Exploring Intersectionality and the Student Experience : Intersections of Ethnicity, Gender and Religion amongst Criminology and Sociology Students

Sanders - McDonagh Erin, Davis Carole, *Middlesex University, UK*

Background: The concept of intersectionality emerged within feminist thinking in the 1980s, and has become a central tenant to current feminist paradigms (Geerts and van der Tuin, 2013; Lutz, Theresa Herrera Vivar, and Supik, 2011; Oleksy, 2011). Geerts and van der Tuin define intersectionality as: 'the idea that subjects are situated in frameworks of multiple, interacting forms of oppression and privilege through socially constructed categories such as gender and "race"/ethnicity' (2013:171). Recent developments around intersectionality make clear the complex nature of diversity in the classroom. Symington defines intersectionality as the ways in which 'a person's experiences with a multitude of factors, such as race, gender, ability, age and socio-economic location, can interact or intersect in ways that can either advantage or disadvantage the person's well-being and development' (Symington 2004: 1-2).

Research into student experiences within Higher Education has sought to explore the ways in which different forms of oppression may impact a students' ability to effectively navigate HE institutions and the extent to which these forms of oppression may hinder students' ability to complete their degrees. Research into Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, for example, suggests that outcomes for BME students have got worse in recent years. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2008), over the past decade fewer BME students are leaving with a good degree. While white students have a 1 in 4 chance of gaining a first class degree, students from some BME backgrounds have a 1 in 20 chance of obtaining a first-class degree. Previous research suggests that BME students may face difficulty with academic writing, professional writing, and argumentation at HE level (Stevenson , 2012), have a weak perception of their own intellectual abilities, which results in lowered expectations, and have less access to information about degree classification, less knowledge of independent learning, and difficulties with critical thinking (Cowden and Singh, 2012).

Relevant literature: Thinking beyond ethnicity however, there are a range of factors that may impact on a students' ability to finish their degree and go on to successful careers: subject, institution, socio-economic class, parental education and age on entry (Times Higher, 2013). Recent research on religion has also been highlighted as a key area that may impact on students' experience of higher education (Guest et al, 2013; Stevenson , 2014) and gender has been clearly identified as a key area of oppression (Burke, 2012). However, there has been little investigation into the ways that these different forms of oppression intersect in ways that may disadvantage certain students who occupy more than one of these oppressed categories. As such, our paper will explore the ways in which some of these different forms of oppression co-exist, and the impact this may have on students' learning outcomes at a post-1992 university. We are particularly interested in the intersection of ethnicity, gender and religion.

Context for the research: In order to understand the ways in which multiple discriminations may impact a student, we are exploring progression and degree classification data for students across the Department of Criminology and Sociology. The vast majority of the students on the programmes are UK students. Our university holds data for gender and ethnicity across all departments. Within Sociology, admissions data for 2013 suggests that the student cohort is comprised of a majority of women entrants (83% female), and only 11% of the Sociology cluster is white. The Criminology cluster is similar with a 74% female intake, and a minority of white students (40%). This means that the students within the Department of Criminology and Sociology are overwhelmingly female, and are hugely diverse in terms of ethnic background, and as such offers a unique group of students who may experience intersecting forms of oppression.

The methodology: We are currently undertaking a piece of qualitative research, exploring students' experiences of intersecting forms of oppression. As this is a pilot study, a selective sampling strategy is has been used. In 2014 a select number of students (n=9) from year 1, year 2, and year 3 across the Criminology and Sociology programmes participated in semi-structured interviews about their student experience at Middlesex. The sample includes Female BME students from different religious backgrounds, and explores the different ways in which the elements of ethnicity, gender and religion impact on students' experiences in the classroom.

Findings: Our paper will present our preliminary findings from the interviews, and related progression data, and will link into emerging strands within critical pedagogies around intersectionality in the classroom. The importance of exploring different intersections of oppression in HE is an emerging field (David *et al.*, 2009; Crozier *et al.*, 2008; Hockings *et al*., 2008), and some authors have begun to recognize the importance of exploring intersectionalities within the classroom, developing pedagogic approaches to working with students who arrive from different backgrounds with different perspectives (Morley and Lugg, 2009).

Implications : It is hoped that understanding the ways in which students situate themselves in the classroom, and the extent to which different forms of oppression may intersect to hinder students' ability to successfully engage and progress, will offer insights which can potentially inform practise. In turn this may have an impact on departmental and university-wide progression rates, and degree classification awards. Our paper speaks to the increasingly diverse nature of higher education, and we are particularly interested in exploring intersectionality as a key theme, in order to better understand and respond to difference and plurality within higher education institutions.

References

Burke, P.J. (2012) the right to Higher Education: beyond widening participation. Routledge

Cowden, S. and Singh, G. 2012. 'Multiculturalism, 'Race', 'Post-Race': Implications for Pedagogy' In Garner, S. and Kavak, S. *Debating Multiculturalism 2.* Workshop Proceedings. The Dialogue Society.

Crozier. Reay, D. Clayton. Colliander, L. (2008) Different Strokes for Different Folks: Diverse students in Diverse Institutions – Experiences of Higher Education. Research Papers in Education, 23:2, 167-177

David, M.,Bathmaker, A.M., Crozier., Davis ,P., Ertl,H., Fuller, A .,Haywood ,G.,Heath, S., Hockings, C., Parry, G., Reay, D., Vignoles,A ., and Williams , J. (2009) Improving Learning by Widening Participation in Higher Education. London: Routledge.

Hockings, C.S., Cooke,S. and Bowl, M. (2008) Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference: Full Research Report ESRC End of Award Report, RES -139-25-0222. Swindon, ESRC

Geerts, E. and van der Tuin, I. 2013. 'From intersectionality to interference: Feminist onto-epistemological reflections on the politics of representation'. In *Women's Studies International Forum*. Vol. 41 171–178.

Guest, M., Aune, K., Sharma, S., and Warner, E., (2013) Christianity and the University Experience: understanding student faith. Bloomsbury.

Higher Education Statistics Agency HESA (2008) Students in Higher Education Institutions 2007/08 www.hesa.ac.uk

Lutz, H. Teresa Herrera Vivar, M. and Supik, L. 2011. 'Framing Intersectionality: An Introduction'. In Lutz, H. Teresa Herrera Vivar, M. and Supik, L. (eds.) Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies. Farnham: Ashgate

Morgan, W. 2013. 'Raw Deal for BME Students?' In *Times Higher Education*, 13 February 2014.

Morley, L. and Lugg, R. 2009. 'Mapping Meritocracy: Intersecting Gender, Poverty and Higher Educational Opportunity Structures' In *Higher Education Policy* Vol. 22, 37-60.

Oleksy, E. 2011. Intersectional Pedagogy: From Movies to the Classroom. In Bhopal, K. and Maylor, U. (eds.) *Educational Inequalities: Difference and Diversity in Schools and Higher Education.* London: Routledge.

Stevenson ,J. (2014) Internationalisation and religious inclusion in United Kingdom higher education. Higher Education Quarterly, 68 (1), pp 46-64.

Stevenson, J. (2012) Black and minority ethnic student degree retention and attainment. www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents

Symington, A. 2004. *Intersectionality: a tool for gender and economic justice.* Association for Women's Rights in Development. Association for Women's Rights in Development [AWID], 2004 Aug. [8] p. (Women's Rights and Economic Change No. 9; Facts and Issues).