

Re-thinking student geographies: Going beyond the im/mobility dualism in HE research (0217)

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Introduction

The diffuse mobility choices made by contemporary university students at various scales has opened up exciting avenues in which to investigate youth transitions and educational outcomes (Donnelly and Evans 2016; Hinton 2011). In the English context there is a particular sense that residential mobility is often privileged over remaining in the family home during study; a point that has been raised by Holdsworth (2009b):

"[...] students are constantly on the move: between lecture halls; from place of residence (which may be halls of residence, privately rented accommodation, or parental home) to campus; as well as from 'home' to university" (p. 1852).

Holdsworth goes on to argue that, in among these mobility practices what is less clear are how the micro-mobilities of everyday-life affect students' actions and performances in their term-time locations. Seven years on and little progress has been made to address this imbalance. This paper builds on a growing critique of the preoccupation with narrow notions of student mobility, arguing that such a view necessarily valorizes residential relocation above local mobility performances (Holton, 2015) which are often mistaken for immobility. Conceptualizing student geographies as a dualism, rather than existing on a complex continuum, fails to adequately understand the significance of everyday movements such as commuting, co-present and virtual social interactions, and different ways of engaging with campus for a significant minority of university students in the UK.

It is timely to interrogate these issues given that the numbers of students choosing not to move away from home to attend university in the UK are growing. Current figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] (2015) reveal that for UK-domiciled undergraduate students, around 25 per cent live with parents or guardians and a further 15 per cent live in their own residence, indicating a small but significant shift away from the

'boarding school' model of HE which has a long history embedded in the elitism of university participation.

Background

Mobilities have become one of the cornerstone topics of the social sciences in recent years being present in all aspects of our daily lives (Sheller and Urry 2016). Despite some insisting that contemporary social life is shaped by the increasing mobility of people, ideas, goods and capital, several writers in the field of HE and elsewhere have been quick to highlight the persistent immobilities of the socially disadvantaged. Nonetheless, as Adey (2006) argues, immobilities are contested and subjectively judged in relation to others' relative mobilities, meaning power plays a significant role in influencing certain types of mobility, providing access to – and to a degree egress from, certain types of mobility (Hannam et al., 2006). This paper aims to expose these binaries further by investigating the privileging of mobility over 'perceived' stasis within HE research.

Student mobilities are often framed in the context of transition, loosely defining those who have left home for university as mobile and those who have elected to live with parents or in their own homes as immobile (Christie, 2007; Crozier et al, 2008). This is pertinent as the UK student experience of living away from home has, for many, become a defining feature of the student identity (Holdsworth, 2009a). Those electing not to live in student accommodation are deemed 'out of place' as their 'local' connections may mean they do not occupy an easily identifiable position within the student community (Christie, 2007). What are less clear from such simplistic binaries are the complexities of students' day-to-day mobilities once they are operating in their term-time spaces and how much does the transition from home impact upon these everyday mobile practices.

The Study

The Lancaster study is ongoing; however, to date 19 interviews have been conducted. Eight of the interviews went ahead as 'go along' interviews, using public transport; three were walking interviews around campus; and the remaining eight were carried out in a fixed location on campus primarily because these participants were car users and, due to health and safety reasons, go along interviews were not possible. The sample includes a mix of

undergraduate (13) and postgraduate (6) respondents, as well as young (9) and mature (10) students. Most participants were female (14) and White British (13). Seven participants said they were living with parents, others were co-habiting with a partner and/or family (8) or friends (1), and three were living alone. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. Only four participants lived in Lancaster; the other participants were located around the North West region, between eight and 55 miles away from the university campus.

Preliminary findings

The paper will discuss preliminary findings from the study including how students [re]frame attachments to places through commuting and how the different spaces students inhabit (e.g. home, university, night's out etc.) and the activities performed in these spaces (e.g. care-giving, studying, homemaking etc.) might form potentially incongruent relationships with mobility.

The paper will also give space for a discussion of the experience of moving between selves and different locations / settings was a common theme for commuter students and there were observable classed and gendered dimensions in terms of how the practices and meanings of mobility were understood.

Conclusion

The paper will make conclusions on the basis of the current study and suggest ways of moving forward in terms of theory and research

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