

Part 2: Outline (to be submitted under the theme of 'Learning' – Changing student experiences of higher education and evolving identities of students)

Continuity or Transcendence?: The construction of student identities through participation in higher education (0149)

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Higher education (HE) in the UK has witnessed rapid and far-reaching changes over the last twenty five years. It has shifted from an elite system that educated a minority of (largely white, privileged male) young people, towards a mass system serving a much larger and more diverse population. Yet despite this sustained increase in participation, the experience of 'non-traditional' entrants (those from under represented and/or marginalised groups) continues to be shaped to a large extent by their personal biographies and identities, with prior educational experience, familial, social and cultural factors playing a large part (Askham, 2008; Callender and Kemp, 2000; Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998; Marks, Turner & Osborne, 2003; Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003, Waller, 2010). Moreover, in an era where social mobility, achieved through participation in higher education, appears to be stalling (Blandon and Gregg, 2005), the extent to which participation offers a route from inequality is less clear.

This paper reports on ongoing research exploring the experiences of undergraduate students taking a BA Education course in a post 1992 University. The research is concerned with how students negotiate the process of studying for a degree within a context of HE expansion and how their experiences shape, and are shaped by, their personal biographies and identities. The research adopts a life history approach whereby students' life histories are constructed through the use of in-depth interviews, eliciting both experiential and biographical data. The rationale underpinning this approach is that in order to make sense of an individual's experience of higher education and the meaning they attach to it, it is necessary to have an understanding of their personal/biographical situation (Bathmaker and Hartnett, 2010; Clandinin and Connelly, 1994; Goodson, 1995; Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995; Wright Mills, 1970).

The data are located and examined within a wider theoretical framework that was conceived from previous research (Doherty, 2001), which suggests that students' experiential accounts can be situated within one of two emergent cultural patterns of *continuity* or *transcendence*. The research indicates that students who follow a more traditional route in to HE tend to perceive university as a 'natural continuation' of their school careers and as such their accounts tend to reflect the continuity model. For students from historically under-represented or marginalised groups, (particularly those from families where there is no history of participation in HE) going to university often means an interruption to, or transcendence from the life course they have previously been following. These students are embarking upon a new journey in to unfamiliar territory (or 'alien environment' as described by Ashkam, 2008). The way in which each group of students from this study experienced HE was ultimately informed by their personal lives and biographies and at the same time their participation in HE played a part in shaping and (reshaping) their identities, although this was more significant in the case of the 'non-traditional'

students, particularly in those with no family history of participation: these learners seemed to spend longer negotiating the process of 'becoming a student'.

These concepts of continuity and transcendence will be revisited and explored further in this paper as they are applied to the research reported within it: research conducted nearly decade on from the formulation of these concepts. Their contemporary relevance, along with the notion of 'expected careers', or trajectories, of young people must be considered against a growing background of evidence concerning the 'worth' of participation, specifically in relation to social mobility in general and inter-generational social mobility in particular. Whilst not located in a theoretical framework of participation that links to identity, numerous studies have identified clear links between inequalities in educational experience and intergenerational social mobility.

A recent study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that education correlates strongly with intergenerational social mobility and this was common across all 14 countries studied (Causa et al, 2009). However, a study by Blandon, Gregg and Machin (2005) comparing mobility between European countries and North America found not only that mobility was lower in both Britain and the United States than in Canada and Nordic countries, but that it had fallen in Britain since 1970, but not in the United States or elsewhere. This study found that increased participation in HE since the 1970s appeared to be reinforcing the existing advantage of children from wealthier backgrounds. Such data raises significant questions concerning the extent to which social mobility (as a desired policy objective) can be increased in those countries where differences based on socio-economic status are more embedded. It also calls into question the extent to which (if at all) some young people are aware of the lack of mobility afforded by participation.

Whilst most studies focus on social mobility in quite narrow economic terms, others focus on social or cultural capital within families and communities. There are concerns that increased higher education provision may be allowing the already privileged to strengthen their position and may in fact reduce social mobility (Goldthorpe, 1987, Goldthorpe 1997, Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007, Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993). A study by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (Platt, 2003) pointed to the complex interrelationship between socio-economic status, ethnicity and gender on securing social mobility through education. Thus the culture of participation needs to be explored along with the *meaning* of attainment and participation (Nash, 2006). That is, if a family's cultural orientation is away from education, examining the basis of this orientation may be more significant than examining destinations and other factors that are largely derived from economic analyses. The extent to which the theoretical concepts of continuity and transcendence may explain participation, attrition and outcome needs to be examined further.

Bourdieu's (1973, 1984) concept of cultural capital and its intergenerational transmission offers an opportunity to use a life history method to explore how orientation toward or away from education may have an individual or familial base, how this may relate to location and be influenced by factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic status and gender. For example, many studies assume a hydraulic relationship between educational participation, outcomes and social mobility, that greater participation and greater access to socially desired outcomes *in themselves* are measures of social progress. This research focuses on the meaning of

participation, the significance granted to participation at the level of the individual. It examines the forms of cultural capital existent within the family and how (or if) these are 'converted' into educational forms (Bourdieu, 1997).

This paper will report on early findings of the research, focusing in particular on the students' experiences of participation, and how these shape and are shaped by their identities, and on the extent to which continuity and transcendence continue to offer analytical purchase in current economic times.

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