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Examining the relations between sociology students' accounts of knowledge and identity (0198)

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Research Domain: Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Context
There is a well established literature that has examined the relations between different aspects of students' identities and their experiences of higher education (for example see Archer and Leathwood 2003;; Kaufman and Feldman 2004; Ahearn *et al* 2008; Mann 2008; Brennan et al 2010; Crozier et al 2010), whilst research from an academic literacies perspective has examined how particular writing and reading tasks can shape students' identities (for example see, Ivanič 1998; Mann 2000; Lillis 2001; Paxton 2003). However, there is less literature which examines the ways in which students' identities are related to their engagement with knowledge in higher education. In his Actor-Network informed studies, Nespor (1994, 2007) gives a clear sense of how differences in the way time and space are constituted in physics, management and sociology lead students to have very different kinds of identities within these disciplines but there is less of a focus on how students' changing engagement with knowledge is related directly to their changing sense of personal identity. It is this issue that we examine in this paper.

Methodology

The Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees Project was a three-year ESRC-funded investigation of sociology and related social science degree courses in four universities, which were given the pseudonyms Prestige, Selective, Community, and Diversity Universities in order to reflect their different reputations. The departments at Prestige and Selective have been regularly rated in the top third of UK higher education league tables for their research and teaching in Sociology, whilst those at Community and Diversity have been regularly rated in the bottom third.

Three years' intensive fieldwork produced rich data sets, including: in-depth interviews with 98 students eliciting biographical stories and their perceptions and experiences of higher education; 31 longitudinal case studies following students throughout the three years of their degree programmes; a survey of over 750 students; interviews with 16 staff; analysis of video recordings of teaching in each institution in each year of the degree (12 sessions); analysis of students' assessed work (examples from each year); a focus group discussion with tutors from all four institutions about students' assessed work; as well as documentary analysis and the collection of statistical data relating to the four departments.

This paper is based an analysis of 86 interviews with the 31 case study students who we interviewed in over the course of their undergraduate degrees. These interviews focused on students' identities, their experiences of studying at university and their wider experiences outside of university. In each interview they were asked about how they saw sociology as a discipline. In this paper we focus on our analysis of students' accounts of their identities and the ways in which they experienced sociology as a discipline. We analysed our interview

data using a phenomenographic approach (Marton and Booth 1997; Åkerlind 2005). The focus in our analysis was on qualitative variation in the ways in which the students' described their personal identities and their understanding of sociology as a discipline.

Outcomes

We are currently completing our analysis of students' accounts of their personal identities. In relation to their relation to sociological knowledge we have constituted five different ways of accounting for sociology. These range from describing sociology as a form of personal development focused on developing the students' opinion to describing sociology as a partial way of studying the relations between people and society. The majority of students expressed more inclusive accounts of sociology over the course of their degrees. However, some students' accounts suggested they had become disengaged with sociology. Our preliminary analysis suggests that these accounts of sociological knowledge are related to students' changing accounts of their personal identities. It is this relationship and how it changes over the three years of their degree course that we will examine the full paper.

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