2011

Nomads in diaspora space: exploring women's indentity work in the university

Sarah O'Shea
University of Wollongong, saraho@uow.edu.au

Submission Title:

Nomads in Diaspora Space: exploring how first in family university students articulate their identities within the university landscape

Dr Sarah O' Shea
Lecturer,
Adult, Vocational and Higher Education
Faculty of Education (Mc Kinnon Building)
The University of Wollongong
Northfields Avenue
Wollongong
NSW 2522
Australia

Email: saraho@uow.edu.au

Nomads in Diaspora Space: exploring how first in family university students articulate their identities within the university landscape

Abstract

How individuals position themselves as 'students' within the university landscape can provide insight into the personal and actual experience of entering this environment. This article will explore how one group of female students narrated their identity work as they moved through the first year of study in an Australian university. These students were all first in the family to attend university and some had had a significant gap between educational experiences. In depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals as they commenced university study and these were repeated at four points during the year; this series of conversations captured the particular nuances of identity formation for this group. The interviews generated rich, description that revealed how students chose to articulate the growth and development of their identity, the contradictions this process engendered as well as the ways in which existing and new identities were blended. The article draws on the concept of diaspora space (Brah, 1996) to contextualise these narratives and explore wider socio-cultural significance.

Key words: First in Family, first generation students, mature age students, identity formation, first year

Introduction

Identity is both dynamic and complex as well as being sometimes contradictory in nature; identities contain a number of related but connected aspects. Identity formation is a shifting process, always in production never complete or finalised. However, there is not a limitless choice in relation to identities only unlimited selves; individuals are restricted by the need to define and present a self that correlates with existing accepted identities. Those identities available within a particular context may not fit existing selves and in some cases, may contradict the established self. This can be the case for students who initially enter the higher education context; their particular learner identities may not match the identity positions available leading to a loss of 'taken-for-granted realities and associated identities' (Scanlon, Rowling &Weber, 2007, p.224).

This article will explore how one group of 'first in family' or first generation students articulated processes around the formation of identities that were congruent or simply sustainable within the university landscape. For the purposes of this study, first-generation status was defined as no-one in the immediate family having previously attended university, including spouses or partners, children, parents and immediate siblings. While the main thrust of this research was to explore how these individuals position and articulate their relationships with higher education in order to provide insight into why some

students choose to persist whilst others decide to go; the conversations with participants also revealed the processes around 'becoming' a university student. The diversity of the student population means that levels of engagement with this environment will differ dramatically; not all students seek a strong student identity nor expect close affiliation with the institution. Exploring how individuals articulate their sense of self as they move through their first year of university study provides a deeper understanding of the complexity of this identity work. As Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009) argue 'the actual experiences of students entering university have somehow failed to attract the level of academic scrutiny that is necessary to appreciate this transition' (p.38). The current Australian study provides close scrutiny of how one group of women subjectively experience university, examining the hurdles encountered, the strategies employed to succeed and also the change, both public and personal, that this experience engendered. By returning to each student repeatedly as they moved through the year, rich detailed data emerged. This article will focus on the themes that emerged around 'identity' highlighting what 'becoming a student' actually means for those involved.

Theoretical Framework

The study outlined in this article draws on the theoretical work of Bourdieu and explores the ways in which the social theories articulated by this theorist can be applied to the higher education environment. Bourdieu is probably most recognized for his work on the school system and how this reproduces social inequality by exalting certain cultural practices usually associated with the dominant classes. These forms of cultural capital are imbued within the taken for granted nature of certain knowledge forms and practices. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital exists in three states: objectified in tangible goods such as books and pictures, institutionalised as academic credentials or awards and the embodied form which is characterised by 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (p.243) which Bourdieu terms as 'habitus'.

In educational terms, habitus impacts a student's ability to 'decode the implicit "rules of the game"'. (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997, p.573). As such, there is recognition that students do not necessarily arrive in educational environments with lack of knowledge but rather that the knowledge or cultural capital that is favoured within their own social situation may not be valued within the higher education environment they find themselves in. This is particularly the case for those students who have no tradition of Bourdieu's institutionalised cultural capital, those who are the first in their family to come to university.

Habitus and diaspora

Bourdieu proposes the concept of habitus to refer to the ways in which individuals are disposed to behave and react based on cultural affiliations and understandings. This seems to be suggestive of a lack of

individual agency perhaps limiting the possibility for change and transformation. Instead, habitus is better defined as a 'portfolio of dispositions' such as individual beliefs, values speech, dress which strongly influence actions in any situation' (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000, p.589). Such dispositions are largely perceived as both spontaneous and natural but Bourdieu regards these as being informed and framed by structural factors such as class, gender and ethnicity. However, the multiplicity of the modern world means that the structural factors are more fluid and hence, I have extended Bourdieu's habitus by referencing the concept of diaspora and in particular, Brah's (1996) articulation of diaspora space.

Diaspora or 'dispersion' offers the possibility of multiplicity rather than homogeneity, a journey that moves people from one cultural context to another (Brah, 1996). As a concept, diaspora recognises the ability for individuals to be located simultaneously across 'geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries' (Brah, 1996, p.194). This challenges the idea of a stable or fixed identity or even the primacy of one identity over another instead highlighting the pluralistic nature of identity even when this is considered to be predetermined. When the term diaspora is considered it is suggestive of upheaval or distress brought about by movement or dislocation but diaspora also offers the possibility of 'hope and new beginnings' (Brah, 1996, p.193). In this space both 'native' and 'newcomer' are still differentiated but are positioned equally, there are no borders and hence no border crossing. Such cross border movement surpasses the geographic or cultural specificity suggested by Bourdieu's habitus and instead can be recognised as the 'point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of us and them are contested' (Brah, 1996, p.209). Diaspora as a conceptual category allows us to reconsider some taken for granted notions around difference, universality, ethnicity and identity. This article explores how diaspora and what Brah (1996) refers to as 'diaspora space' facilitates an alternative conceptualisations of notions around university student identity and what being a student in a mass system of education means for those involved.

Diaspora Space and Identity

Diaspora and diaspora space, as concepts, move away from an essentialist 'either/or' framework and instead recognises the fluidity of identity work better described as 'both/and' (Hughes, 2002). As Hughes (2002) describes, 'both/and' means 'an acceptance of multiple, competing, contradictory positions that are both simultaneously and separately invoked within the subject' (p.413). Essentially, the university environment needs to be conceived as a contested space inhabited by different groups, each of whom share and experience this space differently. University discourse continues to name and categorise students but it is no longer explicit who, if anyone, can be considered native or non-native or in university speak, who is traditional or non-traditional. Diaspora then provides 'conceptual mapping which defies the

search for original absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity' (Brah, 1996, p.196).

In the current study, the word identity is being used to 'signify the plurality, fluidity and complexity' in relation to how people perceive their sense of self (Ivanic, 1998, p11). Put simply, identity refers to the characteristics and attributes an individual equates to the self. These emerge via social interaction with groups and significant others, identity construction is thus an essentially socially situated activity, it is from social relationships that the self emerges (Stryker, 1968). However, the very social nature of identity construction means that it is open to transformation and renegotiation or as Luttrell (1997) describes 'the practical politics of identity are grounded in, and compelled by, specific and situational contexts, not in some set of essential traits and attitudes' (p.118). This complexity is particularly the case in the modern university environment, adopting a student identity is a complex and multifaceted process; it does not simply involve a spontaneous transformation as students walk through the university gates. Identity work is largely invisible, often assumed as taken for granted within the university environment. The inherent contradictions and difficulties of this process need to be exposed and normalised, particularly for older students.

Where previously the act of 'becoming a student' was developed and negotiated at university the varied nature of the student population translates into 'competing mechanisms of socialisation' (Lahteenoja & Pirttila-Backman, 2005, p645). In particular, older students may arrive at the institution with very established identities and may struggle to relate existing with future selves, particularly in an environment, which is characterised by multiplicity in both cultural practices and situational interactions (Scanlon et al, 2007). The concept of diaspora recognises the fluid and multifaceted journeys that people take creating a 'text of many distinctive and perhaps even disparate narratives'; highlighting how identity is not simply defined by age or social background and is instead constituted by the 'materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively' (Brah, 1996, p.183). Braidotti's (1994) metaphor of nomad fits well within the concept of diaspora space as this perceives a subjectivity that is not fixed or permanently defined but rather one that moves through various subjective identities. While moving into the university landscape may engender a sense of dislocation for some students, it also has the potential for powerful transformations of identity. This theme, along with others, will provide a focus for the later data analysis sections of this article.

Similar to Davis and Lutz (2000) my desire to study this area is related to my interest in exploring the 'resourcefulness and courage with which people negotiate the hurdles of their lives under often

inhospitable and usually difficult situations' (p.368). Arriving at university can initiate difficult decisions for students for whom higher education is not the norm. Rendon (1998) argues that first in family students may actually perceive attendance in terms of loss, as they find it necessary to redefine their identity whilst relocating to the new university environment. This sense of dislocation is echoed by London (1989) who suggests that arriving at university can lead to increases in distance, both geographical and social, between individuals and community or familial connections. The resulting transformations in relationships with family, peers and self can result in students having to straddle themselves between two distinctive and largely separate worlds, never completely fitting into either environment. Thomas (2002) supports this observation suggesting that the anxiety about '…not fitting in and not being able to cope may be reinforced in families and communities where HE is not the norm' (p.8). This article will focus on how one group of female, first in family students, narrated their identity work as they moved through the first year of study in an Australian university, examining their arrival at university as well as how they reflected upon the year as a whole.

Methodology

The study is Interpretivist in nature and so as researcher, I took on the role or positioning of the subject, immersing myself in the actors' social realities. I also approached the study as a female researcher as one of the main objectives was to define how women '…are understood as competent subjects getting by, creating and surviving within hostile and limiting environments' (Alway, 1995, p.222). Hence, while methodologically placed within an interpretivist framework, this study is also sensitised by both my positioning as a woman and also, personal subjectivity.

The examination of the data began with the naming and categorisation of the interview data; the resulting fragmentation of data led to the creation of codes and from these analytic concepts and interpretative frameworks were derived. Understanding is also generated through a movement between reading the data and reading the literature. This study draws on Peirce's (1979) 'abductive reasoning' which falls between the polarity suggested by inductive and deductive logic. Abductive reasoning is premised on the act of identifying specific phenomenon and then relating or locating this within alternative conceptual frameworks. In this way, the particular event of aspect of the research is interpretatively defined and engaged with in an imaginative and creative way. Moving beyond the discipline in which you are working in also opens up possibilities for further analysis and exploration. Applying different conceptual frameworks to data can break through the 'ordinariness of routine event' (Charmaz, 2006. p53). Using constant comparative analysis and re-examining taken-for-granted notions through comparison and questioning allows the everyday to be seen in a new way. The idea of persistence, the first year as an

experience and the difficulties that students encounter in this first year offered 'points of departure' (Charmaz, 2006, p17) that enabled me to frame interview questions and develop ideas or concepts grounded within the data.

Context and Participants

Context

The study occurred at a small regional Australian campus affiliated with a larger institution located some eighty kilometres distant. This regional location has been recognised as being both economically and socially disadvantaged with higher than state average levels of: unemployment, families in receipt of pensions or benefits and low income earners as well as lower rates of educational attainment when compared nationally (please see Table (1) for more information).

% of pop.	University attendance rates	Individuals with university degree	Completed H. School
Region	2%	6%	27%
State	4%	11%	38%
Nationally	4%	10%	65%

Table (1): Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001 – 2003)

The university has also one of the highest national rates of students who are derived from low socio-economic backgrounds, as defined by postcode. Most of the students enrolled at the campus live in the local community so once lectures are finished students generally depart, meaning that little 'student life' exists on-campus. This non-residential nature equates to a qualitatively different experience to that of a larger institution with a residential student population. This difference is also noted in relation to the large percentage of mature aged students at the campus. In 2006, when the current study took place, only 14% of the university population was aged between seventeen and nineteen years whilst approximately 60% of the student population were classed as mature aged, the highest proportions of these being between 21 and 24 years.

Participants

Participants were recruited indirectly via both university wide channels of communication such as student publications, notice boards and via invitations distributed by student mentors during Orientation Week in Semester One, 2006. Seventeen students agreed to be involved in the study and their ages ranged from 18 to 47 years, with a mean age of 32.3 years. The intent of the study was not necessarily to focus on mature age students but given the demographics of the campus it is not surprising that the majority were older. Of the fourteen mature age students, thirteen of these are mothers, nine initially resided with their partners (one later separated) and five were single parents. The two younger students were both living at home with their parents when this study was conducted.

The campus caters to a diverse scope of students from a range of educational backgrounds, many of whom have accessed tertiary education from non-traditional forms of access. In this study, none of the respondents had ever previously enrolled in a degree but ten had completed some studies after High School. Four students had attended Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Colleges whilst the remaining six had enrolled in a university access course designed to prepare students for university study and also provide an University Admissions Index (UAI) to enable application to an undergraduate program. The other participants in the study either entered university as a result of High School Certificates or by sitting for the STAT test, a two-hour state examination, which also provides students with the requisite entry. Table 2 provides further details of the students; the participant's pseudonyms are arranged alphabetically for ease of reference.

Table (2): Details of Participants

Name	Age	Attendance	Marital Status	Children & Ages	Entry pathway*	Degree Program	High School Completed?
Annie	18	F/T	Single	No	HSC	Bachelor of (Early Childhood) Teaching	Yes
Catherine	44	F/T	Single	One (15 yrs)	STAT	Bachelor of Nursing	Yes
Clara	23	F/T	Single	One (5 yrs)	AC	Bachelor of (Early Childhood) Teaching	No
Heidi	47	P/T	Divorced	Three (20+ yrs)	TAFE	Bachelor of Soc Sci	No
Helen	22	P/T	Partnered	No	TAFE	Bachelor of Managemt	No
Jane	32	F/T	Married	Three (2, 4 & 8 yrs)	AC	Bachelor of (High School) Teaching	Yes
Katie	33	F/T	Married	Two (6 & 9 yrs)	STAT	Bachelor of Oral Health	Yes
Kira	38	F/T**	Separated	Five (6,8,14,15 &18 yrs)	TAFE	Bachelor of Psychology	No
Linda	32	F/T	Single	Two (9 & 10 yrs)	AC	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts	No
Mary	18	F/T	Single	No	HSC	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts	Yes
Nicki	33	F/T	Single	Yes (2 yrs)	HSC / TAFE	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts	Yes
Rachel	22	P/T	Single	No	TAFE	Bachelor of Soc Sci	Yes
Sheila	31	F/T**	Married	Two (5 & 7 yrs)	STAT	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts	Yes
Stephanie	34	P/T	Married	Four (8, 9, 3 & 18 yrs)		Studying an Access Course	No
Sue	39	F/T	Married	Two (8 &10 yrs)	STAT	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts	No
Susie	38	F/T	Married	Two (3 &6 yrs)	AC	Bachelor of Soc Sci	No
Vicky	45	F/T**	Married	Three (16,19 & 22 yrs)	AC	Bachelor of Nursing	Yes

HSC = High School Certificate/ STAT = State Tertiary Admission Test/ TAFE = Technical and Further Education/ AC = Access Course

*** Some of the students started the year in full-time mode but either dropped a subject (Sheila) or a number of subjects (Kira and Vicky) as the semester or year proceeded.*