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### **Theories of Recognition & Higher Education**

Nancy Fraser proposes a theory of recognition which sees social inequalities as generated from complex interwoven patterns of material redistributive inequalities, and cultural misrecognitions, which she describes as 'perspectival dualism'. (Fraser 2003) Fraser accordingly suggesting a theory of social justice which suggests a reflexive approach, utilizing what she describes as the 'status model' and principals of 'participatory parity'. Using these to deconstruct the ways in which both redistribution and recognition may combine to mean some groups may experience;

“an order of intersubjective subordination derived from institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute some members of society as less than full members of society, as less than full partners in interaction.”  
(Fraser 2003)

This can help us to understand the ways in which some mechanisms for resolving social inequalities, can prove ineffective, even in contexts where redistributive resources are being directed towards resolving this.

Burke (2013) has already used Frasers theories to explore and understand the barriers to access which widening participation applicants face. Applying a Fraserian analysis to ethnographic accounts of admissions processes, she demonstrated how these 'transparent' processes became imbued with cultural subjectivities. These subjectivities prioritized a privileged cultural construction of social class, ethnicity, and gender, within processes of admission which claim to be fair and impartial. Similarly, Morrison (2015) has used Fraser to understand how suggestions of gender-blind recruitment strategies for admission to primary school teaching programs may provide greater gender balances within the profession, but at the same time demonstrated how this lead to a cultural misrecognition of gender. However, the focus of much current application of Fraser within Higher Education (HE) has been to understand the barrier of 'access', with little space currently given to issues of 'participation' to those who have accessed HE.

Students who care for children form an interesting example to explore the application of Fraser to participation. On the one hand these students do access higher education, but on the other it is unknown exactly how many do, as universities are not required to collect data on this. (NUS 2009) While Moreau has highlighted how participation can be problematic, as students face a complex journey which “position[s] them at the nexus of several areas of policy intervention” (Moreau et al 2015). Also Brooks (2012) has highlighted how Neoliberal individualism in higher education has led the student parents in her

study to “accept as personal failures institutionally mediated inequalities”. If, or how these students are recognised as participants in Higher education has the potential to be deeply significant particularly for tackling issues of equality and diversity in HE, research is limited, but highlights that what is known about these students participation is problematic and **requires** further understanding.

### **The Study**

My research took the form of an Institutional ethnography (Smith 2006) an approach which seeks to adopt a particular ‘standpoint’, in this case students who care for children, and trace their institutionally framed experiences. My study took place over two academic years, and included a series of interviews and a focus group with a group of sixteen students who care for children (the standpoint), at a research intensive university in the North of England. This was also supported by seven members of staff whose interviews provide further insight into the cultural context that these students navigate.

### **Findings**

This study demonstrates that on the surface redistributive mechanisms of supporting students who care for children are generally provided and if anything forms an example of best practice compared to other institutions seen in literature (Brooks 2012, Moreau et al 2015). For example, featuring a specific student parent policy, a crèche, opportunities for part-time study, and dedicated housing for families. However, what became apparent during the study is the way in which cultural misrecognition of this group as ‘problematic’ imbued many of the supports available. Participants explained how for example they were completely unaware of some supports as these had never been mentioned at inductions, or welcome meetings, or described how in their experience documents such as the student parent policy seemed to be written more as ‘a document for staff’.

Similar cultural misrecognitions emerged in the ways in which policy documents were activated in the student’s experience, such as in the case of Michaela, recounts, despite policies which proffer flexibility for students who have caring responsibilities on courses with compulsory placements she recounts how;

“I got my placements - they were actually the most faraway regions possible. I started panicking, and I contacted the lady who had received all these forms and had started to do all the allocations, but received no reply....I had to contact the head of year...he said to me that they can’t be seen to support students at the expense of the support for their administrative staff...And he said you need to apologise, even when you’re not in the wrong” (Michaela)

This paper presents a series of similar vignettes from this study which highlights the way in which at this particular institution these student’s experiences encounter barriers to participation which are culturally manifested.

These are also supported by the accounts of staff who recall the ways in which these students can often be received as ‘other’, as one widening participation

officer suggests of the wider universities perception of students with caring responsibilities like;

“American Express, they only have to deal with it say once every year, so when it comes along it is like oh sorry we need to go over there...”  
(Support Officer)

Which leads to these students being silo-ed or miss-directed to the wrong departments, or supports.

While these barriers may not be manifest in the same ways at other universities, this study has highlighted the ways in which the application of Frasers theories of recognition, and the adoption of ‘perspectival dualism’ in particular, makes explicit the ways in which these barriers are manifest, and creates space to consider the most effective means of redress. For example at this particular university greater space for reflexivity could be given consider the way in which policies and practices are developed or implemented, aimed at either widening participation, or increasing equality and diversity. This could help to identify the ways in which cultural subjectivities can manifest and perpetuate barriers to participation, as well as those highlighted in Access, encouraging greater equality and diversity.

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