

## **Understanding social science students' choices and experiences: exploring the role of consumption. (0178)**

### **Abstract**

This paper draws on an analysis of students' accounts of their choice of university and degree and their experiences of university. We focus on the extent to which the students conceptualise themselves as consumers and/or their education as a product. We explore the intellectual value of theorising students' accounts with consumption theory and contrast this with an approach drawing upon Basil Bernstein's notion of pedagogic identities. We argue that on the whole students see themselves as involved in a broader transformation through knowledge, pedagogies and their overall experience of being a student. They do not see university education as a product or themselves primarily as consumers but there are elements of consumption theory that help to provide insight into aspects of students' identities. Bernstein's concept of pedagogic identities facilitates an integration of consumer orientated elements of students' identities within the broader pedagogic process of undergraduate education.

### **The context of the study and how it relates to previous research and literature in the field**

Our study is a mixed-method project called *Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University Undergraduate Degrees* funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [Grant Number: RES-062-23-1438] which is systematically exploring differences in quality between four differently ranked social science departments. It has produced a wide range of data sets from each department, and an analysis of relevant national and international documents. In this paper we focus on qualitative student data and on exploring the relevance of consumption theory for understanding students experience.

Currently there is a concern that students in England (who will be borrowing a larger amount of money to pay for their undergraduate courses than has previously been the case) will become demanding consumers and that university education will be undermined. Indeed academics already report that students have declined as a consequence of seeing themselves as consumers in a more marketised higher education arena (McLean and Abbas, 2009). Academic research which has focused on consumption and higher education has largely explored the impact of conceptualising higher education as a product (e.g. see Hayes and Wynyard (eds) (2002); Naidoo, (2004)) or have been from a marketing perspective (e.g. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006); Hill (1995); Marquez (2002)). The degree to which students see themselves as consumers and whether consumption theory can provide us with useful conceptual tools in understanding that has been less explored.

### **The theoretical approach**

Our project is testing the theories and concepts of Basil Bernstein but we seek to explore our data thoroughly without allowing these theories to over-determine and restrict our findings. In order to prevent this we endeavour to keep the data separate from the theories until we are sure we are sure we have a thorough understanding of what is represented within it. In addition we are exploring the data with other theories which might give us insight so that we can build on Bernstein's concepts. We have selected to investigate the value of some of the concepts associated with consumer culture (e.g. Bauman, 1998, 2001).

### **Methodology adopted**

One hour semi-structured interviews explored 98 students' experiences and perceptions of their first year at university. Biographical interviews using a life-grid methodology preceded the one hour interviews and gave a broader insight into the role of Higher Education in students' lives. In thirty-four second and third year repeat interviews with a selected sample of case study students we built on the familiarity with the students gained through the lifegrid and initial interview. All data sets have been analysed using NVivo software and our analytical process has involved research team members generating coding themes and using rigorous cross-validation processes and inter-coder reliability checks.

### **Preliminary Results**

Preliminary results suggest that students do not on the whole conceptualise themselves as consumers in relation to their university education and what they get out of it. However, they have been bought up in a consumer society and their ways of thinking about themselves and what they hope to achieve are influenced by this. Consequently ideas associated with consumer culture such as those of Bauman (ibid) can be useful in interpreting the way that education fits into their lives. However, Bernstein (2000) also provides a way of conceptualising these elements of students accounts within the notion of pedagogic identity.

### **The implications of the study (eg for theory, practice and further research)**

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