(Not) mattering in higher education (0131)

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Abstract

This paper draws on narrative interviews with sixty refugees and other forced migrants studying in UK higher education to explore how the embodied, subjective and affective practices of higher education (Burke, 2012) can enhance or work against students' sense of mattering. The students accounts were analysed by paying attention to the four elements fundamental to developing and sustaining a sense of mattering: how much attention was paid to them by others; whether they felt important to, or cared for, by those around them; the extent to which they considered that others depended or relied on them and the appreciation they felt was given to them for their efforts (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). The students' stories draws attention to how the small-scale, local, often seemingly casual, micro-practices of higher education can have significant positive or negative implications and intensify these students' feelings of mattering or not to those around them.

Paper

Mattering is the subjective perception that we make a difference to others in our lives, the 'feeling of counting for others, being important for them, and therefore oneself and finding in the permanent plebiscite of testimonies of interest – requests, expectations, invitations – a kind of justification for existing (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 240). Mattering consists of four distinct elements: attention, importance, dependence (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981) and appreciation (Schlossberg, 1989), and operates as a form of external validation of ourselves by others, both at an interpersonal (individual) level and/or at a societal (community or government) level (Rosenberg, 1985; Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981; Tovar, 2013).

Knowing that we matter, that we are the (positive) focus of other people's attention, that we are important to those around us, are depended on and appreciated by those we come in to contact with, is essential to the way we value ourselves (Elliott et al. 2005); whilst knowing that we play a role within any particular social order is essential to understanding our place within it (*ibid.*). Thus mattering is fundamental to both our sense of self and our sense of identity (Tovar, 2013). In contrast, those seeking asylum in a new country are invariably doing so because they have ceased to matter, or have never mattered, to those in authority in their home country, either because of their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or race, or because of their religious, political or social affiliations. The processes of dislocation, trauma and bereavement in itself may also significantly disrupt an individual's sense of mattering to others, as they become rootless, homeless, and unemployed. Seeking and gaining asylum, therefore, offers the potential for new forms of validation and to find new ways of mattering.

As my previous work has shown, accessing higher education is also, for many refugees, seen not only as a route out of poverty and discrimination but also as a way of re-establishing and re-validating themselves within their new social milieu (Author 1, 2007; Author 1, 2013). In this paper I return to research undertaken over eight years to explore how the embodied, subjective and affective practices of higher education (Burke, 2012) can enhance or work against students' sense of mattering. I revisit the transcripts of individual interviews with sixty three refugees and asylum seekers who participated in a range of projects funded by

Aimhigher (a former UK body which funded initiatives designed to widen participation in higher education) and the European Social Fund (set up to improve employment opportunities in the European Union).

The interviewees comprised 38 women and 25 men, predominantly aged between 30 and 50, most of who had participated in some form of higher education in their home countries with some having reached very high levels of professionally qualification or status (doctor, dentist, lawyer, teacher etc.); just over half the group (31) were seeking to access HE and the other half (32) were studying in HE, either on study skills or preparation for HE courses. All the interviews asked very open questions about the refugees' experiences of accessing, being and belonging in higher education; however, in this paper I focus specifically on those students who had made the transition into higher education. Their accounts were closely read and re-read, both individually and then across the transcripts, and carefully analysed in relation to the four elements fundamental to developing and sustaining a sense of mattering, as well as drawing on Tovar's (2013) conceptual framework for linking mattering and belonging.

The analysis shows that many of the refugees had been in positions of influence and importance in their previous professional lives and social milieus. However, their experiences as refugees (including trauma, persecution, displacement and resettlement) combined with the complexities and exigencies of making new lives in an unfamiliar country had not only stripped them of economic capital but had left them with unrecognised academic capital and with social and cultural capital in 'the wrong currency' (Author 1, 2013). This de-capitalisation meant that the men in particular struggled with no longer being 'of importance', having attention paid to them, or being 'needed by others'; contrary to what they had expected, they found being in higher education bewildering and, at times, highly problematic. Both the men and the women commented on their sense of disconnection from the other students, and from the staff, around them; some talked of feeling 'invisible' or as if they were 'ghosts'; some described being 'friendless' or 'alone' in the classroom, sitting by themselves or being the last to be invited in to group discussions; others spoke of resentment at the social groups that were formed by their classmates but that 'carelessly' excluded them. A strong narrative across all the interviews was that only those 'like them' paid the refugee students any attention; in consequence they felt that they were ignored, positioned as different or 'other'. Across the narratives of the female students in particular was a recurring sense of frustration that they were overlooked and uncared for by those, both staff and other students, around them. The narrative also evidence the deep sense of frustration felt by many of the refugees about how little regard was given to what they 'brought' to the classroom. The students narratives also illuminate how little value or appreciation they felt was given to them either for what they brought to the classroom, or for their efforts as students.

The analysis shows that although the students' narratives focussed on the micro and the local – for example recounting a single interaction with another student or staff member, or describing a relatively small-scale event such as where they sat in the classroom – these events carried significant, collaborative, weight and were felt 'painfully' by the students; moreover, the collaborative outcome of these small happenings was a perception for these students that they neither belonged in, or mattered to, the university. Similar to other papers in this symposium, therefore, this research draws attention not to *what* matters but *who* matters in higher education.

References
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