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Abstract: One of the analysed explanations of social reproduction in a massive higher education system are differences in the decision-making process between non-traditional and middle class students. This paper explores social differences in the decision-making on where and what to study based on interviews with 42 Polish final grade secondary students. Meanings ascribed to higher education and future work, ability to read the educational market and the process of deciding which course to attend are analyzed in the theoretical framework of cultural capital, class habitus and field. The paper gives insights how social background shapes horizontal inequalities in higher education in Poland, exposing as well the interplay between class habitus and institutional habitus of school in the decision-making process.

Keywords: inequality; higher education; social class; cultural capital; institutional habitus

Introduction

Massification of higher education has not eradicated social inequalities, but it has changed their character from vertical to horizontal. In many countries the introduction of market mechanisms in higher education (HE) has led to increased representation of working-class students in higher education, but hierarchical division of higher education institutions (HEIs) and courses has become essential for the reproduction of social inequalities. Newly established institutions often serve young people from less affluent families and elite universities are mainly attended by privileged students. Similarly, the most prestigious courses like law, medicine and art accrue students from families with high cultural capital, whereas newly established courses, with attractive names are being chosen by youth striving for social advancement (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013).

One of the analysed explanations of social reproduction in a massive higher education system are differences in the decision-making process between non-traditional and middle class students (Ball et al., 2002). The majority of studies on reproducing inequalities in higher education by the distinctions in decision-making comes from Western countries (e.g. Brooks, 2003; Lehmann, 2007; Reay et al., 2010; Hegna & Smette, 2016), with well-established social classes and educational strategies. Not much is known of social differences in the decision-making of students in East-European countries, where class practices and strategies are less developed due to the system transformation. The work of Minina, Yanbarisova & Pavlenko (2020) based on data on Russian students' choice of track in secondary education shows that the socially shaped practices resemble those observed in Western countries. However, in the higher education system the differences can be more visible, due to the lower position of East-European universities in world rankings compared to the ones in the USA, United Kingdom or Western Europe.

The focus of this paper is on the decision-making process of Polish students choosing what and where to study. Many Polish studies based on quantitative data show that educational choices in Poland are to some extent determined by the social origin of students (e.g. Federowicz & Sitek, 2011; Grotkowska & Sztanderska, 2018) but not much is known of how the process of decision-making and applied strategies of choice vary between students depending on their social background. Wasielewski (2013) analyses the different paths to university of Polish students from rural areas and from cities, but he interprets the differences by geographical origins of students and possessed financial capital not by their social background. The present paper is closer to Sadura's study (2017) on students from the University of Warsaw. Sadura, based on interviews with Polish students, analyses educational paths to university. He distinguishes class-differentiated styles of decision-making on higher education courses:

the accidental choice of working-class students, a meticulous calculation based on carefully gathered information characteristic of the lower middle-class, and 'freedom of choice' resulting from passions and a desire to develop their interests, the most typical for upper middle-class students. In contrast to his study, in this paper students are interviewed before admission to universities which gives more insights into the process of decision-making and winnowing of options. The paper contributes to the educational inequality debate in Poland by showing differences in decision-making between students from families with and without higher education experience in the theoretical framework of cultural capital, class habitus and field. The analysis is focused on the following aspects of choice: meanings ascribed to higher education, awareness of divisions within it and the process of deciding which course to attend. The results reveal how social background shapes horizontal inequalities in higher education in Poland, exposing as well the interplay between class habitus and institutional habitus of school in the decision-making process.

Role of educational decision-making in reproducing educational inequalities

There is a great sociological debate whether people in postmodernity have agency and make free choices or whether choices are still shaped by culture, affecting not only preferences and dispositions, but also applied 'choosing technics' embedded in norms and values (Schwarz, 2018). Despite choices being perceived in contemporary society as individualised not collective, peoples' lives are still shaped by social origins as those from more educated and more affluent families achieve higher levels of education and more often study prestigious courses than children raised in non-privileged environments (OECD, 2018).

The Rational Action Theory (RAT) assumes that education decisions are rational and based on cost-benefit analysis (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). However, perceived costs, benefits and risks depend on social background. While making educational choices, students are concerned about maintaining the social status of their family of origin and minimizing the risk of downward mobility which results in different education decisions by different class representatives (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). In Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concept of social inequalities, educational and vocational choices are perceived as class practices which are an effect of interaction between class habitus and assets of cultural, economic and social capital in the framework of the education field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Habitus is 'a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences and actions, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions' (Bourdieu, 1977b, 82-83). Class practices vary in many aspects

of educational decision-making – starting with aspirations and attitudes towards learning, perception of what is needed to achieve educational success, ability to mobilise capitals and to compete, through constituting the choice options, capacity to make a decision, the choice techniques used and applied strategies (Ball et al., 2002; Bathmaker, Ingram & Waller, 2013). Bourdieu's concept of habitus is often criticised as too deterministic, but some authors claim (e.g. Mills, 2008) that in the context of education the role of habitus can be understood both as reproductive and transformative. While in some situations students recognizing the constraint of social conditions will tend to act in line with their inculcated habitus, on other occasions they may express more agency in generating opportunities for action. The transformation of habitus may be induced by the institutional habitus of the attended school. Schools generate their own institutional habitus which may result in different organisational practices, promoted values and expectations (Reay, 2001; Reay et al., 2005). The institutional habitus of a school shapes students' preferences whether they should go to a university and what type of the university they should choose, creating distinct student trajectories that reproduce inequality (Roksa & Robinson, 2016).

Cultural capital and habitus affect expectations from education, but also the activity in the selection process and the presence or lack of the strategic approach to education (Ball et al., 2002). Choices are much easier when they occur in a familiar field where the rules of the game are well-known. 'Embedded perceptions and expectations make certain choices 'obvious' and others unthinkable, according to where you stand in the overall landscape of choice.' (Ball et al., 2002, p. 58). Being disadvantaged in a particular field leads to adjustment of aspirations and to self-elimination without assessment of the chances of success (Yang, 2014). This subjective expectation of the objective probability means that working-class students, even if academically successful, often eliminate HEIs perceived as socially unattainable as they feel that they do not 'fit in' (e.g. Ball, 2003; Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2005). The phenomenon of self-exclusion is often explored in the literature as well as the social mismatch experience of working class students at university (Pugsley, 1998; Reay et al., 2001; Reay, 2004; Lehmann, 2007; Reay et al., 2009; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, 2018).

Knowledge of higher education institutions, courses and the application process is a form of cultural capital commonly held by more privileged families. The lack of information on higher education among first-generation students (Hutchings, 2002) is another aspect explaining sub-optimal education choices. Students with less favourable social background in their socialization process do not learn how the HE system works, which institutions are considered prestigious and what the job opportunities are for graduates. They often overestimate the costs of higher education, are not fully aware of the benefits

and lack information on how to access financial aid (Herbaut & Geuven, 2020). Even when they are motivated to collect information, they struggle to distinguish trusted sources (Hoxby & Turner, 2013).

Higher education in Poland

In Poland, throughout the communist period, higher education was strictly controlled by the state and very elitist. Although different measures were taken to attract students from the working-class (e.g. positive discrimination in the recruitment process giving extra recruitment points for deprived social origins), higher education remained a path reserved mainly for the narrow group of intelligentsia's offspring. In the newly established market economy of the '90s, secondary school graduates, as well as grown-ups who did not have opportunities to study in the previous system, moved to HE in droves. Poland is an example of one of the fastest expansions of the higher education sector in Europe – over those 20 years, the number of students increased fivefold, and the number of higher education institutions fourfold, achieving one of the highest values of the gross enrolment ratio indicator in the OECD countries – 54% (OECD, 2009).

The strong belief in the rationality of the market economy led to the creation of the biggest private higher education system in Central-Eastern Europe (Kwiek, 2013) and one of the highest shares of students attending part-time programmes in Europe (Herbst & Rok, 2014). The participation of previously underrepresented groups, e.g. people from families with low levels of education, those with low wages and those living in small towns and rural areas had increased (Herbst & Rok, 2014). On the other hand, the diversification of higher education, its division into public and private HEIs and full-time and part-time programmes, has created new lines of division and the formation of horizontal educational inequalities (Zawistowska, 2012). Students from better-off and more educated families are more represented at public universities, while students with lower socio-economic status and from non-central locations are more likely to participate in the paid offer of private universities and part-time studies (Herbst & Rok, 2014). In recent years, due to demographic reasons, the process of de-privatization of higher education has been observed (Kwiek, 2017) as the share of students studying in public institutions is rising. Polish society has very high educational aspirations – 73% would like at least a university education for their daughter and 12% at least a doctoral degree (CBOS, 2017). Higher education is perceived as massive and accessible for everyone (81%), only 14% has the opinion that it is elitist and possible only for high-achieving students (CBOS, 2017).

Despite years-long public debates on the low quality of private institutions, the newest studies based on graduate tracking data show that neither the mode

of studies (full-time, part-time) nor the type of higher education institution are crucial factors for finding a job after graduation (Jasiński et al, 2017). However, the studied discipline has a significant role for graduates' salaries (Zajac et al, 2017) which makes the choice of course potentially the most important dimension of inequalities in higher education in Poland.

Poland is an example of a country with late streaming into different programmes in education which favours education equality (OECD, 2013). After 8¹ years of primary school, at the age of 15, students choose one of three types of schools: academically oriented general secondary schools (high-schools), technical school or sectoral school. Students are admitted to schools based on their results on standard national tests. Secondary education in Poland is dominated by the public sector; in 2018/2019 only 6.6% students attended private high-school (GUS, 2019). 89.7% of students attend a school which enables them to continue education at a higher level (GUS, 2019). The admission to HEIs, similarly to secondary education, is based on the results of the national, standardized exam (pol. *Matura*). HEIs are not allowed to organise other forms of evaluation (except for art and sport HEIs) and have to use the results of the *Matura* exam in the recruitment procedure. Nevertheless, HEIs can decide on the department-specific criteria for which subjects from the *Matura* are needed to apply and on the algorithm for calculating recruitment points. Students are admitted to courses, not to institutions, which means that at the same university a student can be accepted for psychology and rejected for economics because of the different required threshold of recruitment points. In general, to be admitted to a prestigious public university higher results at the *Matura* exam are needed than in the private sector. However, the Polish higher education system is not selective, and even elite institutions usually struggle with admitting enough students for certain programmes (Zajac & Komendant-Brodowska, 2019).

Data and methodology

Analysed interviews with final-year secondary school students (aged 18-19) were carried out between December 2016 and January 2017. In order to recruit students from various family backgrounds, 14 schools were randomly selected (12 general secondary schools and 2 technical schools) from the list of all secondary schools in Warsaw (187). From each school three students were randomly recruited, which in total gave 42 interviewees. The applied procedure let us create a random sample. Although in qualitative studies this is not

¹ In 2017 the Polish government decided to change the structure of schooling and phase out lower secondary schools (pol. *gimnazja*). Between 1999 and 2017 after 6 years of primary school students attended 3-years lower secondary school and at the age of 16 were choosing among three types of school: high-school, technical school and basic vocational school.

necessary, it makes the analysis more profound and accurate. The interviews were structured and lasted about 35-45 minutes. Students were asked about their plans for the future and their motivations – preferred universities and courses, attitudes towards higher education and their sources of information. Data on family educational background and economic situation were collected as contextual variables. Socio-demographic characteristics of interviewees are presented in Table 1. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed.

Table 1 - Characteristics of the interviewees

Characteristic	N
Gender	female, n=24 male, n=18
Parents education	students from families without HE, n=16 students from families with one college educated parent, n=11 students from families with two parents with degrees, n=15
Economic situation	worse than in other known households, n=5 similar to other known households, n=29 better than in other known households, n=8

Source: own elaboration.

As Poland is among the countries with a very high level of first generation students – 65% (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), to analyse the data, students were divided into two groups using parental education level as the indicator for their cultural capital. The first group consists of students from families where both parents did not obtain a HE degree (working-class students but also children of people running small businesses) and in the second group are students from families where one or both parents hold a HE degree (lower middle-class and upper middle-class students).

The extracts from interviews are described as follows: interview number, gender (F – female, M – male); parental education (BWHE – both parents without a HE degree, MHE – mother with HE degree, FHE – father with HE degree, MFHE – mother and father with HE degree), and economic situation of the household (B – better than in other households, S – similar to other known households, W – worse than in other known households).

Motivation and perception of higher education

Traditionally higher education was outside the class trajectory of students from working-class families but with the massification of the system, although the field is still unknown, it is no longer an abstract, unattainable

world. Differences in socialisation mean that, although pursuing HE is more accessible for working-class students, it is still often perceived as a system of privilege which provides benefits on the labour market but not necessarily other qualities such as satisfaction and fulfilment (Archer, 2005). This different perception of higher education is closely linked with motivation to study. While for middle-class students going to a university is a type of non-decision, a path awaiting them from childhood, working-class students entering higher education, must make more conscious choice and see the potential benefits of a path which was not planned. Thus, they often express an instrumental approach to HE (e.g. Lehmann, 2009; Archer & Hutchings, 2000) perceiving it mainly as a way to get economically better employment.

Polish students from families without a HE degree, from both technical and general tracks (especially from less selective schools) more often expressed an instrumental approach towards higher education than middle-class students. Their main motivation to pursue higher education was to increase employment and career prospects by getting credentials. On one hand obtaining a degree is what working-class students strive for but on the other hand it was characteristic for students from this group to call a diploma “a piece of paper”. This term shows a somewhat contemptuous approach to higher education where the whole experience of studying at a university is reduced to the utility of the official certificate. The roots of this instrumental approach stem from partial information of the unfamiliar field. Working-class students were recalling stories of close relatives’ experience on the labour market who did not get a post or a promotion due to lacking official qualifications. Learning from familial experience, they strived to get a diploma to have more doors open on the labour market but were rather sceptical if by going to a university they would attain valuable knowledge and skills.

(...) in my opinion studying at a university is just a ‘piece of paper’,
(...) possibly what we will learn there may be useful in our life, but it is
mostly just a piece of paper needed to work (...). Let’s be frank, it can
be useful but not always. [27_M_BWHE_S]

Students from families without a higher education degree rarely linked motivation to enter higher education with the development of interests, personal curiosity or satisfaction which was often cited among students whose parents attended a university. However, some students from families without HE experience mentioned next to better labour prospects ‘personal reasons’ for getting a diploma. The ambition to prove to themselves and others that they are able to get a credential shows that a higher education degree is treated as a socially desired asset. As Polish society is characterised by high educational aspirations, not pursuing HE can be perceived as socially unwelcomed, even in working-class families.

Students from technical schools, although after graduation they are qualified to perform jobs in the learned professions, similarly to students from general track, did not want to finish their education at the secondary level and expected to continue education to get a degree. Some expressed the worry whether they will pass the Matura exam, but it seemed as the only obstacle on the way to higher education. Neither economic, nor cultural barriers appeared in the interviews, confirming the general perception of higher education in Polish society as easily accessible for everyone.

Middle-class students from general schools, especially the ones whose parents both had a diploma, perceived a university education as a continuum of developing personal interests and an opportunity to deepen knowledge in chosen areas. Intellectual development and growing personal talents as a motivation to go to a university were frequently mentioned.

Studying at university means to do something you like. Something that develops your passions, to educate yourself in the direction you want. (...) [16_F_MFHE_S]

Studying at university gives a possibility for self-development, a possibility to do what I want in life. [8_F_MFHE_S]

In contrast to students from families without a higher education degree, studying at a university was perceived as a process of gaining knowledge, not by the utility of diploma on the labour market. The types of capital possessed by middle-class students create space for freedom of choice. Economic concerns, such as a demand for certain professions or the level of earnings, were absent from their narratives. Students expressed a strong belief that passion should drive the choice of course, as it will guarantee future professional success. Some students clearly expressed that going to a university is a way of maintaining the high social status of parents clearly illustrates RAT reasoning ruling educational choices.

My mother is successful in her professional life, her expertise is much in demand, which also translates into earnings. It is somewhat an interesting convention that a man who was raised at some level, will strive subconsciously to that level, so I am looking for a course for me that will give me the possibility (...) to find something that will be close to my parents' status. [5_M_MHE_B]

Attitudes towards future work

Occupational expectations and attitudes towards work constitute an important aspect of habitus as they capture an individual's understanding of the social structure and one's place in it (Dumais, 2002; Roksa & Robinson

2016). The type of school attended – general or technical track – significantly shaped attitudes towards preferred time of entering the labour market. Students from the technical track, irrespective of social origin, planned to find a job just after graduation from secondary school and study in part-time programmes. Although among this group students from working-class families were predominant, this preference for early entry to the labour market cannot be explained only by social origins. Students from families without higher education experience but attending general track schools, similarly to more privileged colleagues, did not plan to start working in the nearest future, and were rather reluctant to combine work with studying at a university.

As for the planned time of entering the labour market, the type of school matters the most. The role of class habitus was revealed in the expectations from future work. For most students from technical schools the motivation to enter the labour market early was financial independence. Despite their professional qualifications, they were not planning to find a job which would be relevant to their qualification. The type of job was not important, just the money it can bring. Even a boy attending IT technical school, both of whose parents had a university diploma and very good financial situation, planned to start a job just after graduation from secondary school. However, in contrast to his colleagues from the technical track, he expressed a typical middle-class approach to career planning. He had a clear plan for the future – applying for IT or Mathematics at a very good technical university and at the same time gaining professional experience in IT to boost his skills.

My parents also studied and worked at the same time. My brother is two years older than me and he also decided to work and study part-time. Well, I personally think that this is the most optimal option.
[31_M_MFHE_B]

The different approach to qualifications and work among students from the vocational track was also visible in their reasoning why they chose technical school. Although the core curriculum for technical schools is more demanding (students have the same number of hours of general subjects as in general track but additionally they have vocational subjects), the social prestige of these schools is lower and commonly it is believed that students on the technical track were just not admitted to the general one. However, the perception of what is the optimal educational choice varied among students from technical and general schools. All students from the technical track argued that the choice of technical school is more beneficial than going to high school as graduates have more opportunities – they can either enter the labour market as they gain professional qualifications or continue education at a university. From their perspective, the choice of the general track makes graduates go to a university, as they are not able to find any job after grad-

uation from high school, so their situation, as well as the choice was perceived as worse. This different approach to what is beneficial for whom can be interpreted by Breen and Goldthorpe's (1997) theory of different risk assessment of downward mobility. As students from lower social backgrounds have often lower academic results and less knowledge of the HE field, the risk of choosing an academic track in high-school and dropping-out is higher for them. For students from middle-class families, as choice of university is taken for granted early on and they do not plan to enter the labour market early, this risk does not appear.

In general, I preferred a technical school than a high school, you get a profession just in case. [15_M_BWHE_S]

Students with lower cultural capital when speaking about future work did not link it with personal satisfaction or fulfilment nor did they perceive it in the context of building a career. Their idea of future work was very vague, they did not have a plan for the future which was characteristic for students from families with both parents with a degree. Vocational jobs of their parents and vocational education constituted a point of reference for the imaginary future occupation. For example, one girl mentioned her early ideas of having 'an office job', which is a general term used for white-collar jobs. As jobs for professionals were unknown to her due to her social origin, she could not be more specific what type of job she would prefer. The expression used underlines that the main perceptible difference between jobs for higher education graduates compared to people without it is a different work environment – an office and a desk instead of physical labour.

Already at high school, I have been thinking that maybe I would work at an office. (...) Higher education gives better professional prospects than for example a basic vocational school. [18_F_BWHE_S]

Middle-class students did not plan to enter the labour market immediately as they intended to study in full-time programmes. Although they often perceived the period of studying at a university as a prolongation of childhood and carefree life, they had been thinking about prospective work after getting the diploma. However, higher education for them was not a way to get a better-paid job, as it was for students with lower social background, but a possibility to perform an interesting and fulfilling job. They were afraid of being stuck in a boring job without a possibility to 'express themselves' or to show their talents and personality. The self-confidence stemming from acting in a known field was expressed by taking for granted getting a white-collar job. However, most students from this group were focused on performing a satisfying job instead of just a 'good job'. In the opposition to the earlier mentioned aspiration for 'an office job' of the underprivileged student, those from middle-class families 'would not like to land behind the

desk' (22_F_MFHE_S) which was a symbol of a boring job, which does not allow for any creativity.

Planning the future

Characteristic of middle-class habitus is a tendency to detailed future planning that has been 'almost present' since childhood (e.g. Reay et al., 2009, p.1110). This planning is possible due to knowledge of the rules of the field as well as the capital they possess – cultural, social and economic, creating a safety net. Many Polish middle-class students had started thinking about higher education already at the beginning of lower-secondary school (at the age of 13). As going to university is taken for granted by this group of students, early planning of their prospective educational path gives them more time to think about different options as well as to collect needed information. In such conditions the future is awaited and perceived as secure, which makes middle-class students very self-confident in their narration about studying at a university and prospective career. Even if middle-class students had not made the final decision of what to study, they considered different options, spent time on collecting information and intensively planned possible careers. These traits are noticeably visible in the narration of a girl from a family of doctors who several months before the Matura exam had decided at what university she wanted to study medicine. She knew her chances of admission at each institution, what specialisation she would choose in several years, and where she would be looking for a job. Aware of the capital she possessed, she used them fully to set ambitious goals for the future.

From when I was little, I have been planning, I have been focused on studying medicine. My first preferred option is the Warsaw Medical University. Of course, I would like to do a specialization later in psychiatry or child psychiatry, or possibly radiology. These are my main interests. (...) I've always been interested in medicine, because I'm from a family where literally 3 generations of my family are doctors or somehow related to health care. I'm just focused on it but I really like it and from childhood I've been having opportunities to develop what interests me. (...) I would like to work in Warsaw, of course, and if not, I am a very big fan of the Tricity, so that could be a place where I would stay, but if I will not be able to find work anywhere my grandmother has a private clinic, so I will always have some work.
[3_F_MFHE_B]

The lacking disposition towards future, especially towards education and training is considered as a part of the working-class habitus (Reay, 2018). Indeed, many interviewed students from families without a degree did not

have a clear plan for the future. They were very uncertain and declared that they had recently started to think more about where and what to study. However, some interviewees from families without HE experience, despite a similar social background, had more precise plans for the future. Their cases suggest that lack of education planning is not mainly a matter of working-class habitus but it is also an effect of choosing from unfamiliar offers of higher education.

I've been thinking about studying geology, but unfortunately I think I will not be admitted, because I don't know if I will achieve a good result at the Matura exam. (...) I actually don't know yet what I want, I'm still thinking. I've decided that after the Matura exam I will choose.
[18_F_BWHE_S]

Some students from families without a HE degree manage to match their vocational interests to the offer of higher education expressing self-confidence in their preferred path of education and career similar to more privileged students. An interesting example showing how one person can express different attitudes towards planning was presented by a girl [34_F_MWHE_B] raised by a single mother without a university degree who was nevertheless economically successful (she owned several corner shops in hospitals). Similarly to students with higher social background, she had a very clear vision of the future based on her personal interests and enhanced by the information she had already collected. Since childhood, she was fascinated by fashion and wanted to become a stylist. As she had already started going for castings and acting in commercials, she was well informed on the career options in the professional field she was planning to enter after getting a degree. This choice aligned with her habitus seemed as easy and 'natural' as the choices of students from educated families confident about their preferences. However, the same girl's narration about the future was completely different when she was sharing her second intended option, which was a purely academic course in English Philology at the University of Warsaw. The logic, motivation and details of the plan were not present any more. Contrary to the proposed study of make-up, she could not imagine what it means to study English Philology, what type of knowledge she could attain and how she could use it in private life. Her idea of studying English Philology seemed very accidental and not embedded in her interests like make-up studies. When asked about her motivation behind this option she expressed irritation feeling insecure: *Oh God... I just simply opened a website and I liked this course. I've been taking extra classes in English with a private tutor, and I'm trying [to apply].* Her main argument for studying at the University of Warsaw was that *studies are for free*. Finding something similar to one's own experience, even in the unfamiliar field of higher education, makes planning possible.

Most students from families without higher education experience were not well informed on different possibilities such as what are the types of programmes, what courses can be studied at which universities or what are the jobs for graduates. As some made an effort to find some information in advance, the expressed approach to overcome the lack of information was differentiated by the selectiveness of the secondary school they attended. Students from less selective schools, especially the ones from technical schools, were not actively looking for information on higher education, often postponing the process after they pass the Matura exam. As they were not sure of their outcome in the final exam, they were trying to adjust their plans to what would be reasonable to expect in the given situation. Students from families without HE experience but attending more selective schools in the general track (although like other underprivileged students they were not well informed and self-confident about their educational plans made attempts to find out more about higher education to make the best choice. They often declared searching for information to plan their future.

The Horizon of Choice Options

In Poland private HE institutions are less selective and considered less prestigious than the state-provided institutions, and they are more frequently chosen by students from less educated and affluent families (Herbst & Rok, 2014). Among interviewed students, only a few from less selective secondary schools considered applying for a private university. Most students, independently of their social origins, were not interested in private institutions and if ever considered, treated them as a 'safe option' when not accepted to a state university as the entrance requirements are much lower. Most students rejected private colleges due to the perception that these institutions are focused exclusively on 'making money' instead of providing a high quality of teaching. Even if private universities offer better facilities (e.g. newer infrastructure or modern administrative culture) these features were unattractive as students declared the importance of a high quality of teaching. According to Ball et al (2002, p. 66), 'classificatory judgements' visibly disclose students' perceptions of what is unacceptable. However, in narratives of Polish students, private HE institutions were rejected mainly due to their academic quality, and not in terms of the social status of people attending them.

Have you considered any non-public institutions?

Not really. (...) there is a difference between a state university and a private university. There are private universities, which are very good, but there is the belief that state universities prepare a student

better, because they care more about learning, and not the money students pay, so it's even better to have it a little worse and harder at a state university, than to study at a private one. [5_M_MHE_B]

State universities enjoy a very good, so to say, recognition. It's obvious that public ones are better than private. (...) in these state colleges, you have to be admitted and then not be kicked out, and in private you pay, so you know... [22_F_MFHE_S]

Some students from middle-class families could not explain why they had never considered private universities and seemed even surprised by the question. As the newly established private HE institutions did not match their habitus, they unconsciously excluded them from their choice options.

Have you considered studying at a private university?

No.

Why not?

I honestly don't even know them. In a sense, the Warsaw Polytechnic seemed good and attractive enough to me that ... I haven't even considered other options. [16_F_MFHE_S]

Also among first-generation students, private colleges did not gain much popularity, as most of them wanted to study at a public institution. Nevertheless, in addition to quality they more often mentioned the financial constraints of studying at private universities, which would not allow them and their families to choose such an option. For students from less educated families, although private institutions are a less desired option they are not fully excluded like in the case of students with privileged backgrounds. Despite the fact that the fees are similar at the private institutions compared to part-time programmes at the public universities, few students with a lower social background considered studying at the former and did not perceive it as a barrier. This incoherent perception of costs at private and public institutions could stem from the lack of students' knowledge on the costs of education.

Why wouldn't you like to study at private university?

Well, mainly for financial reasons, and I think that public universities have more prestige, right? And I don't know how it is with the level of education, but I guess it looks different, that you went to such a school, where money did not count, but what you had at your final exams. [23_M_BWHE_S]

Similarly to Brooks (2003) but contrary to other studies (e.g. Reay et al., 2001), in the narratives of Polish students social discomfort linked with a mismatch of an individual and an institutional habitus were absent while speaking about various institutions. Interviewed students attending general track and more selective high schools, independently of their social background, were planning to apply to the best-known and most prestigious public universities in Warsaw – University of Warsaw, Warsaw University of Technologies, Warsaw School of Economics. Some students were anxious about not being admitted due to their academic performance, but no self-exclusionary statements on ‘not fitting in’ in social terms appeared in the interviews. Even students from families without higher education degrees used arguments that they want to study at certain universities, because they are ‘prestigious’ or ‘have a good reputation’. This phenomenon could be partially explained by the students’ place of residence – as all interviewees lived in Warsaw or in close proximity to the city, even those raised in families without HE diploma, had some possibilities to learn about the most prestigious institutions. As these institutions are public and offer studies free of charge, together with the relatively low selectiveness of higher education in Poland, students did not perceive them as unattainable.

Have you thought already about any university you would like to attend?

I’m 200% sure it will be the University of Warsaw. There is no other option at all. It’s like I’m very close-knit with Warsaw and it’s my place to live, so I can’t imagine that I could study anywhere other than in Warsaw and the University of Warsaw has its reputation and I care about good education, that’s why the choice was obvious.
[29_F_BWHE_W]

The private-public distinction between HEIs is not the only dimension of horizontal inequalities. While some universities are well-recognized research centres, there are also public HEIs which have a more vocational character, e.g. military or police academies, academies of physical education. Students from families with lower cultural capital attending technical schools or less selective high schools often planned to study at the latter. Although it could be interpreted as a self-exclusion from more prestigious institutions, it was not visible in students’ statements. The choice of institution in most cases is secondary to the choice of course. Students first had contemplated what course they could study or at least what was their field of interest, and then tried to find the institution offering particular courses. As academic institutions do not provide vocational courses, some students from this group with developed interests of a non-academic character, preferred less prestigious public institutions.

Choosing a Course

The choice of courses is one of the most visible consequences of differences in educational decision-making. Bourdieu claims that what is often called an individual choice is a mere illusion, as it is not possible to disentangle what is truly individual and what is a class-specific disposition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). According to Bourdieu & Passeron (1990) students from families with more cultural capital tend to prefer prestigious courses because they let them make the most of their cultural competences and language skills enabling them to realise intellectual plans.

Students from middle-class families, especially from the upper middle-class, mostly could not only clearly define their academic interests but also declared that they had already been devoted to developing their passions for several years, some even since early childhood. Even if their preferences and plans for the future have changed through the course of their life, they could easily recall their early ideas on areas of studies or careers they had wanted to pursue. The choice aligned with habitus gave this group of students a lot of self-confidence in future-planning. The intellectual plans and the possibility to develop interests came first when considering higher education courses which resulted in preferences for more prestigious, rather academic than vocational type courses. If some students were less decided what to study and considered several different options, still all of these options were somehow linked with their broad interests.

I wanted to study psychology since childhood as my mother used to tell me different funny stories from psychology. The more serious they were, the more interesting these stories were, the more I was motivated to change something in psychology. [9_M_MFHE_S]

For students from families without a higher education degree, choosing a course took place quite late in their school career. Less favourable opportunities of personal development and modest opportunities to develop interests, as well as a limited knowledge on courses offered by universities, lead to postponing the moment of making a decision. As students from this group were not well oriented in HE, they could not always clearly specify their preferences for particular courses.

Many students from families without a degree showed similar preferences towards courses as students from families with a higher education diploma. As they were already successful enough to be admitted to good high schools, they wanted to continue learning at the best universities and courses. These resemblances of preferences in the most selective schools between students from different social background shows how class habitus can be transformed by exposure to the institutional habitus of a school. However, as the interviewees were still very young, they were rather in pro-

cess of transition between two different social worlds. They were able to mimic the preferences of peers from families with higher background but their process of deciding what to study was still determined by their lack of field knowledge and marked by their habitus. Although they were academically successful, relative to other students from families without a degree, they did not have well developed academic interests, which could help them to choose a course. As personal interests are one of the most common reasons for choosing a course, these students applied a different strategy, namely they were matching their preferred school subjects with recruitment requirements to create a list of possible courses. In the next step, they were trying to find some information based on these specific courses to narrow the list. Elements of the described process are well portrayed by a student [23_M_BWHE_S] attending a very selective high school and doing academically well but whose parents did not hold a diploma. Although he had crystallised his preferences towards prestigious HEIs, he struggled with the decision what to study as he had little idea what different academic disciplines entailed. As the field of higher education was unknown to him, interests did not steer his decision, nor did his childhood dreams. He put some effort into learning about different courses but after reading descriptions on websites, he still could not grasp what he would actually learn, as he was unfamiliar with the academic world.

Why would you like to study these courses [computer science, geodesy and cartography, environmental engineering]?

Well, maybe they were not my childhood dreams but they seem interesting to me. At least from the descriptions [at the university webpage] and I was also at the open day and I talked to the students there... [23_M_BWHE_S]

Discussion and Final Remarks

The analysis of interviews with Polish students shows that expansion of higher education together with high social aspirations makes going for a degree a necessity. Regardless of parental education, students showed high interest in pursuing higher education. Even low-achieving students or students from the technical track did not perceive higher education as an unattainable path. Despite interviewed students sharing a vision of the near future, the differences in the process of making educational decisions show how horizontal inequalities in higher education arise. Distinct attitudes towards planning one's education path, perception of the purpose and value of higher education, approach towards future work, level of knowledge about higher education as well as differences in the character of interests (voca-

tional vs. academic) varied due to the social origin of student, school type and school selectiveness.

The noted differences between two analysed groups – students with parents who got a degree and students from families without a degree – reveal the crucial role of habitus in educational decision-making, however, the mediating role of school type and its selectiveness was observed too. The readiness of students from the technical track to start working early leads to the choice of less prestigious part-time programmes. Inclinations towards full-time programmes and a longer carefree life without a necessity to start working was observed in high-schools just as often among students whose parents did not attend university as among the ones whose parents hold a degree. The type of chosen track seems to be more influential than habitus on the preferred time of entering the labour market due to differences in promoted values and expectations from students. While high schools are perceived as a straight way to university, technical schools are more labour-market oriented which results in a different orientation towards preferred time of starting a job.

The ‘value of the diploma (...) depends on the economic and social values of the person who possesses it’ (Bourdieu, 1977a, p.506) which means that reaping rewards from a degree depends on the class-specific attitudes to higher education. The idea of future work as the motivation to pursue higher education revealed many class specific distinctions. Students from families without a higher education diploma perceived higher education mainly through the final outcome – the credential they will obtain to enter jobs which are reserved for university graduates. This instrumental approach, although developed in the socialization by the observation of parents, is also a result of dealing with an unfamiliar field rather than just class habitus. Lack of knowledge of the field and the labour market for professionals leads to an image of future work which is only a source of money, not the source of satisfaction or personal fulfilment, which was a common perception of professional activity among students with more privileged backgrounds. Although these class distinctions will not always be translated into different educational choices, they can result in lower benefits from higher education among working-class students.

The ability to read the HE market on the basic level was expressed by most of the students who perceived private HEIs as the ones offering lower quality and were thus less preferred. As the results of the study do not clearly show the mechanism leading to choice of private institutions by students with lower social background, what is important to underline is that the process of making a decision was analysed, not the final choice which is constrained by the requirements of universities. Even if some students from families without higher education experience expressed ambitious plans

for the future, these plans can be changed if they are not admitted to their preferred institutions, courses or type of programmes due to their level of achievement at the end of secondary school. Although many students were aware that there are better and worse institutions, they neither follow rankings nor express any negative opinions on particular institutions. Psychological constraints were also not pronounced. Students from families without a degree did not express fear that they would not fit in socially in certain institutions. As all students had been living in Warsaw or in the vicinity, higher education institutions in the capital did not seem to them so unreachable as for students from rural areas or small cities who more frequently experience the habitus mismatch (Sadura, 2017; Wasielewski, 2013). The process of self-exclusion could, however, be hidden behind preferences for particular courses. As students from families without higher education could not always find courses which would match their interests at the most prestigious academic institutions, they chose public but less prestigious institutions like military or sport colleges.

The reproduction of the hierarchy of courses constitutes another dimension of horizontal inequalities in higher education. The most important distinction in choosing a course between students from families with and without university education is whether a student has precise interests and whether these interests have an academic or vocational character. Most students from families with high cultural capital have developed interests of an academic character, which constitute their basis for choosing a course. Less privileged students either do not develop any particular interests and then struggle to figure out what they could study or their interests have a non-academic character that leads to choosing more vocational and less prestigious courses. Socially constructed lack of knowledge of what various courses entail and what are possible jobs for graduates of these courses cause many students from working-class families to undertake studies that might turn out to be uninteresting to them and from which they may drop out.

In the Polish context, selective high-schools are considered as an important source of incorporating cultural capital (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2015). Students whose parents did not attend university but who themselves went to more selective high-schools resembled peers from families with higher cultural capital in their preferences for HEIs, courses and to some extent in attitudes towards higher education. By choosing and being admitted to selective high-schools, these students had already shown strong agency and practise not aligned to their working-class habitus. The institutional habitus of the school they attended enabled them to access forms of dominant cultural capital. By the last grade of high-school their process of incorporating new values, preferences and practices was already advanced and manifested in habitus transformation. Despite that, they appeared to retain some as-

pects of the old habitus, which manifested mainly in lack of self-confidence in future planning, choosing a course with limited information and their applied strategy of making a decision on a course. These students have learned what is the legitimate discourse on higher education, which institutions are prestigious and which courses are socially desirable. However, habitus is constructed mainly by experience and as they could not change the social conditions they were raised in or gain knowledge on the field of higher education in an informal way, they were very uncertain whether they would choose the right courses. Many of them were determined to find out more about academia but the official websites of universities describing courses cannot be compared to knowledge accumulated by students from families where both parents have a higher education degree who by early development of academic interests could easily navigate universities' offerings.

Class-differentiated decision-making process of Polish students shows both some similarities to the practices observed in Western countries as well as some characteristics typical for Poland. The crucial instruments of supporting students from working-class families in their path towards a good-quality higher education seems to be the provision of accurate and relevant information on higher education as well as the development of their academic interests in the course of education. As shown on many examples, the relevant support of school can change practices, blurring the differences stemming from social origins.

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