Estranged Students in Higher Education: Navigating Social and Economic Capitals

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Abstract

Family is widely regarded as a cornerstone of student support. When family support exist as an essential form of social capital making, rupture of family ties places students in a disadvantageous position. This paper focuses on estranged students' accounts of their experiences of higher education, highlighting how capital dynamics shape their academic trajectories. Based on interviews with 21 estranged students, our research uncovers different dimensions of estranged students' struggles and successes as they move through academia. This paper explores the social imagination that surrounds the university student, or 'student experience', as resting upon family support. We propose that widening participation policies and practices need to be more attuned to the realities that mark estranged students' experiences, as they are not only impacted by the scarcity of either economic or social capital, but also by the instability of interrelated capitals that contribute to precarious and volatile experiences.

Estrangement in the context of higher education

Research on family estrangement has slowly started to grab the attention of research communities, in particular from psychology and social work research. Still, this is an area of inquiry significantly under researched (Agilias, 2016), as is the impact of estrangement on applied contexts such as that of education. With this in mind, we draw on research from different, complementary fields to develop the critical context of the research project herein presented.

The understanding of estrangement is inescapably linked to the notion of 'family' and the presence or absence of emotional, social and/or economic ties that link an individual to their biological or legal (guardian) family. Family, in this regard, is perceived as an everlasting relationship, usually assumed to be sealed by unbreakable, unconditional love (Scharp & McLaren, 2017). This idealised image of 'family' excludes other types of relationships that may fall outside such a constricted definition, and thus raises questions about how family is understood in legal, social and cultural terms. What is more, such definitions characterise, even if inadvertently, family estrangement as atypical, even though research is starting to show that estrangement is a more common phenomenon than it is popularly believed (Costa et al., forthcoming); one that can cross 'all socio-economic boundaries, gender, age, income, education, employment, parental status and social grade' (Agglias, 2016, p. 9). What is relatively unknown however is how estrangement affects the

different facets of an individual's life, including their educational trajectories into and through higher education.

Practices of family life involve circulations of capital in its different variants - economic, social, cultural and also symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1985), with family membership providing individuals with a privileged place in society:

> This privilege is, in reality, one of the major conditions of the accumulation and transmission of economic, cultural and symbolic privileges. The family plays a decisive role in the maintenance of the social order. (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 23)

This is a familiar notion in higher education contexts, where academic entry and achievement is traditionally associated with students from middle class families (Falconer, E. and Taylor, 2016). Family membership can provide a robust foundation in the development of capitals (Winter, 2000) and therefore social status, but it is important to remember that not all students, even those with close links to their family, can activate or mobilise these. This is not only true with regards to financial wealth (economic capital), but also networks of influence (social capital) and the knowledge individuals can draw on to establish themselves in a given social context (embodied cultural capital), and which will ultimately grant them a place in the hidden social structure of academic and social relationships (symbolic capital). In other words, the interplay between family and forms of capitals with currency in educational contexts is not necessarily a given; it is rather an expectation that more often than not goes uncontested. As universities aim to recruit students from widening participation backgrounds, such expectations require examination in relation not only to (estranged) students' entry into academia, but also, and especially, in relation to students' trajectories through and out of the higher education system (See Burke, 2015). This raises related questions on the role of education in supporting the acquisition and development of capitals as part of students' experiences (Costa and Gilliland, 2017), as well as the role of educational policies in the development of inclusive practices.

While widening participation policies in higher education have contributed to an increase of student numbers from non-traditional, diverse backgrounds, with the goal of creating a more equitable HE system, research has shown that 'broadening entry points does not necessarily ensure inclusion or positive experience for these students' (Meuleman et al., 2014, p.503). This is so because students fitting a widening participation agenda often display a set of embodied dispositions, values and forms of thinking, i.e., a habitus, that influence the way individuals perceive and act in the world, which contrasts with the institutional 'habitus' (Lizardo, 2004). The world of education is known for being oriented by and towards a dominant culture that is likely to be disconnected from widening participation students' own socio-culture and economic locations (Crozier et al., 2008), and of which family life is expected to mediate (see Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979; 1990). An individual's position in the education field, as a space of social struggle for the accumulation of capitals, is therefore not only based on which capitals an individual has or gets access to, but also how these capitals are and/or become embodied dispositions.

The habitus – described as 'socialised subjectivity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 126) – that students bring to the field of education, has a major influence in the way individuals perform, and situate themselves in it. Intrinsically related to habitus is the knowledge individuals may or not have of the rules that govern the field of action, and which allows them to situate themselves in the playing field as players with relative

authority. In the context of academia – as a field of social struggle – habitus that represent the practices and experiences of widening participation students have been reported to be more often than not at odds with the activities that direct the field of higher education and which reflect a persisting culture in academia (Burnell, 2015; Reay et al., 2010). Bourdieu considers this dominant culture – a culture that exercises influence through power -to be determinant in the 'orchestration of habitus' (2000, p. 146), i.e., the field invests in certain beliefs, types of behaviour and rituals with the aim of reinforcing a stable relationship between a dominant form of agency and the structure in which it operates. The goal of such orchestration is that of aligning habitus with field. The more aligned the two are, the more indistinct they will become, and the more likely individuals who internalise the rules of the field as their habitus are to succeed. It is therefore not surprising that students from widening participation backgrounds are more likely to feel outcasts on the inside (Redmond, 2006) than they are to feel included, because they are more likely to experience the existence of a 'cleft habitus' (Bourdieu, 2000a). The disjuncture between field and habitus becomes more apparent when one does not belong to the dominant culture. Even though exceptions to the rule exist (see for example, Lehmann, 2014), these exceptions exist not because the tensions and contradictions that mark students' practices are acknowledged and valued, but rather because of the orchestration of the habitus through the harmonisation of their practices with the field. What this shows is that higher education institutions frequently still lack relevant supporting structures when it comes to effectively including students from 'non-traditional' or 'widening participation' backgrounds (Taylor, 2008, 2011; Breeze et al., 2018).

Our research aims to cast a critical perspective on the experiences of estranged students given the lack of attention thus far given to this group, including in widening participation research: focusing on estrange students represents an opportunity to stretch the established categories of educational inequality, particularly in terms of class and race, and focus specifically on the significance and lack of family presence and support. In doing so, this paper will analyse the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic struggles individuals estranged from their families experience when studying at University. Our analysis is support by Bourdieu's theory of practice, especially the interplay between higher education as a social field of action and the capitals (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) that it privileges, consciously or unconsciously, as part of students' lives and experiences. Although research on widening participation – especially in its interplay with social class practices and questions of equity - is abundant, discussions of how such debates fit estranged students' realities are often absent. This paper aims to contribute to that gap in knowledge, starting with family absences, or estrangement, while re-articulating family as the transmitter of (dis)advantage.

The following sections presents the methodological considerations; findings are then discussed with the support of Bourdieu's key constructs of field, capital and habitus as supporting theoretical lenses.

Study

'Estrangement' as a status attributed to students is a fairly recent policy driven practice in the UK. In England, it was introduced into student funding in 1997, whereas in Scotland the same status was only recognised in 2016 and, as such, this study is located in the context of Scottish higher education. Here, it is important to contextualise differences within the UK higher education systems. The higher education system in Scotland is different to the

systems in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For example, in Scotland, students may move into higher education at the age of 17 (rather than 18 in other parts of the United Kingdom). The Scottish higher education system favours a four-year undergraduate degree programme. Tuition fees in Scotland are also different from other parts of the UK, with no direct course fees for undergraduate students from a country within the European Union. First degree students from Scotland or the rest of the EU studying in Scotland are entitled to have their tuition fees paid by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) (See *A Strategic Analysis of Scottish Higher Education Sectors Distinctive Assets*, British Council, Scotland, 2013).

Rather than focusing solely on Scotland's late sign-up to recognizing 'estrangement' in policy terms, Becca Bland, Chief Executive of Stand Alone, an organization which supports people who are estranged from family, has praised Scotland's higher education systems' model of practicing 'corporate parenting'. Speaking of Scottish Universities' success in supporting students financially and emotionally, Bland stated 'Universities in Scotland have a completely different attitude. They understand they have to look out for these students'[1] (The Guardian, 2018). Based in Scotland, our research warns against an overly optimistic positioning of Scottish Universities.

The empirical inquiry took place in two urban Scottish Universities, with participants allocated the status of estrangement by their institutions. Recruitment of participants was conducted with the support of widening participation team contacts who helped to disseminate the call for participation via relevant emailing lists. Our call was also advertised through posters placed around the universities' campuses. Given that estrangement is a delicate and emotional topic, we wanted a recruitment process that would place no pressure on research participants to take part in the study, but that would allow them to take initiative to provide an account of their experiences, should they feel ready and willing to do so. Arguably, this self-selection may have shaped the research findings given that it required participants who were genuinely and actively interested in offering an account of their experiences of estrangement.

A qualitative research inquiry was chosen for this project as it offers an opportunity to explore estranged students' experiences of university and access the meaning they attributed to it by allowing participants to express their perceptions and share their views. The scarcity of in-depth knowledge in this area is notorious, given that most research conducted in the field so far has drawn on quantitative data, which is useful in terms of identifying the broad issues, but limited in particularise them. A key goal of this research was thus to complement existing knowledge with an in-depth understanding of the issues at hand. The research approach was also chosen to access and give voice to the research participants themselves (Costa et al., 2018b; Falconer and Taylor, 2016; Taylor and Scurry, 2011).

An interview guide was developed and interviews conducted with 21 research participants. The table below provides some key characteristics with regards to research participants' gender, age, type of University and degree[2].

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/dec/21/its-painful-and-difficult-the-students-estranged-from-their-families

[2] For the purpose of this research fieldwork sites have been distinguished by the type of institution. This is important in the context of the UK, with different types of institutions: for example, Russel Group institutions (n=24) are often recognised as the leading institutions in the UK, with Technological Universities likely to be research intensive institutions operating outside of the UK HE elite Russell group. These institutions are likely to attract different types of students and hold different 'widening participation' strategies.

Table 1 - Some characteristics of the research participant population (participants' names have been coded and replaced with pseudonyms to preserve their identity)

The interview guide prepared for this inquiry drew on the work of Bourdieu's theory of practice (especially the interplay between forms of capitals and field) with the purpose of accessing the social, cultural and economic contexts that frame the experiences of estranged students. The narrative inquiry approach provided research participants with a platform to 'tell their stories' as perceived by themselves, as a key research drive: this paper, and broader project, aims to encourage new ways of considering and supporting estrangement in the context of academia by critically acknowledging experiential struggles and differential student voices. In this sense, the interview guide was designed to:

1) access participants' own understandings of their own experiences in HE;

2) examine the values, attitudes and expectations they have in relation to higher education; and

3) explore participants' practices and relationships in and with academia in relation to the type of capitals they have access to or lack in their journey into and through higher education.

It is also important to highlight that the research design for this project took into account rigorous methodological considerations. First, the researchers have applied the concept of 'reflexivity' as a research tool in developing critical understandings of social realities (Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1992). Reflexivity as a research tool is not aimed at capturing what has happened, but rather to encourage research participants' to examine their own practice as a way of 'fostering trustworthiness of narration' (Costa et al., 2018a, p. 27). Second, in the process of data collection and data analysis, we were attentive to our own social and cultural location given our own professional and academic positions as well as the assumptions that we may bring to the field given the lack of knowledge in this area of inquiry. As a research team, we encompassed researchers across the early-established 'career course' (Breeze and Taylor, 2018), with involvement in different widening participation activities and research projects (Taylor, 2008; Taylor and Scurry, 2011; Costa and Gilliland, 2017).

We were also cognizant of the fact that we needed to actively consider the power dynamics that are likely to emerge between the researchers and the participants given our different social status positions within the academy. The adoption of a narrative inquiry was useful in this regard as such approach bestowed on research participants a sense of 'research authority' as they become both the focus and content of the research project raconteurs of their own experiences.

The data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach within an interpretive research stance. The process of exploring and re-exploring research themes within the data eased our familiarisation with the information collected and allowed us to both 'see' the narratives in isolation as well as to picture them as a whole through the patterns, consistencies and contradictions that could be identified across the different interviews.

Below, we analyse the research findings and present a discussion of relevant research themes in relation to the social and economic struggles of estranged students in higher education with the support of Bourdieu's key concepts of capital and field.

Limited capitals: estranged students' accounts of daily struggles

This research project uncovered different aspects regarding the struggles of estranged students as they move through academia, with social and economic issues featuring as central. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus our analysis on how the scarcity of physical resources and social connections affects their experience at university. More concretely, we will present data that reveals the strains that are put on students who need to negotiate economic and social capitals without the support of immediate family.

One of the issues that all participants, without exception, reported to be a constant concern in their lives was the deficit of physical and social resources (economic and social capital) to live a sustainable or even dignified life during their studies. The scarcity or sometimes even absence of funds to support day-to-day subsistence needs, such as food and rent were a common feature in participants' narratives as explored in further detail below. Additionally, participants also referred to the absence of social ties in their lives, people whom they could trust and call on in case of need. Essentially, such findings may not come as a surprise (see for example, Gorski, 2017; Loveday, 2015). Yet, they raise a much needed discussion regarding the needs and experiences of estranged students in higher education, with economic and social hardships as part of their everyday academic journeys. This seemingly persists even though institutions have made efforts to support this group of students, with such efforts remaining rather simple and superficial. This shows that estrangement policies and practices are still deep-rooted in an uncontested and taken for granted imagination of the 'student' as a member of a supportive family, which in the UK has become even more prominent since the introduction of tuitions fees to the higher education system (see, for example, Kettley, 2007; Mishkin and Straub, 2014)

The evidence provided below aims to debunk this assumption. It also seeks to argue for a revision of policies and practices that should not work as a simple add-on to widening participation initiatives already in place because estrangement brings with it a set of new challenges that need to be taken into account. As such, estrangement policies should operate in a specialised way to recognise estranged students as individuals independent from their families as well as the specific needs associated with such phenomenon. Below we present evidence that support this perspective.

Struggling for economic capital
Financial anxiety came very clearly across participants' accounts, with frequent concerns about money and about the burden of having to balance their student lives with the concern of bringing in an income without any outside support. As participants put it:

> [estrangement comes with] a degree of further responsibility and
> further pressures that not everybody has to experience. (Dylan, 28)

> So I think financially it is a big difference [from peers who are not
> estranged]. As well as like focusing on my studies I need to focus on
> an income. (Ingrid, 22)

Another participant made this observation more specific by stating that:
> a lot of stress comes from the fact that I'm always struggling with
> money (Martin, 22)

It was clear that economic concerns permeate their experiences:

> So there are many different circumstances [for estrangement] in
> my, in my case the problem is more financial than emotional.
> (Martin, 22)

Combining paid employment and study is not an issue exclusive to estranged students with many students these days balancing part-time work with their education (Hovdhaugen, 2015). However, when the financial strain is accentuated by the lack of a family support structure, economic concerns compound other worries, such as emotional well-being. This was further evidenced by the expression of practical and mundane needs such as the ability to afford basic goods, such as food, or pay the rent:

> Maybe they [student who are not estranged] can have worries
> about other things, but they will never lack food, they will never
> have to worry about rent or stuff like this. (Martin, 22)

The testimony above emphasises a profound sense of difference with regarding one's self-position in relation to their colleagues even though experiences of hardship and/or poverty in higher education is a growing concern within the widening participation student community. However, it is clear that this issue is likely to be exacerbated in the face of family estrangement and the absence of unreserved support derived from it. As such financial concerns were often characterised as a barrier that is constantly present and that marks their experience of the university:

> It's like a rope round you pulling you back as you're going forward,
> but I don't think it's a barrier that stops, I think it's a barrier that's
> just there and to be aware of. (Robert, 29)

Participants also discussed difficulties in finding work and keeping themselves financially solvent, especially during the summer period when the cash flow of the subsidies they receive (e.g. SAAS[3]) temporally stops as it is outside the academic year:

> I would, I would like to be able to cover the summer when I don't
> have SAAS. So if there was maybe like more support in place for
> students who obviously aren't getting SAAS [money] during the
> summer. (Kate, 24)

Underlining the logic for interrupting SAAS's support outside the academic year is the assumption that students will return to their family homes. As one of the research participants observed this is in part because

> there's still a lot of antiquated ideas [in university], ideas that are not
> relevant to me, which is to say "over the summer … why not just go
> and stay with your parents?" …. it just permeates so deeply in the
> institution. (James, 24)

The summer is also the time when jobs in the city are reportedly harder to find, because there is more competition for jobs as more students are free to work and can take on casual work:

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[3] Student Awards Agency Scotland is the agency of the Scottish Government giving financial support to eligible students doing a course of higher education in the UK.

> it's hard to find work when in [the city] alone there's about a
> hundred thousand university students finished for summer now.
> And most of them looking for work, some of them with like their
> own life to run and bills to pay, they can't take a job in a gig
> economy whereas people that live at home can because it's not
> guaranteed but it's a good income when it comes. (Robert, 29)]

Casual work is however problematic for estranged students who, because of the very nature of estrangement, cannot rely on family to house or support them during university breaks and need a steady income especially during the summer time. Here the difference between other widening participation groups and estranged students comes to the fore. Research has shown that one of the strategies widening participation students employ to alleviate economic risk is to opt for a local university so that they can live at home, circumventing accommodation expenses and thus working to support other necessary outgoings (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005 ; Holdsworth, 2009). For estranged students this option is not available, hence, the observation that they would benefit from financial support 12 months of the year, rather than just during the academic year. As Robert (29) goes on to say:

> the structures [of the university] are very much geared towards
> young people living at home

This obvious taps into experience of working class students transitioning into higher education as 'local', not middle class students for whom study mobility is defined in terms of new adventures and new beginnings in new places.
The choice to enrol in central, urban universities in part motivated by the assumption that in the city jobs are easier to find:

> the degree that I wanted to do was only in xxx {a smaller city in
> Scotland] and in XXX [a big city in Scotland] I got an offer from both
> but I came here because (…) I thought that there will be more
> chance to find a part-time job here (Martin, 22)

Yet the 'flexible' job market benefits those who can afford to do work as and when it is available. Moreover, our participants showed that financial insecurity is not a limited anxiety that characterises estranged students' experiences, but rather one which can easily lead to a spiral of other issues. Financial problems were further brought to light when discussed in relation to accommodation. These issues are not only related to rent payments, but also to other issues associated with it, such as deposits fees, funds that students are not in possession of:

> I guess other people have people who will help with a deposit. You
> need that first month's rent and a deposit and stuff, so I just couldn't
> really do it. (Melissa, 28)

Moreover, the hurdles of securing and keeping accommodation were reported as constant concerns in estranged students' lives, linked with the fear of not having a place to stay. Several participants reported to have experienced homelessness first hand, mostly because of financial hardship, while many explained that the idea of becoming homeless is a fear that constantly populates their mind given their financial instability. James (29) shared his experience of being left without a place to stay:

I don't have any family, don't have any support. I felt like there wasn't really much in the way of financial assistance anyway. So when I came to the end of first year we had a situation where I was living in halls and the university were saying "well you need to vacate the halls on this date", and I said "well I don't have anywhere else to go and I don't have a job and my student loan's ending". So I was entirely unprepared for that. As a result I moved all my stuff out the halls onto the grass outside the building. And I didn't have anywhere to go to that day. So I put on Facebook: "can anyone help me?" A friend packed up my stuff. Another friend said "you can keep your stuff in my house", and for that whole summer I ended up being homeless. With a really horrific kind of experience, you know? I felt like that's probably been the worst experience that I've had at university. I felt that at that point the support structures were not assisting people that were in my shoes basically.

The picture of the 'higher education student' and that of 'homelessness' are two realities that are not easily put together as part of public imagination. Yet it is often a risk that estranged students live with:

I was nearly made homeless again this year because I'd run out of emergency accommodation (Jonathan, 27)

I will sometimes think, I'm only so many steps away from - it sounds dramatic - but only so many steps away from homelessness or only so many steps away from um destitution. (Jennifer, 31)

The image of the 'homeless students' is not a common presence in our social imagination, but it is clearly a constant threat in the lives of students who do not fit in the traditional university structure and the economic capital associated with it (Miller, 2011; Mulrenan et al., 2018).

Even though higher education institutions do provide students with support regarding accommodation issues, this support is not tailored to estrangement students' needs. Participants' accounts show how institutional solutions to their accommodation problems were often limited, impractical and unrealistic:

There was an email [from the university] that said that if you are estranged you can get summer accommodation for free in the campus, but I mean it's three months. …and also because they asked like for a lot of proofs. Like how can I even prove that? So I didn't even read more about that because I got demoralised. I didn't feel like it's going to be helpful so I said I'm just going to stick and do my own thing without asking for support. (Martin, 22)

and often overpriced:

student accommodation was really expensive (Emma, 24)
they [the university] can offer you some accommodation, but it would cost like, I don't know, five or six hundred per month. So it's not really a help. (Erica, 24)

What this evidences is that when it comes to providing concrete support to estranged students, institutions seem to be out of touch with practical issues, such as that of helping *affordable* accommodation. This is a critical issue that evidences little understanding of the financial strains under which estranged students are likely to live.

Participants were also clear that their struggles were not only economic, but also social. The lack of support networks in their lives was a key issue for them as presented in the sub-section below.

Loosing, using, and acquiring social capital

Research participants' financial struggles have a direct impact on their social lives in that they are not left with sufficient disposal income to socialise with fellow colleagues, a key activity of university life:

> because basically I get money only to pay rent, bills and food. I
> don't have money for much else. So even like socialising is difficult
> because if you go to a club, if you go like to a bar you don't even
> have money for anything. (Martin, 22)

> I don't necessarily think I've really been involved in a kind of
> student life.(Melissa, 28)

The lack of relevant and reliable social contacts was also prominent in participants' lives and often reported about in relation to economic and/or emotional fragility:

> don't have a safety net… Like if something happened to me,
> because I live on my own, I don't have like a backup plan (Emma,
> 24)

> So sometimes I do think if I didn't have to worry about money I
> could put more into my studying. I would maybe say in an
> emotional sort of sense. …you know, like when you've had a bad
> day at uni or you've failed something or something's not gone
> great. You know, people say like "oh I'm just going to go home to
> my mum and dad". Whereas I don't really have that. (Ingrid, 22)

Social contacts were also deemed crucial as a form of safeguarding that was absent from their experiences and which therefore placed them in an even more vulnerable position. This meant that participants often did not have anyone to depend on:

> You need to rely on yourself. You don't have really too much
> support from anybody. (…) it's reflecting on the results on your
> studying. For sure you have worse grades than students who have
> some support from parents. (Erica, 24)

The lack of support from relevant social networks is a reality that students reflected upon and which contrasted significantly with the experiences the majority of their colleagues seem to have. From their perspective, the university is regarded as a space construed on the belief that students rely on family support and that that support is translated into a relative

abundance of resources, i.e., economic, social and cultural capitals, as participants' testimonies show:

> I've just found it to be um the whole experience of university is, based on an assumption that you are not from a widening access background, and that you have family that you can turn to (James, 24)

> You know, (…) it is assumed that people had like a network behind them to help them get through it. (Melissa, 28)

> It's hard to really get across, but the whole standard nuclear family, that doesn't really exist [in my case] …. it's always the assumption (…) that your parents are millionaires and all the rest of it, when [pause] no, like I mean. (Jonathan, 27)

Such sentiments are further illustrated by the observation that the university is mostly regarded as a middle class environment:

> you know, you come to a place like this, everybody's, well not everybody, but a vast majority of people are quite comfortable, they're, you know, foreign students with lots of financial backing. With their parents, everybody's quite, It's generally a middle-class environment isn't it? Um [pause] and, you know, knowing that you don't have the support network behind you and stuff that they do. (Dylan, 26)

> I'm disappointed by the demographic of uni. Like I'm from the poorest background …. [but] people told me "university in Scotland's free. You'll go to university, like you can achieve this, when you get there there's going to be other people like you", and then that's not what I've found. Every single one of my friends here are middle-class. Like they're all from privileged backgrounds, …I'm more of a niche crowd. But it's just like the overwhelming majority of people just do not understand. And therefore in a lot of ways the university doesn't understand. (Clare, 21)

The testimonies show that estranged students' experiences are strongly marked by monetary struggles as well as by the absence of a safety net that is typically associated with family support. Within the widening participation context, difficulties related to economic capital have often been discussed as a key hurdle in students' lives. Similar discussions have been presented about the type of social capital widening participation students bring to academia, one that does not present a competing advantage in relation to the typical middle-class student that higher education institutions seem to value. In the case of estranged students however these debates need to be taken a step deeper. What our research shows is that the type of capitals brought, expected and exchanged in academic

space places estranged students at a disadvantage. Many studies have demonstrated the ways that 'widening participation students' ' do not fit easily into higher education, without the requisite capitals able to 'play the game' (see for example, Reay, 2018).Estranged students' experiences resonate here, but also act to problematize the homogenisation of 'widening participation' groups and issues, and force a nuanced approach to the differences faced by particular students. The lack of family support to buffer and mediate institutional disadvantage, which certain 'local' or 'widening participation' groups may rely on, means that estranged students are often in extremely precarious situations, including experiences of homelessness and/or house insecurity (Hallett and Freas, 2018). What is clear then is that higher education institutions – despite claims to modernization and overall inclusion goals – continue to operate within a long-established mechanism of capital reproduction, in which the conditions of capital acquisition rely on the availability of capital to create more capital. Implicit to this is an underlining assumption that families will act as '*corporate bodies'* (Bourdieu, 1998, p.19 [emphasis in original]), strategically using their resources to maintain their family's position in the social fields they frequent. Bourdieu (1979) explored this approach as a typical reproduction strategy used by the middle class in which family social, economic and cultural investment is leveraged not only for accumulation of capitals, but also for the transformation of these capitals into symbolic forms of prestige and power that are ultimately denoted though the ways in which students are able to participate in higher education.

Even though the main intent of estranged students upon entering higher education is the acquisition of cultural capital, it is however the lack of social and economic capitals that end up characterising their participation in University life in more prominent ways. Deficits in economic and social capital weigh in on the shaping and making of their academic experiences and often complicate, sometimes divert from the goal of HE not so much in widening *access* to a diverse student body, but in enabling significant student *participation*. This reality is one that more often than goes unnoticed as part of the public imagination of 'students' and the 'student experience' . In essence, when critical means of initial capital production, i.e., family, are missing and no effective alternative forms of support are in place, it is precariaty that more easily ensues. Thus, for the 21st century academic entrances and experiences, family remains a key, yet hidden component (Bourdieu, 1996, p.19), one that is still expected to have an active part in students' experiences of higher education. In the next section we aim to discuss this phenomenon in further detail to provide a critical perspective on this topic.

Reflections on the experiences of estranged students
It is widely known that higher education institutions are erected on a power structure supported by dominant forms of capital that in turn dictate the rules of the field of social action and compel its players to oblige – consciously or not – to the practices that legitimate their social position as a form of recognition and practice legitimation. Studies of higher education, particularly focused on student experience have alerted to this phenomenon as an entrenched form of social inequality that explains why working class students often feel as fish out of water in the academic environment (Taylor, 2007; Taylor and Scurry, 2011; Reay et al., 2013, Moutford, 2014). This is related to the misalignment of individuals' way of thinking and acting, i.e., their habitus, especially because of the differences in capitals they bring to and/or able to accumulate from and for the academic game. Our research has shown that estranged students see this phenomenon exacerbated by a set of interrelated

factors, in that their practices are likely to clash with the dominant culture in academia as the economic and social capitals they hold are not only basic, but limited to play a key role in academia. The scarcity of key resources, such as the affordance of rent, and/or the non-existence of a safety net in their lives does not only indicate that the capitals they bring to academia are deficient, but that they are also ineffective in circumventing the hurdles they face. This is particularly evident through the insufficiency of economic capital that characterise their experiences. It is equally relevant in terms of the fragile and unstable social capital they exhibit. What this means is that estranged students' efforts are focused first and foremost on striving for capitals rather than on accruing them (Bathmaker et al., 2013). Thus, the way higher education institutions are set up to allegedly endow students with capitals useful for them to succeed in society does not take into account this reality.

Universities continue to be sites of social inequality and difference, especially because of the taken for granted perspective they attribute to the meaning of 'the university student', which is more often than not associated with a middle class position, a position that is usually inherited and linked to one's family background (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 163). Such interpretation of the figure of the 'academic student' is a doxified construction that requires questioning, one that can easily justify the standardisation of practices even when policies developed to acknowledge a diverse body of students are in place. This is the irony of the issues presented by our research. Estrangement has become recognised in higher education, with explicit policies and guidelines for widening participation teams and funding bodies to work from. Yet, such policies and their application to practice seem to lack a deep understanding of the day-to-day struggles of estranged students. As reported by our research participants these struggles are not just economic or social, these struggles are anchored in a multitude of factors that lead to interrelated adversities. Academic institutions and funding bodies have acknowledged estranged students' economic struggles and put into place monetary support to help them in this regard. Yet, such support is focused on providing funding throughout the academic year, whereas estranged students' economic struggles spread across the fiscal year. Although this is arguably the time estranged students are associated with academia, it is not the only during this time that they require support. What this shows is that higher education institutions are mostly focused inwards, operating from an administrative perspective that ensures the smooth running of business. HEIs as fields with their own playing rules may be far from being student centred where widening participation is concerned. The concern in promoting entrance to a more diverse student body has not necessarily translated into mechanisms for supporting plural forms of student participation.

In this vein, we propose that policies on estrangement need to consciously acknowledge that different forms of capital are intertwined and that students' needs should therefore be considered within the capitals dynamics that mark their lives in and outside the University as both spaces shape their student experiences. Higher Education institutions' work does not end at widening access to hard to reach groups. This realisation is ever more important when working with estranged students who lack key capital structures needed to thrive in traditional academic environments. Indeed, what our research shows is that equal emphasis needs to be placed on student participation – and in the quality of such participation – where attention is given to formations of 'capital', as stifled rather than sustained or automatically reproduced. Estranged students' experiences or fear of homelessness does not happen only because of shortage of monetary funds, it is also linked to the absence of strong social links that could provide a helping hand in instances of

economic adversity. The limitation, lack, or precarity of family connections as a source of social capital has been closely linked with experiences of homelessness. When the fear of becoming homeless overrides the potential associated with being a higher education student, then university life acquires contradictory meanings.

Academia is often regarded as a space where social connections can be forged or strengthened. Yet, it can also be seen from a prism of social exclusivity given the dominant culture that it aims to protect. This latter aspect has been reported in the literature as a mechanism of distinction in which students' family background plays a central role in the preservation and/or enhancements of a desired status quo through not only economic power, but also social support. Family estrangement disrupts this dynamics and questions the central assumption of the role of the family on students' lives and experiences of university. The quality or strength of estranged students' social capital is most likely weakened – sometimes even lost – in comparison with other cohorts of students, because of the lack of connection with what is regarded as a natural (re)source of social capital, i.e., their family. What this means in practice is that estranged students cannot be placed into a conventional framework of social connections of which family links are often taken for granted and/or regarded as an inherent form of support. Instead, policy makers and widening participation teams should question if and how social capital comes into being in the context of student estrangement and which impact it has on their experiences. The lack of strong family ties is a major weakness in estranged students' lives because family is still viewed as a major form of social investment. What our research shows is that there is still a blind spot in widening participation policies and practices, with family ties often considered given, neutralised and normalised in terms of emotional and social supports, but also, increasingly, in the context of mediating and buffering student finances. To be without such anticipated supports, whether these materialise or not, is to exist in the fringes of the imagined 'student experience', experiencing invisibility or stigmatisation (Costa et al., forthcoming).

Widening participation supports need to take into account the impact of family estrangement on students' experiences, as demanded by the Stand Alone organisation. Stand Alone encourages institutions to commit to the Stand Alone Pledge by ensuring dedicated supports for estranged students such as financial assistance, accommodation, emotional support and so on – acknowledging the specificity of 'estranged students' as a distinct category not easily collapsible into 'widening participation' generally (see: http://www.thestandalonepledge.org.uk/).

As our data demonstrates, interviewees' experiences often lead to economic difficulties in that access to basic goods become a constant struggle; a struggle that is further compounded by limited meaningful social ties that could provide support. Experiences of estrangement can also lead to homelessness and a strong sense of exclusion within the higher education context. Thus, estranged students' experiences are not only impacted by the scarcity of economic or social capital, but rather by their intersection, which then impacts on symbolic positions in the field of higher education. The near constant sense of precarity can be compared with other 'widening participation' students, attending to the differences and similarities between and within 'student groups'; thus far 'estranged students' have also been conceptualised fairly homogenously, and more research is needed to further explore this as well as to strategically argue for specific and practical' resources for this group (as per the Stand Alone Pledge) across time and place. It is also important to consider student's own definitions, as well as resistances and personal

strength evident in all discussions of the challenges faced by estranged students. Often these students face isolation, uncertainty, financial instability and fear of homelessness, and yet have still secured a place at university using whatever limited resources, personal and practical, to navigate barriers to their academic success.

Finally, the research findings indicate that knowledge of the impact of family estrangement on student life is still very limited and that other layers of estranged students' experiences need to be explored, as for example, intersecting issues related to their gendered, racial and sexual identities. What is important to emphasise here is that this gap in knowledge is not only in relation to the UK, but rather to the international scene in that estrangement is largely an unidentified issue in international higher education landscapes, as demonstrated by our review of extant literature. Thus, there is a gap in knowledge, policy and practice that needs to be tackled more globally, with considerations of diverse local 'student experiences' within changing international educational economies.

This paper is relevant to teams of those concerned with researching widening participation generally, and the place of the 'family' in education and society more broadly; our hope is that there will be further use to practitioners working in widening participation teams as well as policy makers who are interested in developing a more thorough approach as to how estranged students navigate the higher education system and how they can be supported (Taylor et al., 2019). Clearly, more research is needed into the issue of estrangement, including 'estranged students', and we hope future research may probe further at the differences within and between estranged students, as well as dwelling on comparative differences across time and place.

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