern localities. For such participants, a perceived 'northern' culture, defined in opposition to the 'south', was an important part of their identity and motive for staying rooted in the region. Their narratives make even more sense when seen relationally against the narratives of the highly privileged and affluent young people we spoke to in a fee-paying London school. These young people exercised the greatest degree of spatial agency in narrating their mobility intentions and distinguished between not only types of university but also geographic places in terms of their stocks of cultural and social capital. Their university choices overlapped with inherently place-based

choices. In considering where to study, they were only constrained in terms of locating themselves in places (and positions) of economic, political, and cultural power/dominance. For example, the Edinburgh Festival was a cultural manifestation symbolic of the kind of narratives of the self these young people identified with. A fuller understanding of how historically uneven power relations across space shapes contemporary youth is evident here in examining the accounts of participants from dominated regions of the north with dominant areas of the south. Our study underlines the importance of carrying out multisited research across diverse geographic and social locations in order to capture, as advocated by Massey, the simultaneity of power relations evident across space.

Mobility intentions for those from lower social class backgrounds were also often framed in relation to places where they knew people, which was especially the case for participants from minority ethnic groups. We saw from the example provided here that in narrating their spatial imaginaries and conceivable choices, the places mentioned were all those where they had connections. To make sense of this further, spatial imaginaries of minority ethnic youth and their mobility intentions must also be seen as reflective of unequal structures of race manifest within contemporary Britain. It was also the case that white participants in the study exhibited no spatial constraints on the basis of their ethnicity, but the British Asian students we spoke to often alluded to issues of race and the racial structuring of space. As evidenced elsewhere (Ball et al., 2002), participants from ethnic minority backgrounds sometimes framed their geographies of the United Kingdom in terms of the ethnic make-up of localities and fear of being 'othered' by people in localities that were not ethnically diverse. These findings underline the importance of directly addressing ethnicity in young people's perceptions of place and mobility intentions, especially in contemporary climate of rising far right politics and the increasing marginalisation of minorities. Although it was not possible in the space available here, a fuller analysis of the wider dataset from this perspective is needed.

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