Recording and Recognising the Experiences of Estranged Students in Higher Education: Using Photo-Elicitation as Method (0239)

Rachel Spacey [1] [1] *University of Lincoln, United Kingdom*

Background and context

Estranged students have "*No communicative relationship with either of their living biological parents and often their wider family networks as well*" (OFFA, 2017, n.p.). In the absence of family capital (Bland, 2016) they are considered a disadvantaged group and universities are encouraged by the Office for Students (previously the Office for Fair Access) to include them as a target group in their Access and Participation Plans (formerly known as Access Agreements). In order to best support estranged students, higher education institutions need to understand the challenges they face (OFFA, 2017), however, as the first formal piece of quantitative research into the experiences of estranged students by the charity Stand Alone which supports estranged adults highlighted, there is a lack of qualitative research undertaken with estranged students to understand their experiences of higher education (Bland & Shaw, 2015).

New Starts (Bland & Shaw, 2015) found that financial support and accommodation are two key factors influencing estranged students' experiences since they will incur greater costs, having to house themselves during the vacations as well as in term time without the support, financial or otherwise, of a family network. Estranged students were also found to prefer non-Russell Group institutions based on their perceptions of the support available and because in the absence of family "*they lack the social capital or confidence to apply to a higher tariff university*" (ibid. p.17). Their research also suggests that one of the biggest barriers estranged students face is a lack of understanding around estrangement such that it is regarded as taboo.

Methodology

This project aimed to address this gap with a qualitative study of estranged students at a post-1992 university in England. The visual method of photo-elicitation was selected since it is frequently used in sociological studies and is considered a useful approach to engage vulnerable groups or marginalised communities (Mannay, 2013). Estranged students were recruited to take part in the project and asked to take a series of images during a specified time frame; the Easter vacation. This time frame is significant since "*the holiday periods are windows in which estranged students become particularly vulnerable, slipping between the net of parental responsibility and the responsibility of the local authority*" (Bland & Shaw, 2015, p.12) – the latter only applies if they are defined as care leavers otherwise there is no local authority statutory support for estranged students who have not been in local authority care. After the Easter holiday, participants shared their images with the other

participants in a facilitated focus group session and the students' comments about, and reactions to these images and responses to the focus group questions were audio-recorded with their consent. The resulting transcriptions were uploaded into the qualitative software analysis tool, NVivo, to facilitate thematic analysis.

Results

In terms of recognising estrangement, thematic analysis of the focus group transcriptions revealed that the students' experiences of estrangement varied greatly and were complex and changing. Some students chose not to be in contact with their parent(s), others did not have a choice. Their estrangement was hidden, misunderstood and unacknowledged – some of the students told their friends at university, others did not and while some had disclosed their situation to a personal tutor or other member of staff, some had not.

In terms of recording the experiences of estranged students, participants utilised a range of coping strategies to get through the Easter holidays including keeping busy, maintaining a routine such as going to the gym, working, voluntary work, doing chores, leisure activities such as gaming, studying or revising. The Easter period was punctuated by isolation – during vacations the campus is empty and flatmates, course mates and friends go home. Some of the students enjoyed the freedom of walking around and exploring the city over Easter while others would have liked more to do. For some the vacation was a positive time – an opportunity to visit friends and new places and to relax. The importance of access to university spaces other than student accommodation such as the Library became clear as one way in which estranged students negotiated the Easter vacation.

Project participation and the use of photo-elicitation as method were considered therapeutic for some of the students. Although all eight students had volunteered to take part in the project, participation, particularly the act of taking images of their experience, involved confronting their estrangement. However, the focus groups also provided an opportunity to meet with other estranged students which was the first time they had encountered other estranged students whilst at university.

Implications of the study

While the generalisability of the findings must be treated with caution given the project's limited scope, the approach taken and the rich data it generated are of value to an area of research which is still in its infancy. The findings of the study appear to support the contentions that issues of stigma, recognition, awareness and understanding of estrangement need to be addressed by the higher education community and whilst this group of students is numerically small, by raising awareness of the existence and issues they face at university, arguably "*their progression through higher education is a clear sign that widening participation initiatives are working well and access to brighter futures are open to all*" (Bland & Shaw, 2015, p.3) within a sector-wide focus on the student experience.

Moreover, there are implications for research using photo-elicitation as method. While it was judged positively by participants, allowing them to legitimately contemplate their own student experience, some individuals found the process challenging since they were asked to focus on their estrangement. This ethically complex project thus raises questions about the ways in which both the researcher and the researched may need support in research which involves vulnerable groups and sensitive topics.

References

Bland, B. (2016). The students with no support network. *Times Higher Education*. [Online]. 25 January 2016. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/students-no-support-network [Accessed June 22 2018].

Bland, B. and Shaw, J. (2015) *New Starts. The challenge of Higher Education without the support of a family network*. Unite Foundation and Stand Alone. [Online]. Available at: http://standalone.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/StandAloneUNITEfoundation.pdf [Accessed June 22 2018].

Mannay, D. (2013) ''Who put that on there … why why why?' Power games and participatory techniques of visual data production', *Visual Studies,* 28(2), 136-46.

OFFA (2017) *Topic Briefing: Estranged Students.* [Online]. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/universities-and-colleges/guidance/topic-briefings/topic-briefing-estranged-students/ [Accessed June 22 2018].