

'It is like school sometimes, you know' - peer group relations and the social construction of identities at a campus university (0107)**Outline**

All students are engaged in processes of identity making and re-making at university, as they differently take on and move between different constructions of identity at home, university, family and peer group. This paper looks in particular at the various forms of social-pedagogical identities and relationships students construct, negotiate and 'play out' at university outside of the formal learning environment of the lecture hall or tutor room – and the complex ways in which these practices work to both reflect and reinforce dominant discourses centred around class, 'race' and gender.

Even before students have attended their first lecture or attempted their first essay, they will have begun the process of confronting and negotiating the (largely unwritten) 'rules of the game' of university life. The dominant discourses of knowledge, communication and practice in higher education can be seen to vary significantly between countries, between institutions and even between disciplines (see Ballard and Clanchy, 1988; Martin, 1997; Lea and Street, 1998). It is nevertheless possible to speak of these discourses as comprising an academic institutional 'culture' that influences (and is influenced by) the ways in which students and lecturers think, act and communicate in the academy (Bartholomae, 1985; Grant, 1997; Lea and Street, 1998).

This culture is not uniformly accessed or experienced. Despite the marked increase in students from working-class and ethnically diverse backgrounds attending university in the last decade, and popular and media conceptions of the university as a 'feminised' arena, academic culture continues to predominantly reflect the dominant discourse of the student learner as white, middle-class and male (Mirza, 1995; Grant, 1997; Leathwood and Read, 2009). Whilst financial constraints have been found to have a major impact both on university entry and on the successful completion of degree courses amongst working-class students of diverse ethnic backgrounds, social and cultural factors also have a bearing (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994; Archer and Hutchings, 2000). As Spurling (1990), Lillis (1997), Tett (2000) and others have pointed out, students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds are also disadvantaged by an institutional culture that places them as 'other'.

However, individuals do not passively 'receive' discourses of academic culture: they actively engage with them and sometimes challenge them. This article explores such negotiations and challenges by looking at a form of university 'culture' that is under-researched – the social environment of the university and students' multiple and competing peer group friendships, relationships and identifications.

A number of writers have discussed the importance of friendship groups in relation to identity formation – particularly in relation to school-age students (see e.g. George 2007; Hey 1997; Weller 2007). As Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007) note, membership of a group at school (or exclusion from it) can greatly inform the construction of 'who you are' in terms of identity – both in relation to one's own self-identity and how others see you. Those who are accepted as friends with peers who are socially deemed to have high 'status' (either within a particular friendship group, or wider collectivities such as school year cohorts) can themselves acquire 'status' capital amongst their peer groups. As Adler,

Kless, and Adler (1992) state, 'having someone as a friend is a form of power'. Moreover, the consequences of finding yourself 'unpopular' can be severe, including the threat and the actuality of bullying and violence. The threat of finding oneself labelled as unpopular, for example through being positioned as a 'nerd' or 'boffin', is a common fear amongst both primary and secondary school children (see e.g. Francis, 2009). Such dynamics are under-researched amongst university students, perhaps due to an implicit conception that concerns around friendship, popularity, 'coolness' and belonging/exclusion are left behind at the school gate and abandoned once a person reaches adulthood. However, as studies such as Jackson and Dempster (2009) show, elements of discourses such as the association of studying hard with a lack of 'coolness' and the valorization of 'effortless achievement' are still articulated by some students, relating to particular socially dominant constructions of 'laddish' masculinity.

In this paper I will be exploring such issues by looking at data from 64 semi-structured interviews with students at a London-based campus university, conducted as part of the *Gender and Pedagogies* project (please see symposium outline for further details of the project). Thirty-eight women and twenty-six men were interviewed, with a spread according to social class background and ethnicity. Students were recruited from a range of subject areas and contained both home and international students, those who entered university at school-leaving age and 'mature' students.

Utilising examples from this data, the following themes/areas will be explored, utilizing a poststructuralist analysis (particular attention to variations in experience according to gender, class, ethnicity, age, and residency e.g. on- or off-campus, local or non-local):

- The importance of friendship groups for HE students and their dynamics
- Discourses of inclusion/exclusion, 'popularity' and 'clique-ness' amongst peer groups
- The experience of university/college social activities, such as on and off-campus entertainment, induction activities, groups and societies
- University, college and disciplinary identities, and the articulation/negotiation of particular social-pedagogical identities in relation to these

In particular, in the context of increasing widening participation and the popular/media conception of the 'feminisation' of the university, I will be looking to explore how far these forms of social-pedagogical culture and identities reflect, reinforce or challenge socially dominant discourses relating to gender, class, and ethnicity, and how far the 'traditional' academic conception of the student as young, white, middle- or upper-class and male is perpetuated or challenged by these social-pedagogical cultural practices. It is hoped that such an analysis will further academic understanding of this under-researched area of student pedagogical life, and generate understandings that will be of use to practitioners in the field of student welfare and academic and pastoral support.

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