

Student transition: belonging at university and living at home (0121)

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## **Introduction**

Studies of student sense of belonging are closely aligned concepts of academic and social engagement (Tinto 1975). They are linked with strategies relating to successful retention particularly for first year students (Thomas 2012). Our analysis of students' lives challenges the conventional home-university model of transition and highlights the importance of acknowledging the influence of 'family and community' aspects of student's lives on the student experience of belonging.

Chow & Healy (2008) write about the transitions made by students leaving home to study at university. Students in their study focussed very much on the development of new social relationships made through accommodation and physical living spaces as key to their sense of belonging in this new university space. Students continuing to live at home will experience the process of going to university differently and it is within this context that our empirical work is situated.

## **Research Methodology**

Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was our selected approach, as this method has been successfully used in phenomenological studies to draw out narratives from interviewee's lives (Wengraf, 2001). The interview protocols were guided by the BNIM process, and a primary question, known as the Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN), was developed for use in the interviews.

Below we present three student biographies, followed by a cross case analysis, which, as Wengraf suggests, is most powerful when constructed as a triptych.

### ***Isi: pre 1992 Research Intensive Institution***

Isi is a young working class Asian man. He has a sharp and combative narrative style. His life history unfolds trauma and drug misuse resulting in hospital admission. University is a way of escaping his past life, and reinventing himself, as well as a

strategy for avoiding the local gym, where his troubles began. He is looking for new spaces to inhabit, however, this is difficult as he still needs to live at home.

***Paola: post 1992 Vocationally Focussed Institution***

Paola is a 27 year old, married Brazilian woman who lives with her husband. She frequently labels herself as a mature student. Her decision to study at her university was made on limited information, based in part on its location in the prestigious Square Mile in the financial district.

***Kuura: post 1992 Vocationally Focussed Institution***

Kuura is a young female of African/Gambian parents. She presents as very articulate and self-assured, with clear views on her academic journey/career plans. She came from a school with low levels of academic attainment. Despite her excellent grades Kuura elects to attend a post 1992 institution of lower status than others for which she was qualified.

Moving beyond the individual narrative analysis to a cross case analysis provides for the opportunity to consider the themes from both shared and opposing perspectives. The three cases are presented below.

***Case analysis A: Similarities of Kuura and Paola contrasted with Isi***

***Belonging and family/friends***

Both women share a desire for the warmth of family and community life. Kuura in the present and Paola echoing back to her Brazilian roots. These family and social influences militate against them making positive choices that would build future opportunities and develop cultural capital. Kuura sees her university as replicating the familiarity and comfort of her family. Paola is disappointed with her choice. She decided to go to university after working in the City. Her friends were not able to help her much with which university to attend. Both women are very engaged with their studies but exhibit different manifestations of belonging.

In contrast Isi despite a chaotic and confused life history, and working class roots has a 'big' sense of life and expectations. He has sought out good mentoring and guidance in terms of his university selection and future career. He recognises the limitations of

his patchy family support and is keen to draw a line under his ‘council estate’ upbringing. He is pained by his realisation that if he goes back to his community and his roots he will be unable to fulfil his ambitions for a “big life”. This innate association of his past being wasted coincides with Bourdieu’s concept that ‘self-improvement ...presupposes a personal cost’ (Bourdieu, 1983, 244).

### ***Case analysis B: Similarities of Kuura and Isi contrasted with Paola***

#### *Belonging and social class/community*

Both Kuura and Isi share an acute awareness of social class and their community roots. This can be seen from Kuura’s discomfort at a public prize giving when she realised other students were from private schools. When starting at university Isi does not mention his council estate origins to any of his new friends. Both are keen to make friends but their background plays out in very different ways. For Kuura her narration is one where her university life tumbles out and mixes with her home and community life. Isi by contrast sees his new friends as a way of building networks for the future. He is very aware of the social status of the contexts within which he makes friends and keeps them separate from his home community. Paola has no UK community affiliations. She is concerned with the status of her institution, which she compares unfavourable with universities in Brazil, and does not see herself as belonging.

### ***Case analysis C: Similarities of Paola and Isi contrasted with Kuura***

#### *Belonging and ethnic boundaries*

Reay et al. (2010) state the importance of ‘cross-racial interactions’ for higher sense of belonging on campus. When Isi narrates his university experience he expresses a continuous awareness of cultural, ethnic and class distinctions/boundaries. Similarly Paola’s expresses feelings of alienation from groups on the basis of ethnicity reflecting feelings of isolation. Whereas, Kuura is comfortable and integrated into the multi-cultural university environment.

## **Discussion**

This study suggests a reframing of contemporary thinking about sense of belonging and transition to encompass a set of relationships, often ignored, which to our students are significant ie family, old friends and community. Everything these students

experience is coloured by the life they lived before, and which they continue to return to at the end of each day. The implications suggest that universities need to be more responsive to home and community factors. This might encompass further research into the role of family and old friends in transition; reconstituting university spaces to enable a different set of relationships to emerge, social rather than educational. This could lead to a reframing of the classroom and university space as one in which affords these students opportunities to develop new social relationships and support, similar to those living on campus.

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