

[Leaving the academy: perceptions, fears, and hopes around 'unbecoming' a student and academic \(0324\)](#)

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Abstract (148 words)

This paper explores perceptions, experiences and fears of precarity and loss in the academy. It draws on fieldwork from two studies: the first involving 50 student interviews with undergraduate students at a pre-92 university in the UK, and the second involving 73 email interviews with academics across the UK. We will be using these studies to explore the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate students in relation to leaving the university and 'unbecoming' a student; and academics contemplating, negotiating or experiencing a transition away from a career in higher education. The paper will draw on the theorisations of Walkerdine, Butler and others to discuss the emotions such transitions evoke, the ways in which decisions, hopes and anxieties are constrained and influenced by government and institutional policy and practice; and the ways in which they are discursively constructed in relation to identities such as gender, class, 'race'/ethnicity, and age.

Paper

This paper draws on fieldwork from two separate qualitative studies in order to explore issues of commonality and difference in relation to two processes of 'unbecoming': the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate students in relation to leaving the university and 'unbecoming' a student; and academics contemplating, negotiating or experiencing a transition away from a career in higher education.

As Walkerdine (2005) vividly evokes, the contemporary neoliberal subject is expected to move flexibly and fluidly through life, carrying her self as a snail carries their shell. In the contemporary labour market of the global North we have seen in the last few decades a marked increase in temporary, part-time, insecure positions in the academy and the wider (and graduate) labour market, and a concomitant rise in influence of a discourse valorising individualized flexibility and personal resilience in the face of a degree of change and impermanence that is presented as inevitable. However, as an established body of writers have discussed (see e.g. Butler, 2004, Ettliger 2007) such precarity is of course socially and politically generated rather than 'natural' or 'inevitable'; and supposedly 'individual' qualities of resilience, flexibility and confidence in the face of change are actually highly gendered, classed and 'raced'. As Butler (2004, 2009) notes, the ability to cushion oneself from the worst effects of precarity is

greatly mediated and constrained by the advantages and disadvantages of particular social positionings. Those in less advantaged positions are far more likely to experience insecurity and precarity in the first place, and are also far more likely to experience any associated shifts in identity and meaning-making in terms of anxious or painful 'border crossings' (Walkerdine, 2005).

Our aim here is to use such theorisations to explore two different sets of data. The first is a series of email interviews with 71 academic staff on issues around HE policy and the experience of academic life and work, conducted initially in 2011 and followed up in 2014 (Authors, 2013). The second is a series of face-to-face interviews with undergraduate students at a UK university, focusing on issues around friendship, social life and 'belonging' in HE, that commenced in the summer of 2016 and which is ongoing (see Author 1, forthcoming 2017).

The increasing 'precariousness' of academic life, shown for example in the steady rise in the number of fixed-term, insecure, and 'flexible' job positions for academic staff (Hey, 2001; Reay, 2004) is increasingly becoming a topic of concerned debate and activism in the sector internationally (for examples see the CASA website, <https://actualcasuals.wordpress.com>). With this focus in mind we returned in 2014 to re-interview a number of academic staff we had originally interviewed in 2011, to discuss their perceptions and experiences of precarity in the academy. In this paper we will focus here on the emotions generated by feelings of insecurity and precarity in the academy even by those currently holding permanent 'secure' positions. In particular we will be looking at the ways in which participants talked about plans to leave (or fears of a forced exit from) academia – of 'unbecoming' an academic.

Juxtaposed with this data, we will be utilizing the second dataset to look at undergraduate students' perceptions and views of the future, and the transition away from studenthood as an identity. University is usually constructed as a 'stepping stone' to a more secure and well-paid position after graduation. In neoliberal rhetoric, a seemingly apolitical 'survival of the fittest' scenario is presented, whereby it is primarily up to the individual to have made themselves as 'employable' as possible (Clarke, 2008; Tomlinson, 2012). However, as a growing body of work shows the employment prospects of UK graduates are increasingly precarious, and the ability to prosper in this landscape directly and complexly connects to aged, 'raced' classed and gendered capitals (see e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2013; Abrahams, 2016).

This paper will use primary data from interviews with final year students to look at their own expectations, hopes or concerns in relation to the future after graduation, in the context of neoliberal drives to utilize the liminal time of the university for the purpose of crafting an 'employable' self. To what extent do students perceive student life in these terms, and what are their perceptions in relation to leaving higher education, 'unbecoming' a student and entering a precarious graduate labour market? After the liminality of the university experience, life afterwards for graduates is often painted as an entry – or re-entry – to the 'real world' (see Barnhardt, 2002). We will finish the paper by reflecting on this construction of the university experience as by implication 'unreal' – a framing that is also often leveled at academics working in the rarefied world of

the 'ivory tower'. We will compare and contrast differences and also moments of congruence and commonality between the student narratives and those from academic staff also planning to leave the academy, before concluding with some thoughts connecting our data to the result of UK's recent referendum, and the emotions generated as a consequence of this wider (and to many a forced) 'unbecoming'.

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