

Gender dynamics in the valuing of extra-curricular activities ((0079)

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Introduction

Despite the hype concerning the feminisation thesis in higher education and the representation of male students being the relative losers in higher education (Berliner, 2004; Lewin, 2006; Robinson, 2009), gendered meanings continue to permeate higher education in ways that mean that the recognition of women's experiences are frequently marginalised (Leathwood and Read 2009). The gendering of the academy is complex and uneven and the dominant forms of identity assumed in the pedagogies of independence remain highly problematic when understood from the perspective of gendered, raced and classed identities. However, most work on students in HE has concentrated on students' roles inside the classroom, whilst student identities have been largely analysed and addressed from within the curriculum. Very little work has looked at extra-curricular activity (ECA) from a perspective which is informed by a broader conceptualisation of the extra-curricular as a site of gendered, raced, and class practices which are intimately tied to the development of an employable self. Our research, funded by The Higher Education Academy (Clegg et al 2009), was designed to explore this terrain and specifically to problematise the meanings and values associated with different forms of ECA.

As part of a wider project our the research involved interviews with sixty one second year students at a post-1992 higher education institution.

Participation in and valuing of ECA

Our study found very little difference between the overall *forms* of ECA that men and women were participating in other than undertaking caring responsibilities. However, we found that men were much more likely than women to see their participation as *being* ECA. Men were also more likely to also be actively building evidence for CVs such as gaining certification or accreditation as a way of trying to distinguish themselves from other graduates when applying for jobs post-graduation; In addition, the differential rationales for participation significantly influenced what forms of ECA men and women regarded as valuable to employers. For example, men were more likely to see the value of *all* forms of paid employment whilst women de-valued low paid or unskilled work. Indeed, across all forms of ECA women were, in general, more likely to be dismissive of ECA as of value to their employability than men, unless it had direct relevance to a specific job. This could of course be read as indicating that women had a more acute sense of actual value, especially as it appears that women graduates are being more successful at finding work on graduation, but it might equally be part of a the same processes that produce an income gap almost immediately (Thompson 2010).

Whilst previous studies have indicated that women may be involved in accumulating capital in alternative ways or involving alternative forms of capital than men (Skeggs, 1997; Huppertz, 2009), we found little evidence of women utilising their femaleness, femininity or their cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to increase their cultural capital. This is particularly significant in relation to caring responsibilities since, unlike Skeggs' and Huppertz's research, many of the women we interviewed saw caring as simply something one 'did', reflecting Bourdieu's belief in the absolute naturalisation of caring (Bourdieu, 1998). When drawn, most women (but not all) could see the innate value of caring, however, few would reveal to future employers that they were carers, unless they were going to be working in the caring profession. Rather than considering caring to be a form of capital which can be utilised or invested to support their future employment, these women felt that having caring responsibilities would wholly disadvantage them when applying for employment. It could be argued that these women have a clear understanding of the discursive positioning of care (Lynch 2009; Lynch et al 2010), but this robs them of the opportunity of elaborating a narrative in which caring can be valorised as a way of demonstrating considerable social value and worth.

Implications

Our previous work (Stevenson and Clegg, 2010) has identified how participation in ECA is being used by some students as a very specific and purposeful strategy to enhance the likelihood of gaining future graduate level employment. We have previously highlighted class differentials (Stevenson and Clegg, 2010) however, it is clear that there are also significant gender differences.

It is concerning that women are less likely to be participating in ECA (or what is recognised as ECA) than men since research by Tchibozo (2007) has shown how UK graduates who have been involved in extra-curricular activity are advantaged in terms of getting work, occupational status and wages than those who have not. However, levels of participation are irrelevant if participation is not recognised either as ECA or considered valuable by women. It is also concerning that the women in our study did not appear to be drawing on alternative forms of capital to 'compensate' for the 'lack' of more traditional forms of ECA. Whilst we do not regard those who possess alternative forms of capital as in any way deficient, both higher education institutions and employers continue to value very traditional forms of ECA (Clegg *at al*, 2009) including participating in certain forms of ECA (Tchibozo, 2007). The unquestioned and naturalised assumption that activities engaged in primarily by women, or recognised as being of worth only when enacted by men, however, is problematic and as Morley (2001) suggests leaves the prejudices of employers unexplored. Higher Education Institutions need to support students, in particular women, to recognise that not only are the activities they are participating in forms of ECA but actively support students to recognise the value of this participation. This support, however, needs to be understood and undertaken in a context which no longer simply understands students as possessive individuals but which also takes into account the structural liabilities and possibilities of their situations.

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