Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0360

"No Words, Just Two Letters 'Dr'": Working-Class Early Career Researcher's Reflections on the Transition to and Through a Social-Sciences PhD and into Academia"No Words, Just Two Letters 'Dr'": Working-Class Early Career Researcher's Reflections on the Transition to and Through a Social-Sciences PhD and into Academia

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract:

Drawing upon data generated through a SRHE funded project this paper builds upon feminist research that calls out the 'toxic impossibilities' (Pereira 2016) of neoliberal academic life (Breeze 2018; Gill and Donaghue 2016; Loveday 2018; Pereira 2017). It explores how working-class ECRs navigate neoliberal academia's "intolerable demands" (Gill 2010: 237). Guided by Bourdieusian theory and feminist epistemology methodologically it draws upon the methods of one-on-one interviews and photo elicitation with UK domiciled doctoral students and ECRs.

The research interpretations make visible how class background (and it's classed and raced intersections) impacts upon experiences of and progression through doctoral study and into academia. Attention is accorded to participants 'strategies for success' and the wider implications of these strategies in participants personal lives; their imagined futures in the academy; and upon their ties and connections with their working-class friends and families.

Paper: Notwithstanding the expansion of doctoral study, it continues to operate as a classed pathway (Pásztor and Wakeling 2018); a problem exacerbated by the surplus of doctoral graduates and an increasingly congested precarious global academic labour market. It is now accepted that the 'leaky pipeline' of academia whereby 'non-traditional' bodies remain absent from professorial and higher managerial positions within UK higher education threatens the diversity of scholarship and leadership. This Society for Research in Higher Education funded project explores working-class, ECR lived experiences of moving through doctoral study into the academic workforce. It makes visible the successes, hurdles, ambivalences and strategies of this precarious and often invisible group of academics.

The research aims and objectives are to build on feminist research that calls out the 'toxic impossibilities' (Pereira 2016) of neoliberal academic life (Breeze 2018; Gill and Donaghue 2016; Loveday 2018; Pereira 2017). Specifically, this paper explores how first generation, working-class ECRs navigate neoliberal academia's "intolerable demands" (Gill 2010: 237). Guided by Bourdieusian theory and feminist epistemology methodologically it draws upon the methods of one-on-one interviews and photo elicitation with UK domiciled doctoral students and ECRs. Participants are self-

identified working-class, first-generation (at the undergraduate level) UK domiciled doctoral students and ECRs within the social-sciences across a range of university types. This paper is underpinned by the following research questions:

1. In what ways, if at all, do first-generation working-class ECRs perceive their working-class background as impacting upon their experiences of and progression through doctoral study and into academia?
2. How do they generate and navigate their own 'strategies for success' in their working context?
3. What are the wider implications of these strategies for success, for example in their personal lives and/or their imagined futures in the academy?
4. What can be done, if at all, by stake holders of UKHEs to address working-class doctoral students and early career researchers journey to and through a social-sciences PhD and into academia?

In seeking to elucidate what I mean by a feminist methodology, I must point out that feminists seldom ascribe to one 'feminist methodology'. Instead feminist researchers craft political stances from feminism per se, applying them to the research process in both theory and practice. It is these researchers' political and ethical proscriptions that renders research feminist. One notable way in which feminism is present within and throughout this project is through the way in which my research practice mirrors conceptualisations of feminist methodology, particularly in relation to questions of ethics. Skeggs argues that "feminist ethnography is always informed by feminist ethics" (2007: 437). My research practice is concerned with the feminist ethical principles of reciprocity, honesty, accountability, responsibility, reflexivity and equality throughout all stages of the research (Letherby 2003) – from its initial conception to the final act of dissemination. Beyond this, and in seeking to further explicitly elucidate the way(s) in which my research practice is feminist, uniting characteristics of feminist methodology includes: a) the importance of research illuminating, critiquing and transforming power dynamics on both a micro and macro level, b) whilst also paying attention to power dynamics inherent within the research process, and c) the importance of thinking reflectively when doing so. Finally, in-line with a feminist method of research, my thesis seeks to 'give voice' by emphasises and empathises with the experiences, words and voices of participants.

The research and it's contributions make visible how gender and class background impacts upon experiences of and progression through doctoral study and into academia; participants 'strategies for success' and the wider implications of these strategies in participants personal lives and/or their imagined futures in the academy. **The research results** recognise that academia, for working-class aspiring academics remains a seductive endeavour (Taylor 2013) as they often engage in the 'labour of love' (Cannizzo 2017) out of "an ethic of service to others less 'lucky' than them" (Mahony & Zmroczek 1997:5). It explores the extent and ways in which neoliberal academia, for working-class ECRs operates as 'cruel optimism'; that is, "a relation of attachment to comprised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible and toxic" (Berlant 2011: 21).

With regards to **significant of the research for higher education practice and policy** this paper responds to calls for "social justice [researchers] to continue to focus their gaze *within,* as well as outside of, the academy" (Read and Leathwood 2018:347). It contributes to scholarship on class and higher-education, doctoral employability and the politics of academia generating insights into the

support needs of working-class ECRs considering the possibilities for innovation in policy and practice at various scales and upon the politics of knowledge production.

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