

**On Structure and Subjectivity, Reproduction and Transformation: Understanding non-traditional students in higher education; a trans-European approach<sup>1</sup>**

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**Introduction**

Access and retention in HE has become an important policy issue in recent years, across the UK and Europe. The massification of HE has increased the numbers of students entering HE while widening participation policies have opened the doors slightly to non-traditional students, both younger and adults. Research indicates that the learning experiences of adults in different types of HEIs varies. Statistics also reveal a differentiation in the drop-out rates ranging from small to high percentages.

With the marketisation of HE and the push for a vocational emphasis on degree courses the social and educational benefits of learning are being neglected by governments and policy-makers. Their concern with drop-out rates is an economic one and those that drop-out are viewed negatively. Our research, which focuses on access, retention and drop-out, aims to look qualitatively (biographical interviews) at why some students keep on going on despite, in some cases enormous difficulties, and why others from a similar background in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, age and disability drop-out. The issues are complex but we do not view dropping out as always being negative as many gain educationally and socially from learning even though they do not complete. Dropping out may be the starting point of a new stage in their biography.

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There are eight partners involved in this research project. We all come to this research with different approaches to biographical research ranging from the more scientific approach of the German team to the more subjective/intersubjective approach of the UK teams. We also share different theoretical and conceptual approaches as we come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. This symposium paper explores some of these differences but also how we are working towards combining the different perspectives.

### **Studenthood and identification: higher education as a liminal transitional space**

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What does it mean to be a student in a period of mass higher education? A growing number of researchers in post-compulsory education and training have explored questions of identity as a significant dimension of the learning experience (Tedder and Biesta 2009; Merrill 2009). This paper provides a conceptual discussion of studenthood as a way of understanding the ways in which student identities are related to participation and retention. Studenthood refers here to the variety of different ways in which registering for an education programme is implicated in people's sense of who they are.

Studenthood is a distinctive form of identity because educational programmes themselves are almost invariably associated with transition. The formal status of being a "student" is relatively clear cut in higher education, where people are required to undergo prescribed procedures which clearly designate them as being students. The status of student is also a transitory status, after which most will expect to become something else – a graduate, who will enjoy graduate status in a credentialist labour market.

We can therefore see higher education not only as a transitional space, but as being "liminal". This idea derives from the work of the social anthropologist, Victor Turner (1987), on tribal peoples who are in the midst of a passage from one status role to another. There are obvious reasons why Turner's idea of liminality cannot be transferred unproblematically to the types of status transition that are experienced in a very different type of society. Nevertheless, we argue, it is possible to draw on and develop Turner's work in thinking of a critical theory of retention.

#### **Turner and the liminal persona**

Liminality, in Turner's work, refers to what he calls "an interstructural situation" that is experienced by people undergoing a rite of passage. He was particularly interested in those elements of ritual, instruction and symbolism that expressed concepts of the "interstructural human", believing that they would help to inform a model of society as a "structure of positions" (Turner 1987, 4).

For those within the rite of passage, Turner argued, their identity is neither that of the old nor that of the new. “Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary identities”, he wrote, and may in some societies even involve “a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise”. So although a structuralist, he certainly was not a simple functionalist. Rather, he accepted that initiation rituals may conserve the status quo, but equally may also generate new thought and new custom (Turner 1987, 7).

Turner linked the generative capacity of this role to its very marginality. Liminal personae were often separated physically from the rest of society, whether by isolation and distance or by symbolic disguises such as masks. Often, he noted, they have no possessions and their relations with others are characterised by attributes of “structural invisibility”. Yet particularly where these rites are collective, Turner thought that there was likely to be complete equality among neophytes, transcending all other distinctions. The neophytes themselves tended to form life-long bonds. Once more, Turner saw this as the production of “interstructural liminality”, where the initiands were not enacting institutionalised roles, yet nevertheless were performing the values of the common good (Turner 1987, 9-11).

Turner conceptualised his work in the context of what he saw as small scale, stable, cyclical societies. It would be wrong to take his ideas as a conceptual template that can be applied, unchanged, to the higher education systems of larger scale, fast-changing and multi-linear societies of the advanced capitalist nations. Just to take one obvious example, Turner presents data on relations between instructors and initiands that were typified by complete submission and obedience (Turner 1987, 9). Whatever we may think about the hierarchical nature of contemporary higher education, these are hardly likely to be its typical characteristics. Nevertheless, some of Turner’s insights may be helpful in enabling us to understand the processes of identification within contemporary higher education.

### **Habitus and disposition in higher education**

Researchers have paid considerable attention to the interplay between student identity and institutional culture in higher education. In particular, a number of writers have drawn on Bourdieu’s thinking to examine the relations between habitus, disposition and various capitals in higher education systems. Diane Reay and others have examined the way in which the institutional habitus of higher education is typically welcoming for those whose dispositions are formed in environments rich in cultural and social capital; and equally alienating for those whose dispositions may not include the values, attitudes and tastes that are valued not only by academics and administrators but also by other students (Reay et al 2005).

The RANLHE project is particularly concerned with ‘non-traditional students’. This is, of course, a troubling notion, which has been hotly debated within the project team. We chose it largely because we thought it likely to be meaningful to a non-research audience, including those who are participating in the study. Yet although defining a group of people by what they are not is inherently risky, it can also highlight the non-normative

nature of the group's attributes. In this case, it points to the ways in which some students' dispositions are characterised by their exposure to forms of capital – social and cultural – that have limited value within higher education.

Bourdieu's work is clearly valuable in exposing the deep social and cultural roots of contemporary inequalities and injustices in higher education. This is not to say that his ideas have always been applied thoughtfully; as Reay herself remarks (2004), some researchers have taken a somewhat superficial and mechanistic view of Bourdieu's work, so that his theory sometimes appears little more than a respectably high-faluting Marxism.

Moreover, in some respects his work is now dated. While higher education systems may well reflect and reproduce inequalities, Bourdieu's fieldwork was undertaken in a particular context. The habitus that characterised the French *grandes écoles* during the 1960s is very different from the habitus of a mass higher education system in early twenty-first century Britain. The cultural assumptions and norms of French elites in the 1960s that underpinned Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital and taste have been shattered, not least by the youth movements (and associated consumer markets) of that and subsequent decades. Cultural tastes and dispositions may be derived from and express a variety of pluralistic solidarities associated with generation, ethnicity and gender as much as, or even more than, socio-economic class.

The massification of higher education is particularly significant for our understanding of the importance of studenthood as identity. The Finnish scholar Tapio Aittola has drawn attention to the socio-cultural importance of mass higher education, arguing that while the status and identity of student was highly distinctive and appealing during the phase of elite higher education, university study has now become the normal route for young people. As Aittola says, apart from anything else, one result is that going to university increasingly feels like an extension of school (Aittola 1995). As well as the subjective dimension, there is some evidence that the value of university credentials is less clear cut in a period of mass higher education, which in turn is likely to have a subjective dimension.

### **Studenthood as a liminal status**

In a mass higher education system, student status is also a liminal status. In Turner's words, it is an institutionalised status that is explicitly betwixt and between two other statuses. It is bounded by time, as well as by prescribed criteria of entrance and exit. It is also inherently a temporary status.

The temporality of education is rarely investigated by researchers (for an exception see Allan and Lewis 2009). Yet it is an important aspect of higher education's liminal nature. Students must constantly interact with staff and departments that constantly present the learner's status as student, and symbolically reinforce the learner's formal status as student. Inevitably, though, this is a formal status with a clear time scale: as well as a date of initial registration and at least a 'normal' date of graduation, there are timetables for attendance, deadlines for assessments, time limits on passing from one level to another.

You might feel yourself to be a student all your adult days, but the university regulations will always draw a line.

It follows that studenthood will always be a provisional identity. Learners will build their sense of studenthood over time, in the knowledge that it has prescribed temporal boundaries. These temporal milestones are often associated with ceremonies and ritual, from the symbolic practices of assessment to the grand opera of graduation. All of these organise and reinforce the transitional nature of studenthood.

So studenthood is always a temporary identity. And drawing on Bourdieusian analyses of higher education, one explanation of retention is to do with the students' dispositions. These will include the nature of studenthood – that is, the ways in which the learner thinks of themselves as being a student, including the extent to which they develop an identity as a student. At its crudest, we would expect retention rates to be higher among those who have a well-developed sense of themselves as fitting the role of student. They will be comfortable and confident with the identity of studenthood.

Conversely, the non traditional learner is likely to experience the role of student as a marginal one, as a cause of discomfort, or as inconsistent with other established identities. Far from integration into a cohesive group of what Turner calls “initians” they are more likely to develop a ‘relational identity’ that can account for subjective feelings of being isolated and out-of-place. When this is overlaid by epistemological obstacles, such non-normative students may resort to “mimicry” of the cultural and educational capital that they see in others; or they may simply see themselves as in a “stuck place” (Meyer and Land 2005, 373). Where learners are able to master the epistemological challenges of the discipline, they may equally resort to celebration of their distinctiveness.

Studenthood will also involve imagined futures. Learner identities will be expressed through, and also shaped by, different ways of seeing the future self. One of our interviewees spoke openly about imagining herself engaging in a conversation with middle class friends, while maintaining her existing family ties. Again, this is associated with the transitory nature of the student role. The growing financial commitments incurred by study, combined with evidence of a slowly falling return on graduate status, will affect imagined futures. It is not clear, though, whether these trends are likely to erode the learner's emotional investment in their transitional student identity, or encourage them to make conscious efforts to hang in and complete.

Interviews with mature students showed ways in which participating in higher education had changed their sense of who they were – in particular, of their own capability and worth. A new sense of themselves as capable of learning and accordingly, the opening up of new possibilities for self-fulfilment both in the present and in future was a recurring theme. Often this was important to their continuation as students – though support both practical and emotional from family and friends, as well as academic staff, were other key factors highlighted, indicating the relationship between dispositional factors and those relating to external circumstances – such as family responsibilities – in student retention.

These are, of course, rather general remarks. Studenthood will vary considerably between different groups of non-traditional learner. Generational differences, for example, may mean that mature students still view university life as an exceptionally privileged experience, while young non-traditional students may see it – as Aittola suggests – as a slightly grown up version of school. Gender differences will also play themselves out, though in increasingly complex ways as the gender balance of students (and increasingly staff) shifts away from traditional patterns of patriarchal domination.

Studenthood may also be expected to vary between different types of university, and within universities between different disciplines. In her study of mature students in a research university, Kasworm found that respectful connections with academic faculty were particularly important in learners' co-construction of their relational identities (Kasworm 2010, 153-5). Of course, there may be a generational dimension to this pattern. Kasworm nonetheless suggests that the search for authenticity and legitimacy within the cultural context of a research university is likely to be different from that of a high-access, community based college, and that this is likely to impact upon learner identity.

### **Conclusions**

The idea of constructing a critical theory of retention is ambitious. It is particularly zealous, even utopian, to suppose that the building blocks can be made from such diverse material as social anthropology, critical theory, social theory and psychoanalysis. Perhaps, confronted with this challenge, some might decide to drop out – as a positive step of self-realisation!

This paper has outlined the concept of studenthood as a way of understanding the ways in which student identities are related to participation and retention. It argues that retention can be influenced by the different ways in which participating in learning is implicated in people's sense of who they are. Of course, their sense of a learning self can also be a damaged one, as in the case of people who see themselves as permanently blocked, or as someone who is a "drop out". Arguably, the identity of the lifelong student is also a damaged and damaging one, indicating trouble in moving from a different kind of "stuck place". These suggestions draw on Turner's ideas of liminality in an attempt to explain studenthood as an inherently transitory identity – one that people develop over time, but subsequently leave behind, and know from the outset that they will leave behind. For most learners, indeed, the whole purpose of studenthood is its transitory nature. As one interviewee put it: "My turn: I'm going forward now".

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## **Towards a Critical Theory of Access and Retention in Irish Higher Education**

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The themes of respect, confidence and self-esteem emerging in the interviews undertaken as part the RANLHE research project have been both striking and thought provoking. This has forced us to reconsider what is at stake when students talk about studying in university. The students we spoke to were clearly not seeking status or prestige alone but rather recognition, which touches on *both* one's 'private' sense of self and one's 'public' self. Intersubjective recognition has emerged as a key theme in our data and has been central in students' accounts of their motivation for applying to college and their determination 'to stay the course.' This has offered us some new insights about the successful formation of learner identity, student motivation and retention. We are in the process of identifying the broader pedagogical, institutional and social implications. What is *not* being proposed is that *all* the issues that have emerged from a grounded examination of the data can be understood under the rubric of recognition but that this is one highly significant and under-theorised aspect of student experience that merits careful consideration.

The extent to which students have chosen to foreground these issues in their stories has surprised us. Our sensitising concepts reflected our previous engagement with critical theory, critical pedagogy, social psychology and the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (Johnston et al., 2009).

The interviewees decision to come to college was informed by a desire for recognition that was rooted in some perceived lack or undeveloped capability which was often rooted in the experience of disrespect at school or at work. For instance Katy, now in her 30s, talked about her working class background and 'turbulent family life....I always refer to myself as the person who fell through the cracks.....in school'. So despite the fact that

she subsequently enjoyed a successful but not wholly satisfying career after school where she was 'respected' she decided 'I wanted to go back [to education] for my own self-esteem to try to see can I do this'. In university she has flourished and as a consequence has a stronger sense of self-esteem, agency and autonomy. This confirmation of her learner identity means she is considering a postgraduate degree and has bolstered her desire for a different and in her view more socially valuable form of work. Now she says 'I have aspirations of helping in such a way of recognizing in others the reasons they are not achieving...That I would be someone who would recognize and realize there is a different way.' Although Katy's story has its own specific nuances it is typical. It is underpinned by the logic of intersubjective recognition and in her reflections on both her private and public self she uses confidence, self-esteem, respect as key terms. However, we realised that these various terms were interrelated but not synonymous and that we needed to understand the relationship between these terms, the evaluative frameworks on which they are based and that require considerable theoretical elaboration.

In trying to make sense of such data we turned to the ideas of Axel Honneth (1995) whose philosophically rich and ambitious work on recognition has proved useful. Honneth was a student of Jürgen Habermas at Munich and has worked at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt (the Frankfurt School). His work is shaped in by an attempt to think with and against the insights of Habermas and to critically engage with the complex intellectual legacy of critical theory. In particular, he develops Habermas' contention that human development can only be achieved intersubjectively through free communication and this is expanded to emphasise the key role of recognition and respect in this process.

Honneth argues that for humans to achieve a productive relationship with themselves (an identity) humans require an intersubjective recognition of their abilities and achievements (1995, p.92). This is the foundation of moral consciousness and society as a whole and one develops a morality in the context of the reactions (positive and negative) one receives from another person in the struggle for recognition. Honneth argues that the struggle for recognition, based on the need for self-esteem and the experience of disrespect, also explains *social* development. 'It is by the way of the morally motivated struggles of social groups - their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of recognition - that the normatively directional change of societies proceeds' (1995, p.92).

Honneth argues that there are three differentiated recognition orders in modern society the development of which are crucial to understanding the dynamics and history of capitalism and modernity. Each social sphere is defined by the different forms of recognition needs. Recognition, a simultaneously individual and social need, requires love in the immediate interpersonal sphere for the 'singular needy subject' for the development of self-confidence; the recognition of the autonomous rights bearing person in law offers the basis self-respect; and the successful formation of a co-operative member of society whose efforts are socially valued is necessary to build self-esteem (Honneth in Fraser & Honneth 2003, p.161). This is not simply an adaptation of Hegel as the theory is layered and stripped of some, if perhaps not all, of the metaphysical abstraction of German Idealist philosophy. It relies on a reading of the work of George



Herbert Mead, the object relations psychology of Donald Winnicott and, less explicitly, a novel use of Foucault's genealogy of modernity.

Self-confidence is the first form of relating to self and is established and developed in the relationships of friendship and love and is based on the right to exist. If one experiences love, an ability to love one's self and others develops. One is capable of forging an identity by receiving recognition from others. This is the process by which individuals individuate themselves from others. Without a special relationship with another person it is not possible to become aware of one's own uniqueness and special characteristics and a positive image of one's abilities is developed. This Hegelian concept of being reconciled with others was developed by both Dewey and Mead and is reminiscent of Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Fleming 2008) which maps the relationships of trust that build a secure base for identity and are key to expressing one's needs without fear of rejection. In the language of Erikson and Winnicott these are the relationships that create trust through being accepted, recognised and support the expression of ones' needs without fear of abandonment. If this essential ingredient of development is not available, or a negative message about self-worth is given, then the outcome is a potential hiatus or missing piece in the personality that may seek and find 'expression through negative emotional reactions of shame or anger, offence or contempt' (Honneth 1995, p.257).

Self-respect is the second type of relationship to self and develops when a person in a community of rights is given recognition as a morally and legally mature person. Respect is shown to other people by relating to them as having rights. Without rights there is no respect. For some, e.g. Kant, the formation of the autonomous person is the main goal of education. The absence of autonomy is price paid for the absence of this recognition. Securing the rights of the individual is viewed by Honneth as an important social gain thus he holds a more optimistic conception of modernity than the earlier critical theorists.

<b>Forms of relating to self</b>	<b>Forms of recognition</b>	<b>Forms of disrespect</b>	<b>Component of personality</b>	
Self Confidence	Parent secure attachment & love and care	Neglect, abuse, emotional neglect	Physical integrity & psychological damage	
Self-respect	Legal rights	Violation of legal rights, civil and human rights and employment rights	Social integrity And treated as an object	
Self-esteem	Community of practice, respect & solidarity	Bullying, ignoring, excluding, constant negative feedback	Honour, dignity,	

Table 1 Honneth's Forms of Relating to Self and Forms of Recognition

The experience of being honoured leads to a form of self-relation that Honneth calls self-esteem the third form of recognition. The dilemma for the person is whether the community will honour their contribution through work. People with high self-esteem will reciprocate a mutual acknowledgement of each others contribution to the community and loyalty and solidarity grow from this (Honneth 2007, p.139).

This reciprocal and mutual recognition of each other's work becomes a strong feeling of solidarity in the community and these well recognised people are capable of being, as a result, strongly motivated. People earn self-esteem from society if their activities are in tune with society and society provides the basis on which they can become worthy members of society.

It is not surprising to have three forms of disrespect, corresponding to the forms of respect. At an obvious level, if a child is neglected and humiliated they may lose self-confidence. If they are denied citizenship or denied rights their self-respect may suffer and finally if one's way of life is not recognised or respected then damage is done to one's self-esteem. Abuse, insults, ignoring people, 'put downs' and mudslinging will not only be an injustice (harms people and denies civil rights) but injuries are done to their understanding of themselves, their identity.

From Katy's story (outlined earlier) a differentiated theory of recognition might help to illuminate why and how she has decided to stay at university. Consider Laura, a middle aged student in her final year of university. She told a story of significant disadvantage including periods of long-term institutionalization as an adult. Her childhood was a period of serious poverty. Her journey to university commenced in a workshop for adults. A supervisor encouraged her to return to education by recognising that she had 'something.' The support though modest (a series of books given as gifts) were experienced as recognition of her intelligence:

They were seeing something...I think my reaction to the books they gave me...I thought they were the mad ones. They could see me starting college, they told me this since. That's what they said anyway. You come across people who, no matter how stupid or unaware you are of your ability, they can see something and they point it out.

The phrase 'they can see something' was repeated a number of times in her narrative and it gave her the experience that 'someone might take me seriously.' Such stories tell of moments of recognition and these moments are profoundly developmental. In addition they hint strongly that if HE is to provide an environment in which students can thrive, then these moments need to be turned into pedagogical experiences of recognition.

Finally, the research thus far has concentrated on grasping the logic and grammar of the students' narratives. Sociological study cannot restrict itself to an 'account of accounts' which is ultimately based on the idea that experiential and phenomenological knowledge will offer a complete description of the social world. Before the study is concluded we will need to analyse these narratives through and against other forms of sociological knowledge (Finnegan 2010). However, our contention is that such work can be best done

if the internal logic of people's lives is properly understood in all its complexity and in this case by understanding the importance of recognition.

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## **The sociology of reproduction and the psychosociality of transformation: transitional space, object relations and les 'miraculés' in higher education**

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### **Introduction**

In this contribution to the symposium we consider particular interdisciplinary 'psychosocial' frameworks, which can help illuminate the experiences of non-traditional learners in higher education. We want to build theories of change and transitional processes in less reductive, more interdisciplinary ways. To this end we connect the object relations school of psychoanalysis, and ideas of transitional space, with Bourdieu's sociological perspectives. This is part of a wider search to build holistic understanding of the lived, embodied, affective as well as cognitive experiences of students. In doing so, the paper straddles the sociology of social reproduction and psychosocial perspectives on learners' experiences of change.

### **Biographical narrative interviews**

To chronicle student experience, in depth, the project partners have developed biographical narrative methods to chronicle and illuminate the dialectics of learning and agency. We have used sensitising concepts such as habitus and disposition, drawing on

Bourdieu's work (1977/2000), and Winnicott's (1971) notion of transitional space. However, methodological and theoretical assumptions within the project team vary, despite a common commitment to biographical approaches. The differences encompass biographical narrative interviewing itself and what is needed to generate 'good' or 'valid' narratives, as well as how to interpret them and represent learner lives. The differences of approach are not simply technical but also epistemological and, to an extent, disciplinary.

As biographical researchers we tend to favour relatively open, in-depth interviews, using only the most general of guides to enable the subjects to construct and explore their experience (Merrill and West, 2009). But if biographical researchers interview in relatively open-ended ways, the differences are also important. Some researchers, in the interests of being more scientific and objective, initially ask a person to tell their life story – and nothing else – and then retreat into the background as part of preserving a de facto claim for the work as scientific, in the sense of maintaining clear distance between the researcher and the object of her study (Alheit, 1982).

The aim is to build replicability and reliability into the process, and to minimise researcher bias: the nature of the narrative would, or should be, more or less similar, regardless of the interviewer.

However, other biographical researchers, like us, favour more interactive or relational forms of interviewing. Asking a question such as 'Tell me the story of your life' can produce disappointing, brief and even terse results. Stories can flow more freely when questions are asked: the narrative interview, as represented above, can suppress researcher creativity and insight as much as any survey instrument. Some interviewees might take time to feel confident and trusting about the purpose of a study. In our approach, time is taken to explain who we, as researchers, are and about the nature and ethics of the research and who and what it was for; and to identify topics we want to know more about. A prime aim, in the language of Donald Winnicott (1971), is to minimise anxiety and build confidence; to create, in other words, a 'good enough' space for more open, honest and creative story telling. The role of the researcher is relatively proactive: recognising that her behaviour will inevitably affect the other and story telling, including unconsciously. The narrative consequences might be seen as idiosyncratic and less scientific; or, on the other hand, as more creative and productive. This is the territory of auto/biography where a process of co-creation of text is explicitly acknowledged. Story telling, like higher education itself, can change as the self negotiates its position in relation to the other and new senses of legitimacy and self-understanding can emerge, via richer narrative but also legitimacy in the eyes of the other (Sclater, 2004).

Some differences are also played out in analysing texts, including the extent to which analytical protocols leave room for reflexive engagement with the auto/biographical dimensions of story generation. Lynn Froggett (2010) writes, for instance, of moments of mutual attunement in which the listener responds to a person's 'embodied idiom' in highly connected counter-transferential ways, using this to build more sophisticated understanding. A serious effort is being made to create a psychosocial and auto/biographical approach to interpretation in the Canterbury team. We use an analytic proforma, devised in earlier auto/biographical research, which gives attention both to themes but also the research process; and to the feelings and even fantasies of researchers

in the counter-transference. It includes psychoanalytic interpretative strategies, linked to clinical perceptions and practices, which can illuminate some conscious but also unconscious reasons behind individual investment in learning and resistance to it (Merrill and West, 2009). A 'binocular' account is generated in which insights and procedures from different traditions are shared.

### **Bourdieu and the miraculé**

Bourdieu's work (1997/2000) teaches of how a learner with limited social and educational capital (as it may appear at first sight) can struggle in a traditional university habitus. Bourdieu's structuration approach enables us to explore how working class students may be positioned and constrained by the capital it privileges. Yet, as Chapman Houlton (2009) has observed, Bourdieu fails sufficiently to engage with how some students may survive and prosper, even in what appears to be a culturally exclusive space. We need to understand more of this experience, including any 'capital' they might bring.

Bourdieu offers relatively little in the above regard when writing of the education mortality rate and the disastrous effects of the unequal distribution of capital among students in higher education, which only increases as we move towards the classes most distant from scholarly language. But some - les miraculés - appear to defy 'death', despite the gloomy prognosis. Of course Bourdieu was well aware of this phenomenon and argued, structurally, that les miraculés served to mask systemic inequalities. Yet, to repeat, Bourdieu fails to engage with les miraculés and 'the subjective experience of objective possibilities' (Houlton, 2009: 22).

Object relations can help to interpret and explain more fully such experience. Social science often lacks a convincing theory of the subject, who is often reduced to little more than a cognitive, rational, and information-processing creature (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) with little recognition or understanding of bodily and affective states. Object relations theories offer a subject who is social and psychological, more or less open or defended in facing new experience. Psychological dynamics are conceived as the product of relationships between people, infused by elements from the wider culture. Relationships may be imbued with imprints of class or gender, for instance, in restrictive ways. The lack of particular capital – shaped by class, for example – can inhibit a person's sense of self and legitimacy in interaction with a university 'other', provoking anxiety about the capacity to cope and defensiveness in relation to learning (in object relations theory, anxiety is considered fundamental to the human condition, stemming from our utter dependence on others at birth and in earliest experience). Present anxiety – 'are we good enough?' - may feed on deeply embodied past anxieties: 'can I cope or do I or my ideas deserve to be taken seriously?'. This is what Melanie Klein (1998) called 'memory in feeling'.

Winnicott (1971) was interested in the infant's struggle to separate from a prime caregiver and the anxieties this could create. Of how anxiety might become unmanageable and the infant might retreat, literally and symbolically, into compliance, for instance. He applied such ideas to separation and self negotiation in adult life: posing the question as to what enabled people to move from dependency and defensiveness, for instance, towards greater openness, independence and creative forms of endeavour. Spaces can take varied forms, such as a seminar at university or even a research interview

(West, 1996). Significant others, and their responses, can be important in claiming space, as they (maybe a lecturer or other respected professional) contain anxiety and encourage risk taking, perhaps with a new idea. The processes at work here can be considered to be primitively emotional as much as cognitive: of feeling seen and legitimate, of being understood and valued in the eyes of significant others (West, 1996). They may be people with whom we identify – a teacher from a similar background to ourselves - whom we respect and consider respects yet also challenges us. Such characters or objects may be symbolic: a good theoretical narrative, like feminism, for instance, that helps us to re-story past, present and future; they may be fictional, a character from literature with whom we identify and whose resistance becomes a resource in our own struggles (West, 1996). Moreover, students themselves bring into the academy psychological and emotional resources or what we may call capital. This can be a product of life struggles; it may include religious capital.

Bourdieu's gaze, in the above terms, is more systemic, less intimate. What we are chronicling are very complex patterns of interaction in university spaces, including quite traditional habitus. In an 'elite' institution, for example, there are *les miraculés* – an older, working class woman, for instance - who seem to prosper in what might be considered the traditional, masculinist habitus of a law faculty. Her narrative suggests that students and tutors cannot be reduced to stereotypes, while her own internal resources are considerable, including the resilience born of surviving marital and financial breakdowns.

### **A case in point**

In the Canterbury team, we are also working with a student called Nathan from a mixed race background and materially poor part of London. Nathan's story is, at times, full of anxiety about his capacity to cope with academic assignments, which were problematic for him at school. Comments from tutors like being 'overly descriptive' and 'insufficiently critical' brought him to an edge. He struggled too over accommodation, sharing a house in difficult circumstances. Nathan's story also encompasses difficult material around racism in his local community. Yet his narrative contains many good objects that come into play, including his family, which enable him to keep on keeping on, as he perceives it. The solidity of these relationships - full of support but also challenge – found expression in a story of how the family descended to help him clean the house and make it habitable. There is rich material on how, every night, there was 'skype' communication with his academically successful sister, when problems were most intense. There is rich psychosocial 'capital' drawn on here, in managing anxieties and in building a learner identity.

However, socio-cultural understanding is also required, as is an auto/biographical sensibility, not least in challenging deficit assumptions. Psychologically, these may have been lurking in Linden's initial reading of Nathan's text: of *overcoming* a difficult background, using a range of significant others as well as his religious faith, in the manner described above. In a more socio-cultural reading, Mehri challenged this: Nathan's multi-cultural background could be seen as rich in capital, enabling him to deal with unempathic and even racist encounters. We noted, in thinking of these responses, how Mehri's biography was implicated in her reading of the story: as an Iranian woman

whose complex cultural heritage had, on occasions, been reduced to a one-dimensional, exotic otherness. Such auto/biographical sensibilities, alongside interdisciplinarity, created a more complex reading.

### **Conclusion**

Being and becoming a student in the many spaces of an increasingly diverse university system requires different levels of understanding. A feminist cultural anthropologist, Jennifer Crawford (2005), emphasises the importance of taking time with narrators and of being attentive to the other, as we might in relation to music, art or poetry. Of the need to listen for the rhythms and poetics of the everyday, and how transitional moments can appear in surprising ways. How the struggle to become a learner may be idiosyncratic as well as representative of more general trends, at one and the same time. Of how a range of characters can enter transitional spaces – from past, present as well as future – to enable a person to claim some space and manage the anxieties of becoming. Perhaps, in moments of transition, structuring processes, like class or gender, may diminish and a common humanity – as between a tutor and student, a sister and brother – is created. A student may also find new agentic possibilities, exploiting perceived notions of deficit. Nathan used his mixed race heritage to gain attention and access to new resources. Our paper is one contribution to understanding these processes in more nuanced, psychosocial ways.

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