

Thinking about the future: Potential sociologies of Higher Educations students' possible selves (0074)

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Abstract

This conceptual paper argues for the importance of complex and non-linear understandings of student futures that take into account structural educational inequalities. The paper begins by establishing the role of imagined futures and embedded pasts in present Higher Education student experiences, using the discourse of employability as an example. It then introduces the possible selves concept (Markus and Nurius, 1986) as an initial way of interrogating naturalised understandings of student temporalities. The paper suggests that sociological thinking is necessary to using the possible selves concept in a way that avoids individualising discourses of deficit. I offer two potential theorisations, using Butler's (1997) writing on performative subjectivities to explore narrative constructions of future selves, and Massey's (2012) power-geometries to highlight the importance of the spatial in understanding the temporal. Overall, the paper highlights the value of re-thinking the temporal conditions of Higher Education that we might otherwise take for granted.

Paper

This paper takes as its starting point the increasing focus on graduate employability for UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (see, for example, Graduate Employability Rankings, 2016). The discourse of employability makes an explicit causal connection between a chosen course and institution of study and the future of employment. The inclusion of employment rankings in guides to university choices (Page, 2015) and HEI marketing materials creates a further temporal layering; the prospective student, it suggests, makes their choice of future study based on the future offered beyond study itself. This paper argues that these conceptualisations of future work against our linear understandings of time, in which a student might move from a past of schooling, to a present of HE study and a future of employment. Instead, the imagined future is a persistent part of present student temporalities. Similarly, OFFA's requirement that Access Agreements articulate a clear plan for increasing employability for their Widening Participation (WP) students in particular (OFFA, p. 10) suggests a clear awareness that past inequalities are often re-experienced in the future of graduate employment. In an HE environment in which the student future is both forced into the present and influenced by the past, this paper takes a conceptual approach to seeking new ways of conceptualising educational temporalities.

I begin with the concept of possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986), which has been used to explore the connection between personalised, imagined futures and present behaviour. In particular, this concept has highlighted the importance of fully imagined, detailed future selves in determining present motivation (Carroll, 2014; Hock, Deshler and Schumaker, 2006; Oyserman, Bybee and Terry, 2006). While arguing that the possible selves concept underpins much current thinking about widening access to, within and beyond HE, I also suggest that sociological thinking is necessary to developing its useful conceptualisation. Key to this development is an

emphasis on the social constructions of subjectivity, and a move away from the interventionist approach to which the possible selves concept's disciplinary roots in cognitive psychology might lend itself (Oyserman, Terry and Bybee, 2002). Rather than placing a deficit in imagination upon the underachieving or unmotivated student, then, this paper shows that the imagined future must be conceptualised sociologically as well as individually. The paper therefore first establishes a discursive, narrative approach to subjectivity and temporality, before extending a discussion of temporality to include the spatial.

Literature on possible selves has begun to suggest the importance of a narrative approach to the concept, though this remains underexplored (Erikson, 2007; Whitty, 2002). This paper argues that temporality is inherently narrative, and that telling the story of oneself as an educational subject requires the performative negotiation of the multiple and non-linear constructions of temporality outlined above. I use Butler's theorisation of performative subjectivity in *Excitable Speech* (1997) in conceptual conjunction with possible selves to create a theoretical framework for a narrative understanding of HE student futures. Butler argues that the subject's entry into discourse is contingent upon the 'implicit and explicit norms' that govern intelligible speech (Butler, 1997, p. 153). Her analysis highlights the ways in which the subject makes itself comprehensible, both to the self and to others, by drawing on available discourses and obeying implied and inherent norms of which the subject is itself largely unaware. As such, the narrative of the self must occlude discourses or positions that might render the subject unintelligible. This theorisation refuses a division between the individual subject and the social context in and through which that subject narrates itself, thus rendering social context fundamental to understanding subjectivity. This work has been used by Brockmann (2012) to theorise the performative construction of learner identities in vocational education. Brockmann's analysis disrupts naturalised understandings of vocational learners as practical or non-academic, showing the performative rather than the given nature of these narratives of student subjectivity. She explores the role played by past familial and school discourses in learners' present narratives of themselves as vocational students. I argue for the importance of extending this conceptualisation to include the imagined future self, and the impact of available, intelligible discourses of career futures upon the present narrative construction of subjectivity. While this theorisation sustains the focus on individual identities implied by the possible selves concept, it ensures that temporalities are indivisible from social structures in understandings of student subjectivity.

In order to explore the intertwining of social structures and future temporalities more closely, the final part of this paper introduces the spatial to the theorisation of the temporal. In doing so, I draw upon the work of Massey (2012; 2005) and Taylor (2012). Both writers insist upon the combined study of the spatial and the temporal, arguing that lived experiences are constituted through the uneasy and unequal relationships between the two. Massey coins the term 'power-geometries' to explain the geographical structures of mobility that enable privileged ease of temporal and spatial movement. These power-geometries, Massey argues, allow grand narratives of global, instantaneous communication to ignore issues of immobility and exclusion. Taylor's (2012) study of gendered and classed narratives of place in the north-east of England is a sharp reminder that imagined futures of area regeneration are intertwined with selective re-tellings of place-bound hardship and deprivation. I use both

Massey's and Taylor's studies to highlight the ways in which considerations of space and place are vital in resisting the pull of the global narrative of HE. Their arguments show the intricate, constitutive role of the local in the construction of possible student futures.

Overall, the paper employs sociological theorisations of narrative subjectivity and the spatial in order to complicate the role of temporality in thinking through student subjectivities in HE. It deliberately holds in play multiple concepts and disciplinary orientations in order to argue for a complex, uneasy and unfixed understanding of temporality in relation to student futures.

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