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Gender and social class in study choice: narratives of youth transitions in Spain

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ABSTRACT

Social inequality regarding gender and social class is a topic of long-term interest in social research. However, the intersections between the two variables in the reproduction of inequalities in the field of education require further investigation. The longitudinal research project 'Social Inequality in Higher Education' aims to shed light on these processes in Spain. In this article, we focus on the intersection of social class and gender in the transition from school-to-university, specifically on study choice. We show several gender differences, e.g. a male tendency to avoid displaying insecurity that may hamper their access to support, in particular in the intersection with lower social class. Thanks to our mixed-methods approach, combining focus groups and personal interviews from a longitudinal perspective, we are able to compare these methods regarding the gender and class differences they produce.

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Introduction

'Study choice' is a crucial element in the reproduction of social inequality and represents an incision that marks young people's future itineraries in their transition to adulthood (Casal et al. 2006). Study choice can be understood as (1) The decision to go to university or not, (2) the selection of a degree course, and (3) the selection of an institution. Research on study choice tends to consider different fractions of the population according to the aspect in question. The decision to go to university or not has been described as only affecting some of the young population, as young people from the lower[1] classes have few possibilities to enter Higher Education (HE) and those from the upper classes

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take HE for granted (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007 [1985]; Cooper 2013; Reay 2012). The research focus is then on social groups that are underrepresented in HE, e.g. 'Students of Colour' and of low-income families (Welton and Martinez 2014). As female students have come to outstrip young men as regards access to university, gender is not usually a topic when considering access to HE in general, but remains central in research on gender-specific degree-course selection (Connell 2009). Examples are females' aversion to mathematics, science, and technology (MST) degrees (Yazilitas et al. 2013), but also gender-atypical occupations in general (Alm 2015) or male students in female-dominated institutions (Isacco and Morse 2015). Institutional choice is of interest in highly-segregated HE fields, e.g. in the UK, where elite universities exist next to 'post-1992' universities (Davey 2009; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010). Similarly, studies considering intersections of different social divisions in education usually focus on a concrete combination of social divisions in their participants' profiles, e.g. working-class Latinos in the US (Ovink 2014), Chinese middle-class women in Canada (Soong, Stahl, and Shan 2017) or white working-class boys in London (Stahl 2016). Research considering different aspects of study choice and participants from diverse profiles at once is rare. Such separation may lead to deeper insights by concentrating resources, but risks ascribing different meanings to similar actions, as in the example suggested by Ladson-Billings (2007) where arriving at school just-in-time was interpreted as having little interest in education when shown by black working-class parents.

In this article, we consider study choice in the sense of access to HE and degree-course selection and present findings of a study that followed young people from different backgrounds through their transition from school to HE. In Catalonia, only few degree courses are offered by different universities in the same geographic area, so institutional choice is less interesting in this context and not considered in this article. In this paper, we focus on the intersections of gender and social class in study choices.

The context

Since Bourdieu and Passeron (2007) first published their study on French university students in the 1960s, social class-specific inequality has frequently been studied and theorized (Reay 2013; Webb et al. 2017). Inequalities in access to and success in HE do, however, persist even after the so-called 'massification' of HE (Trow 2000). The additional HE graduates belong mainly to the middle classes (Rahona Lopez 2009) and institutional diversification leaves non-traditional students in less prestigious institutions (Reay et al. 2001). Spanish HE participation is high in comparison to the EU mean: In 2015, 41% of 25–34 year olds possessed HE titles, in contrast to the EU-15 mean of 38.4% (Eurostat 2016). The Spanish labour market is characterized by high general unemployment (22.1% in 2015 [Eurostat 2017]), extremely high youth unemployment (younger than 25 years: 48.3% in 2015 [Eurostat 2017]) and the latest labour market reforms foster job insecurity and privatization (Cabasés Piqué, Pardell Veà, and Strecker 2016). Though unemployment is highest for young women with little education, the figures for young people under 25 with HE are with 32.14% also alarmingly high (INE 2017).

In Catalonia, the transition from school to university includes a University Entrance Exam (PAU), consisting of a general and a specific part. The Catalan school system offers three High School branches: Arts; Sciences and Technology; and Humanities and Social Sciences. In each branch, pupils study different subjects that enter into the specific part of the PAU. Each year, the *numerus clausus* represents the score of the last student who obtained a place on degree course x, at university y. University fees increased significantly in the last years (Sacristán and França 2013) so Spain is now among the eight European HE systems with the highest fees after the UK (Eurydice 2017); graduate wages are, however, low (Koskinen 2007).

Study choice and intersectionality

'Choice' evokes ideas of agency, freewill and equal opportunities, but can be understood, in line with Bourdieu, as a social practice individuals perform within the boundaries of their *habitus*. As the *habitus* is influenced by the field and the different capitals of the individual, it embraces the interaction of structural constraints and agency in decision-making processes (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Davey 2009). Decisions may appear strategic from the outside, but are the result of unconscious logics of practice (Davey 2009) and legitimated retrospectively in order to create a coherent life story (Pais 2007). Rather than focusing on final decisions, this study is therefore concerned with study-choice narratives.

Bourdieu and Passeron (2007) describe how the share of female students rose since the turn of the century from virtually 0 to almost 50% in the 1960s, but do not differentiate by social class of origin, disregarding possible intersections. Though Bourdieu (2000) considers in his later publication *Masculine Domination* how female (auto-)submission affects all spheres of life, intersections remain marginal. Connell (2007) criticizes Bourdieu's work for ignoring previous feminist research. Bathmaker (2015, 68f.) reviews feminist readings of Bourdieu with a focus on the notion of 'field', arguing that the consideration of social conditions may 'counteract an overemphasis of "politics of the performative"', so 'a positive engagement between Bourdieu and feminist theory is mutually profitable' and 'provide[s] a means of exploring' the subjects' abilities to 'exert greater or lesser degrees of agency and autonomy in different fields of action'. Webb et al. (2017, 6) argue that current widening-participation research suffers a Bourdieusian 'hangover', limiting its ability to theorize and overcome inequalities due to applying Bourdieu's concepts either in a light way or through a pick&mix-approach that neglects 'the interconnections and interdependencies between concepts in a field of inter-subjective practices' (10). Apart from a deepening of the original concepts, these authors propose that theories of intersectionality, among others, can help to overcome the limitations of Bourdieu's concepts:

> considering intersectionality as both a social theory of knowledge and an approach to analysis that provides an inductive account of routine practices and struggles and reveals the complexities, provisionality and becomingness of social positioning, subjectivities and change might be a fruitful way to explore how inequalities have been reproduced (or not) in contexts where social class groupings are not considered the sole locale for struggles for power and resources. (Webb et al. 2017, 17)

In conclusion, Bourdieu gave more importance to gender in the course of his career and that considered in his analyses the influences of social structures and representations on individual choices, although less systematically than the multi-layered approach by Winker and Degele (2009). In spite of their limitations, Bourdieu's concepts may be useful for feminist research and approaches like intersectionality may adequately overcome shortcomings in the consideration of social divisions other than social class and improve the comprehension of reproduction mechanisms. This article expects to contribute to this line of thought.

Bourdieu and Passeron (2007, 84) describe study choice as influenced by 'objective chances' of succeeding in obtaining a certain occupation. Working-class and female students were considered to face lower objective chances to achieve the professional future HE should prepare for and therefore exempt from the 'game of free intelligence' that disconnected university studies from their professional future. In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu argues that 'objective dependence' (2000, 53) reproduces female submission. Despite new 'gendered opportunities' in a context of gender-equality discourses, social change towards a 'public gender regime', a 'feminization' of school and work cultures and the increased female participation in the labour market (Budgeon 2014), gender differences persist and the objective chances of women remain worse than those of their male peers, favouring their 'objective dependence' especially in times of economic crisis (Álvarez 2015; Bourdieu 2000; Connell 2009). Gender segregation and the devaluation of female work persist (Alm 2015) and while several well-paid and highly recognized male-dominated professions do not require university studies (Ovink 2014), girls have to either pick – and succeed – in male-dominated professions or invest into HE to gain independence. In Spain, much of the masculinized non-graduate labour market eroded with the bursting of the real estate bubble, but a certain recovery in this field and additional alternatives in other masculinized sectors, like informatics, suggest that the situation has stabilized. The diverse public cutbacks in the wake of the economic crisis did furthermore effect especially feminized labour, e.g. in the fields of caring and culture, while government intervention to lower unemployment focused on the highly masculinized construction sector.

In a male-dominated world, female traits are devalued (Bourdieu 2000) and a 'gender binary' is constructed to legitimate the hierarchical order of masculinities and femininities (Budgeon 2014). In HE, an 'ideology of talent' serves to justify such a hierarchy as 'male' effortlessness is ennobled, while 'female' eagerness and compliance are devalued. Connell (2005, 71) defines 'masculinity' as 'simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture.' Connell differentiates Hegemony, Subordination, Complicity and Marginalization. Highly relational, these types depict a societies' dispositions in which 'hegemonic masculinity' is 'the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Connell 2005, 77). Schippers (2007) elaborates on this approach, identifying 'manly' and 'womanly' traits, distinguishing between hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic femininity, male hegemonic femininity and pariah femininities, which are all constructed in local contexts and in intersection with other social divisions. According to Budgeon (2014), hegemonic femininity is now characterized by a balance of traditionally feminine –

emotionality, caring – and traditionally masculine – independence, autonomy – traits and the new 'pariah femininities' lack this hybridity. As existing inequalities are ascribed to individuals' interests, decisions and efforts, hybrid femininities do not question hegemonic masculinity. The feminization of the school and work culture requires men to show traditionally female traits – communication skills, emotionality – so social change also favours the development of hybrid masculinities, which may turn – theoretically – hegemonic depending on the local context. Ovink (2014, 267) comments, however, that 'focusing on school raises questions about Latinos' masculinity', among young working-class Latinos and Latinas living in the US. So in the intersection with working-class, hybrid masculinities may continue marginalized, influencing e.g. academic performance negatively. This may also explain why her male participants showed random decision-making in their accounts, while the female participants rather resembled the 'strategic&ambitious'-type developed in a study about middle-class study choice by Davey (2009).

A central figure in the transmission of support and pressure is the mother and the 'emotional resources passed on from mother to child through processes of parental involvement' (Reay 2000, 569; Reay 2015). While all mothers 'suffer' to best support their children (O'Brien 2008), working-class mothers who put educational success above all else jeopardize their own and their children's well-being without necessarily gaining educational success (Reay 2000). In Ovink's study (2014) this pressure is centred on Latinas, who are expected to be academically successful and support their families of origin economically, while Latinos are less expected to show economic support and academic success. In a study with Chinese women in Canada, structural restraints in the recognition of their university degrees favoured their changing from engineering and medical careers to pathways 'typically associated with women and care work' (Soong, Stahl, and Shan 2017, 8) and some decided to work part-time, focusing on their children and household management while their husbands pursued their careers. Women's well-being is, hence, repeatedly subordinated to educational success and family matters, first regarding their own education and the demands of their family of origin and later on their own families.

The study

The longitudinal research project 'Social Inequality in Higher Education' started its first wave of data collection in spring 2011 with 12 focus groups in public, semi-public and private High Schools in the city of Lleida (Spain) and a rural town in the homonymous province. Lleida, with a population of 138,542 inhabitants in 2015 (INE 2016), is a Catalan University city that receives approximately 8,500 students on the 29-degree courses on offer at the University of Lleida (2016). With less than 2,500 inhabitants (INE 2016), the rural town is located a considerable distance from any university, so young people have to move out of their parents' home to enter HE, unless they choose distance learning.

The focus-group participants were asked to outline their future plans, to give recommendations to peers regarding how to choose whether and what to study and how they imagined University. The main socio-economic data were assessed using a questionnaire in which participants were encouraged to disclose their contact data for a follow-up. Social classes were assessed through parent positioning (Rubin et al. 2014) asking for the parents' highest educational qualifications (cultural capital) and their occupation

(economic capital). As it is common sense that doctors or lawyers have been through HE, we found that it was easier for participants from upper classes to complete the question-naire and developed a revised version for the follow-up that required the category of occu-pation, differentiating between public servants, entrepreneurs, freelancers and employees. This led to other limitations, but improved the likelihood of all participants marking an answer, enabling us to 'map' their social positioning, though simplified and imprecise.

In autumn 2011, potential follow-up participants were contacted and a first wave of interviews was conducted. Due to an underrepresentation of students from families with little economic and cultural capital and with migration backgrounds in the resulting interview sample, an additional socio-economic survey was used in spring 2012 to identify students with these profiles in first-year classes at the UdL and the selected students were included in the sample. In the 2011/2012 academic year, 21 interviews were conducted, 14 with participants from the focus-groups sample and seven with additional participants. These interviews focused on study choice and experiences once at university.

The documentary method by Bohnsack (2010) proved suitable for our analysis as the reconstruction of 'implicit patterns of meaning' (109) gives access to the *habitus* (106) and the method was successfully applied to focus groups (Bohnsack 2010) and interviews (Nohl 2009). Although the documentary method is 'multidimensional' (Bohnsack 2010, 112), social divisions and their intersections are considered only in the last step. Rather than constructing the most important divisions from the participants' narratives, these are chosen by the researcher, risking their imposition (Winker and Degele 2009). Intersec-tional analysis offers interesting alternatives to approaches that simply sum disadvantages (Bowleg 2008; Gordon 2016). A pure intersectional analysis is, however, often reduced to narrow interpretations or based on essentialist assumptions (Gordon 2016) and remains highly ambiguous, vague and open-ended (Davis 2008). We designed an approach that integrates steps of the intersectional analysis by Winker and Degele (2009) (shaded parts in Table 1) within the documentary method according to Bohnsack (2010).

The first two steps are the 'formulating interpretation', which summarizes 'what has been said, depicted or discussed' in the words of the researchers, and the 'reflecting interpretation', which focuses on the framework in which 'the topic is dealt with' (Bohn-sack 2010, 110). While the identification of references to identity constructions, social rep-resentations and social structures was integrated into the formulating interpretation, the identification of the most relevant identity constructions and the intersections of central categories on all three levels form part of the reflecting interpretation. The search for additional information on social structures and representations could be seen as an inter-mediate step, but was included within the formulating interpretation in order to maintain the clear scheme. The third step consists of the construction of a typology and is not included here. In this article, we show how the participants construct their study choices in focus groups and interviews.[2]

Findings

Our analyses of the focus groups and first-year interviews showed how the participants tended to construct their study choice around personal interests and vocation, favouring certain types and sources of information in this process and displaying a variety of

Table 1. Steps of analysis combining the Documentary Method and the intersectional multi-level approach.

Formulating Interpretation	Thematic development and selection of interview passages for transcription
	Formulating detailed interpretation of the passages
	Description of identity constructions
	Identification of symbolic representations
	Identification of references to social structures
	Data on structures and representations
Reflecting Interpretation	Most relevant identity constructions
	Intersections of central categories on the three levels
	Formal interpretation and text type differentiation
	Semantic interpretation with comparative sequence analysis
Construction of Types	Sense-genetic type construction
	Socio-genetic type construction
	Identification of different types within the orientation frames
	Systematic comparison of types along several dimensions
	Description of intersections in the overall view
	Consideration of possible interactions on three levels at once

Source: Own elaboration combining the steps of the Documentary Method (Nohl 2009, 45) and of the intersectional multi-level approach (Winker and Degele 2009, 80, shaded in grey)

difficulties and coping strategies. Our mixed-methods approach allowed us additionally to compare the focus-group and interview findings, drawing as well on the observed inter-actions between participants as a display of femininities and masculinities (Budgeon 2014) – and possibly further social divisions. Avoiding the imposing of social divisions, we compared the profiles of the participants showing certain preferences with those showing others, identifying gender and social class differences, as well as possible inter-sections. For the reader's convenience, we summarize the main profile aspects of the quoted participants in the following table (Table 2) and present the findings below focus-ing on gender and class differences rather than retracing the process of analysis.

Worried girls and nonchalant heroes

Most focus groups started to dwell at some point on difficulties and worries, however, these topics were usually brought up by female participants, while the male participants remained silent, negated the existence of these difficulties in their particular case or dis-regarded their importance. Several female participants worried how (1) to identify their vocation, (2) to enter the related degree course, (3) to successfully meet the demands, and (4) to be successful on a crisis-shaken labour market.

> Edith   I'm 17 years old and I don't know what I'll want when I'm 30 or 40. And now they make you choose a thing that, that in a certain way is what will determine your life. I don't know but it's like what you will be, what you will do. (…) I believe that it's something that you really need to think a lot and maybe' they make you' they force you to choose. (…) I believe that it's very difficult. (FG1)
>
> N.   Before you enter a degree course you don't know exactly what you are going to find (…) because you've never been there and then, maybe, maybe you you think you're sure that you're going to like this and then you get there and and tz (…) well no' I don't' no I see that it's not for me. I don't like it and I don't see myself doing this. It's your future.
>
> Dori   I for example mathematics. I stink at mathematics. And I've seen that biomaths is on the syllabus. OK (laughter) maybe biomaths (…) you say 'oh that's easy'. But maybe I get there and 'what's that?' and you can't. (FG1)

Edith's quote depicts her unwillingness and inability to decide for the rest of her life, showing with her evocation of 'the job-for-life' that this imaginary remains important for young people, though its existence was refuted by Chisholm (2006). N. expands this problem further, arguing that even if you think you like something, you may be mistaken and Dori's comment is an example of the influence of self-efficacy beliefs in the female MST study choice (Yazilitas et al. 2013). Koala, the only male participant in FG1, reacted to this discussion arguing that the girls should know by now what they want to do, discre-diting their worry to take the right study choice. At the same time, he constructed his own study choice as straightforward, aiming for a vocational training first, so he was automati-cally exempt from the worry to enter into his aspired degree course. As we see in the first-year interview, he entered HE right away eventually once he got his PAU score.

> At the moment I'm decided to study, first of all, I want vocational training, in electronics. Design of electronic products. And then, if everything goes well, well, a degree course in elec-tronic engineering. (Koala, FG1)

Table 2. Participants' characteristics in alphabetic order following the alias.

Alias	School Type in FG	Sex	Year of Birth	Family of Origin		Migration history	Studies in follow-up
				Cultural Capital	Economic Capital		
Cara	Rural	F	1993	3	4		Sports
Carol	Rural	F	1993	3,5	3,5		-
Dori	Public	F	1993	0	3		-
Edith	Public	F	1993	0	0		-
Jab	Rural	M	1993	3	2,5		Informatics
Juan	Rural	M	1991	0	0		-
Koala	Public	M	1993	3	2	+	Electronics
Mabe	Private	F	1993	4	3,5		Sports
N.	Public	F	1993	3,5	3		Economics
Pasta	Rural	M	1993	2,5	2,25		-
Spin	Public	F	1993	3	3,25		-

F = Female; M = Masculine. The cultural and economic capital were calculated using the mean of mother and father for education (indicator for cultural capital) and current or previous work in case of current unemployment (indicator for economic capital), whereas the numbers 1 to 4 were used to code 1 'no studies', 2 'elementary studies', 3 'superior studies', 4 'university studies' and 1 'no work', 2 'employed worker', 3 'public servant C or freelancer', 4 'public servant A/B, entrepreneur/contractor', respectively; when no data was indicated or the indicated data did not fit the categories, '0' was ascribed).

I changed my opinion actually, before I thought that I'd study a vocational training, but you see at the end the teachers and the parents and the friends and so on, well, they made me change my opinion. (…) I ended up studying a degree course, in electronics as well, industrial electronics. (Koala, Int1).

Similarly, Jab refused in FG10 to reflect on an alternative degree course should his current plan fail, even when another male participant insisted on his answering the question properly. In his first-year interview, he mentioned, however, that he had considered other alternatives before reducing his study choice to options with literally no entrance limitations, disburdening his study choice from the possibility to not score the necessary result.

Pasta   yes but, they said that what would you want to do if it [the chosen degree course] didn't exist?

Jab   I've got two options in mind so that in case that I can't do one I'd do the other one. (…)

Interviewer: and if they removed both?

Jab   certainly they' they won't remove either of the two. (FG10)

When comparing focus groups and interviews, we notice that several male participants who had constructed their study choice as straightforward and secure in the focus groups, admitted in the first-year interviews that they had felt stressed in High School and doubted between different options. Possible explanations for this are the effects of the data-construction method and the moment of data construction. Young men may be less able to express their worries in front of their peers, as weakness and emotionality are considered 'unmanly' (Schippers 2007) and men are generally less likely to express their feelings (Simon and Nath 2004). In the interview situation, their need to perform a hegemonic masculinity could be lower, as they were faced with a female interviewer. If this was true, focus groups would not be the most adequate method to speak with males about difficulties and worries. However, it is also possible that the different moment of data construction provoked the change, as admitting solved problems in the retrospective is in line with a 'masculine hero' who overcomes difficulties and does not endanger masculinity. If this was the case, it would indicate a male difficulty to access support, so we could assume an intersection with gender in the difficulties Davey (2009) describes regarding 'open-door-approaches' in her analyses of public and private school-support regimes. This is in line with findings from Isacco and Morse (Isacco and Morse 2015) about young men not seeking-support. In both cases, peer-support appears little helpful for young men.

The male tendency to block difficulties in the focus groups had the effect that they hardly showed further coping strategies and based their accounts on objective information only (see below). Some of the female participants, on the contrary, embraced the focus group as an opportunity to speak about worries, enabling us to observe further coping strategies and references to social representations.

In FG1 youth was constructed as a time when mistakes can still be corrected. This is related to the concept of youth as an 'experimental space', refuted by Casal et al. (2006), but obviously still relevant for the young people's imaginaries.

Spin   Yes, it's something that we've got coming up within two days, but we've got the luck that we're still young (…) we say 'well, I was wrong. I'm studying this' (…) and next year I'll start something else.' (FG1)

In the same FG, N. coped with the decreased 'objective chances' (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007) in crisis-shaken Spain by constructing her identity as opposed to the social representation of unmotivated unemployed, reproducing public discourses that blame unemployment on the lack of motivation of those affected (Winker and Degele 2009) and construct solutions around activation and emigration (Lahusen, Schulz, and Graziano 2013).

N.   I believe that it's more important to do something that you like, and not so much to do something, tz that that has many job opportunities even though it's very important today because it's difficult to find work. But, tz, the job opportunities you also search for them yourself, if you want to do something and if you have initiative, well, you'll find job opportunities. If not here then elsewhere [Interviewer: Do you mean in another country?] hmhm for example. (FG1)

Mabe   I want to do INEF [sports faculty] and the people laugh at me saying that 'you won't you won't have work'. And (…)it seems to me that for the moment nobody is going to have [work]. (…) because there are many people and [there is] very little work. And secondly (…) in INEF (.) there is as much work as on any other [degree course]. (FG12)

By reproducing the negative image of her peers, N. did not need to assume structural difficulties and could rely on her own future success by constructing an opposed identity – additionally ensured by expanding her reach beyond Spain. Several authors questioned these social representations, arguing for example that if the number of job seekers is bigger than the number of vacancies, some will not receive a placement, no matter how well-educated, active, mobile and motivated they are (Bessant and Watts 2014). In the second example, Mabe disburdens her study choice from future job opportunities through an opposed strategy, arguing that these are equally bad in any field. Here we can observe a certain relation to public discourse speaking of the 'generation of precarity' (García Vega 2016), though different authors have highlighted the heterogeneity even within this generation, showing that the crisis affected certain groups, e.g. women, more than others (Álvarez 2015; Strecker, Ballesté, and Feixa 2018). Although Mabe assumed difficulties for her professional future with this reference to the structural level, she disburdened her study choice from the responsibility for such difficulties.

Despite her eloquent coping with future difficulties on the labour market that allowed her to consider job opportunities as a secondary criterion for study choice in the focus group, N. came to study economics instead of architecture in Int1. Aware of her change in direction, N. spent more time deconstructing her choice for architecture than constructing her decision for economics.

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

Emotional distress led her to reassess her self-efficacy belief – considering that scientific degree courses were too difficult for her – and her priorities – preferring to study something easy and feeling well, rather than continued suffering. Though she based this reassessment on her experiences in High School, her anticipation that the male-dominated scientific degree courses were more difficult may be an example of how activities realized by men are ennobled (Bourdieu 2000). In Int1, N. hardly mentioned her PAU score, but in

the further follow-up we see that it represented an important limitation, forcing her to discard several degrees e.g. teacher training. This means that architecture was beyond her reach, too. Her reference to a feminine trait – emotionality – served, in this sense, as a way to justify her study choice, understating the importance of academic difficulty. However, the follow-up shows us that her change in direction did not improve her well-being, as she kept experiencing difficulties.

Information preferences and silence

Regarding the participants with low cultural and economic capital in their families of origin, we noticed that these were rather passive in the focus groups and did not react to the invitations to participate in a follow-up. This reservation and attrition may be the result of group dynamics described by Bohnsack (2010) when mixing participants from different backgrounds, as the participants whose practices are different from those of the dominant culture feel insecure. However, the focus-group situation enabled us to observe interactions between the participants, for example how participants corrected each other's ideas and how the corrected participants reacted to these interventions. Before describing this further, we present differences we encountered regarding prefer-ences for certain types of information sources and information and regarding its accuracy.

We distinguished references to two main types of information: 'objective' or 'fact-based' information, e.g. regarding access to different study programmes, their contents; and 'sub-jective' or 'person-centred' information about personal interests and skills that could be assessed through introspection or through personality-based recommendations from sig-nificant others. Both types of information could be offered through personal (teachers, friends, family members, etc.) or impersonal (websites, books, newspapers etc.) infor-mation sources and could be combined. Personal information sources are related to the concept of 'hot knowledge', 'high-quality, insider knowledge which provides them with superior understanding of the field of higher education' (Davey 2009, 195). Access to hot knowledge depends in Davey's study on the participants' social capital, but we can add – considering the contributions made by Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013) – that differences may exist in the way young people employ their social capital. In our study, young men and participants from lower social classes showed nonchalance and passivity that question their ability to seek support and so their ability to mobilize their capitals.

The gender-specific ways of presenting their study choices described above are reflected in the types of information and sources that appeared in the accounts. The male participants' straightforward study choices only required 'objective' information in order to find the study course that best suited their vocation. The female participants were much more likely to problematize the previous step – to identify their vocation – and hence related to person-centred information, as they explained how they had attempted to find out what they might like.

> You should enter the different universities' websites and compare, I don't know, checking the study plans' I did this. Ehm instead of looking for names or the places where they do it or for the marks, well, directly go on looking through the study plans. And according to the subjects that you like more or, or something like this (Pasta, FG10).

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

Pasta's recommendation to base the decision on the subjects mentioned in the different study plans shows how he did not consider the definition of one's interests as a problem. Moreover, he sanctioned considering names, places or marks as unnecessary, while the effort to read through study plans was legitimate. As this is low when the field of interest is narrow and clear, Pasta may mention this effort without endangering his masculinity. If N. attempted to follow his advice, it would probably turn into a laborious and effortful approach going through the long list of degree courses offered in the social and the scientific branch – without solving the problem to first identify her vocation.

Participants corrected repeatedly each other's inaccurate interpretations or outdated information. This indicates that they had not previously used the whole potential of their classmates as a personal information source and gives us again the occasion to analyse interactions.

Spin	for example the', the numerus clausus. They aren't, they aren't updated until months before [University entrance] because, they always change. They say 'well let's raise them two tenths let's lower them' and that's …
Koala	but the numerus clausus is nothing significant.
Spin:	no but, facing the PAU [Koala: it's only the' only'] (at the same time) in order to know whether to take more optionals or not (…)Koala
it's simply the (at the same time) (2sec) simply the score of the last person who entered that degree course the year before. (FG1)	
Cara	I'd like to give advice to Juan. The information he's got is a bit outdated, because teacher training [for physical education] has disappeared.
Juan	but they don't know. It's not yet decided.
Cara	Nono, the thing is, you've got to do primary school teacher. 4 years, the normal one and then one specializing.
Juan	OK (FG10)

Spin got informed through impersonal information sources, reading 'a couple of pages'. Judging by her comments, she may have seen that the *numerus clausus* changes every year and considered it important to know the score she would need this year. This shows that although she found out and read about the *numerus clausus*, she did not understand how it works. Koala corrected Spin's erroneous interpretation, but his assumption that the *numerus clausus* is not significant is not completely helpful either, as Spin's idea to take additional exams in the PAU to improve her score could be a valuable strategy.

Koala's discrediting of her approach silenced Spin in the end, though it is not clear if she actually understood her mistake.

In the other example, Cara informed Juan that his chosen degree course had disappeared. Her presentation of the new options was not completely accurate either, as she argued that one has to study four years before choosing the specialization in sports, whereas this specialization is chosen for the fourth year. It is possible that Juan only attempted to display a straightforward study choice in front of his peers, although he had not yet done any research and did not decide at all. The confrontation with Cara showed the strategy's riskiness as he became even more vulnerable when Cara uncovered the inexistence of his chosen degree programme. In the focus-group situation, he was unable to use Cara as an information source, reacting instead with a quick withdrawal.

The two examples show that no matter which information sources are employed, important concepts may remain diffuse, the information may be outdated or inaccurate. Obviously, an unfortunate combination of both sources may worsen the situation even further. When comparing the levels of accuracy with which participants referred to structures, we found that most focus group, except the private-school group (FG12), showed confusions and misunderstandings about aspects like the PAU, degree courses, university entry etc. FG12 was the last focus group, so these participants had had more time to receive information. However, it is possible that the private-school participants possessed better access to information as greater school-support (Davey 2009) and higher social, cultural and economic capital in the family of origin converge, given that private schools tend to include more students from such families than public schools (Dávila, Ghiardo, and Medrano 2008). Public-school students, in contrast, may only encounter 'open-door approaches' (Davey 2009) and especially young men from the working-classes may feel hampered to seek such support if they cannot show their worries in front of their peers. This may partly explain the reproduction of social inequality.

Teacher support was a contested topic too. Several focus-group participants blamed their teachers for not guiding them in their study choice and informing them about upcoming legislative changes. This shows their preference for personal information sources and, therefore, the high importance of social capital and teacher support in this transition.

Carol   we would have been grateful, (…) if they knew that the things were going to change, [Interviewer: hmhm] well, if they had informed us how we should choose the subjects and how to do the things well.

(FG10)

Now they've changed everything with Bologna. And not even the advice of people who have been studying there for many years and, that are those that are useful, well, they are of no use to you. [Interviewer: hmhm] And as we are among the first years, there are no people either who can advise you how to take the, the degree course. (Jab, FG10)

Jab's comment that older friends' advice is no longer useful due to the Bologna process could be understood as 'hot knowledge' cooling down (Davey 2009), although we can argue that the HE experience is not limited to these changes (Bourdieu and Passeron

2007) so Jab may still access 'hot knowledge' through his social capital, though he might have difficulties to distinguish helpful and outdated information.

Discussion and conclusions

Our results show several gender and class intersections in the study choice. Male participants tended to construct their study choice as straightforward in the focus groups, displaying nonchalance or passivity. As effort and emotions are considered 'unmanly' in certain contexts (Ovink 2014; Schippers 2007), male participants may refer to 'safe options' while their access to HE or to a certain degree course is still unclear and change their study choice once they know their PAU-score. Especially, participants from lower social classes remained silent in the focus groups and chose not to participate in the follow-up, corroborating the silencing of participants from non-dominant backgrounds in focus groups (Bohnsack 2010). However, focus groups proved to be an adequate tool to observe the display of social divisions in the interaction with peers (Budgeon 2014). Both regarding male nonchalance and a devaluation of (female) effort we found tendencies similar to those observed in studies in quite different national and historical contexts (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007; Ovink 2014), indicating high generalizability.

Female study choice was 'burdened' with the responsibility for future happiness in a crisis-shaken country, leading to coping strategies relating to social representations and public discourses. That these appear though youth research questions or refutes their validity shows that they are still influential for the participants' world views: the job-for-life (Chisholm 2006), youth as an experimental sphere (Casal et al. 2006), unmotivated unemployed (Winker and Degele 2009) and education, motivation and mobility as the cure of unemployment (Bessant and Watts 2014; Lahusen, Schulz, and Graziano 2013). In the first-year interviews, many participants showed different study-choice constructions, readjusting their narrations to justify their actual course, e.g. after academic difficulties. These revisions confirm the constructedness of life choices (Pais 2007).

Our analyses, considering identity constructions, social representations and social structures, allowed us to retrace the complex interactions of the different levels within the participants' narratives. With this we are able to reconsider concepts and theories about the reproduction mechanisms of social inequality presented by Bourdieu from this new angle. For instance, with the 'ideology of talent' (Bourdieu and Passeron 2007) effort is devalued, so academic difficulties are worse for girls who fail *despite* their effort, while male failure is *excused* by a lack of effort, but not talent. Additionally, a lack of effort may be justified by presenting 'safe options' that do not require any real effort to be achieved. If researchers worry about how to support male students although they do not seek support (Isacco and Morse 2015), young men might soon receive support without their talent being questioned, while young women's educational success would still be ascribed to effort rather than talent. This may also explain why private schools, known for highly interventionist support-regimes (Davey 2009), are more successful in pushing young men into HE than public schools with their open-door-approaches, In sum, young people from the upper-middle and upper classes receive 'better' support (Reay 2013), as they are more likely to visit private schools (Dávila, Ghiardo, and Medrano 2008), to access 'hot

knowledge' (Davey 2009) and to receive emotional backup in their families of origin without endangering their own or their mothers well-being (Reay 2000, 2015).

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As most participants favoured personal information sources and several criticized their teachers for not informing them well or in time, teacher support appears highly significant in our study. Peer support seems, on the other hand, little likely to function, as young men have difficulties to seek support from their peers, the peers are not necessarily better informed so inaccurate information may be proliferated and young women might not be able to encounter useful recommendations, as they tend to construct their cases as unique, adding complexity. Future research should study if similar tendencies apply in

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other local contexts – within and beyond Spain.

Notes

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1. We employ the terms 'lower', 'middle' and 'upper classes' to refer to the broader concepts of social class that are translated into very different measurements in research. Although such terms may be considered pejorative, we believe that they display the persisting relation of dominance and subordination between 'upper' and 'lower' classes and consciously choose to continue to use them, especially as, how Rubin et al. (Rubin et al. 2014, 198) argue, these

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are 'meaningful response categories', so avoiding them might sound politically more correct, but ultimately obscures the presentation of findings unnecessarily.
2. Quotations are presented by first mentioning the participants' self-chosen pseudonyms, followed by the number of the Interview (e.g. Int1) or Focus Group (e.g. FG12). If several participants appear in a quote, the pseudonyms are directly indicated in the quote. The pseudonyms may appear little standardized as some participants chose single letters or random nouns for themselves. Pseudonyms were not translated.

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