

The cultural production of master students' career narratives, study strategies and future selves (0085)

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Introduction

Higher education is facing some of the most massive changes in its history (Shin and Teichler, 2014). In particular three transformations are interesting to understand why students' careers are playing a significant role in today's HE. One is the expansion of students gaining a degree (Eurostat, 2015), with the result that HE has moved from being perceived as a self-contained system. Another concerns the marked orientation of HE. The profitable rationale is both produced by society demanding the investment in HE to pay off, but also internalised by students' who expect fees and effort to translate into human capital (Knight and Yorke, 2003). Finally the job market has changed dramatically within the past decades leading to less predictable careers (Heery and Salmon, 2002).

These transformations constitute a strong focus on students' careers, with a range of counseling and transition-initiatives as the result. However the transition to the job market is not just a question of matching demands, it is a process of identity formation, where moving from being a student to becoming an employee requires of the graduate to negotiate their sense of selves.

Theory

Narrative psychology proposes narratives as the tool which organises the messiness of life into a progressive, meaningful and coherent story. The construction and negotiations of narratives occurs in particular *social and cultural* contexts allowing some narratives whilst excluding others (Polkinghorne, 1988). Academic disciplines present such cultural settings that support, recognise and produce certain narratives. They provide the students with a platform to construct an academic identity from (Hasse, 2002). As such it is interesting to explore how different study programmes interact with students' narratives.

The construction of narratives involves negotiations of the present, the past, and the future (Bruner, 2004). University and the job market might be two distinct cultural contexts. However there is reason to

believe that they interact; students' considerations about their future careers might for example interact with their study-strategies.

On that basis, the aim is to understand how various cultural settings at different study programmes interact with master students' narratives about their career orientation, and moreover to explore how the students' considerations about their future set the scene for their present studies.

Method

The data were collected at two Danish universities. In Denmark about 80 % of all bachelor students continue into a master study programme, which is free of fees.

The study was carried out at four STEM master study programmes with graduates entering the same job market: Molecular biomedicine and biochemistry on the one hand represent heavy research study programmes, and chemical engineering and biotechnology represent more applied.

Workshops were carried out at the study programmes. On the basis of the workshop 5-8 students from each study programme were selected for individual narrative interviews about their experiences with studying and considerations about their future (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). 25 interviews were conducted, lasting about one hour. All were transcribed. This paper is based on the interviews, that were approached with a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Preliminary findings

5 categories of narratives were identified in the analysis.

The first category was labeled '*nearsighted narratives*'. The students within this category had a vague idea of life after graduation. They did not consider their future after graduation, and their major concern was finishing their thesis, which hopefully would lead to a Ph.D.-position. They highlighted the Ph.D. as the most natural and prestigious career perspective, why considering other aspirations were not viable. Some even explained how they were questioned by other students and teachers if they were not aspiring towards a Ph.D. As a consequence the students did not consider future relevance in their choice of courses and theses.

The second category was labelled '*goal oriented*'. This group both contained students that aspired towards specific private companies as well as high prestigious research groups. The students' carefully articulated how they planned to meet their goals. Some did their thesis in cooperation with a company, and others had picked a thesis where they gained certain competences that they expected to be attractive to particular employers.

The third category was labelled '*content specific*'. The students within this category highlighted how they perceived themselves working with a particular content. The students explained how it was important to them to follow a specific interest. As a result their choice of courses and thesis reflected their sometimes very specific aspiration.

The fourth category was labelled '*self-managing*'. The students within this category highlighted how they expected to have a large control over their work-life. This group contained students with various narratives: from a professional athletic who valued being able to plan her schedule, to a student who was driven towards starting his own company. In common the students within this category highlighted the independence and self-management in their aspirations.

Finally the fifth category was labeled '*be happy*'. The category in particular contained students who during their theses-work had experienced a working-culture which they did not find to be attractive, and which they found it hard to imagine a future within. They highlight how they did not wanted to spend their lives in the lab, but that life should be something more than a career.

Some of the five categories contained students from all study programmes, but some were related to specific programmes. An example is the *nearsighted narratives* which were primarily found among bio chemistry students, and the *goal oriented* narratives among students from chemical engineering and molecular biomedicine. This is interesting as students from both bio chemistry and molecular biomedicine highlight a Ph.D.-position as being a natural pathway. However the students' study strategies were different. Where the molecular biomedicine students aspire towards specific research groups, the bio chemistry students have no post-graduation plans. As a result the molecular biomedicine students' choice of thesis is strategically based on gaining specific competences they expect to be useful in their future career.

Conclusion

The study shows how the cultural setting at four study programmes interacted with master students' narratives about their career orientations. Five categories were identified. Some narratives were specifically related to the study programme, while other narratives were found across the data. The narratives not only shaped the students' future perspectives, but also their navigation to get there. As such the students' considerations about their future, interacted with their study strategies. Applying an identity lens the study gained insight into the complex interaction of study culture, career narratives and study strategies.

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