**Transformation or Transgression? The impact of an institutional habitus on working class student identity**

Abstract

Whilst evidence continues to highlight disparity in higher education (HE) participation rates across social groups, there continues to be small numbers of young people from social groups 4 – 7 choosing to go to university. There is a body of literature that identifies issues connected to social and academic fit for such students (see Rose 1989, Law 1995, Mahony, Zmroczek 1997, Reay 2001, Walkerdine, Lucey et al. 2001) but little that tracks the influence of an institutional habitus on identity transformation. Drawing from data collected within a post-1992 HE institution, and utilising a Bourdieuian analysis around the notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1997), this paper seeks to explore issues of student identity as they negotiate their way through the HE field.

Introduction: Research Aims and Theoretical Framework

Following political attention to widening participation, the UK higher education landscape has expanded to meet increased student demand (Blanden and Machin, 2004). Similar patterns of expansion have been observed internationally. The growth in student numbers brings a theoretically diverse student population, within which social position appears to play a determining factor in the type of higher education an individual student, would experience (Archer, Hutchings 2000). In the UK, there are perceptions of a binary distinction between research intensive institutions (identified as being elite or 'top' institutions) and those formed post 1992 that place an emphasis on teaching. The consequence of this divide results in institutions becoming synonymous with particular social demographics where 'there are large socio-economic and ethnic gaps in the likelihood of attending an HE institution with high status (as measured by research intensiveness)' (Chowdry et al., 2008: iii). The Higher Education Statistics Agency data[i] also indicates that institutions perceived as being elite attract the majority of their students from the higher social groups as illustrated in Figure 1.
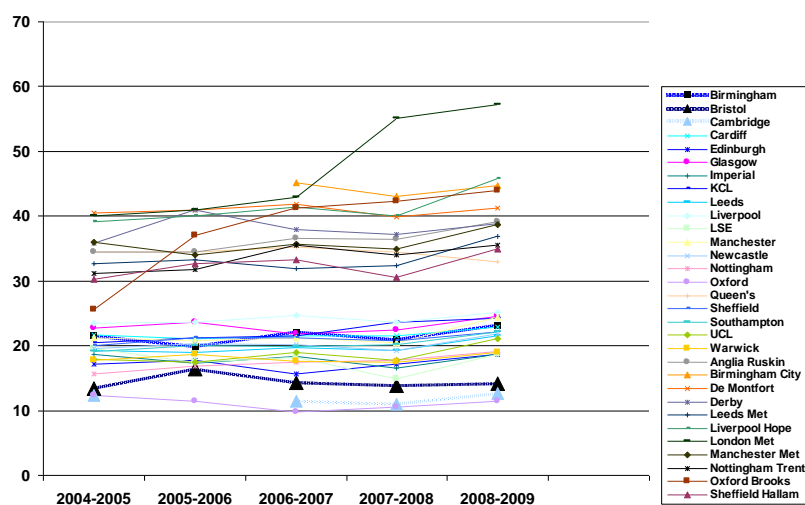
Figure 1: Russell Group vs. Post-1992 Universities: Participation Rates of SEG 4 – 7

The difference between the two groups would indicate that there is less social difference, or the occupation of different social spaces amongst the student body at a post-1992 institution when compared with traditional universities that attract fewer students from social groups 4 -7. Whilst a number of possible explanations for this social group spread centre on academic and social fit (Rose 1989, Holloway 1997, Parr 1997, Reynolds 1997, Skeggs 1997, Reay 2001), there is little research that focuses on the influence that institutions have on the identity formation of widening participation students [ii] in post-1992 institutions. In particular, there is currently insufficient information about the nature of their transformation or 'transgression' (Bourdieu, 1999: 510) from their family based habitus.

This research seeks to fill this apparent gap by focusing on identity trans/formation. Taking a Bourdieuian perspective it explores the result of a habitus that theoretically enters a field with which it is not familiar (Reay et al., 2005). With a focus placed on the notion of habitus clivé (Reed-Danahay, 2005) it specifically utilizes Bourdieu's theoretical tools to ask questions about the enculturation of working class students into the middle class field of education and in particular, the ways in which the institutional habitus influences their identity transformation. With that in mind the following research questions will be addressed:

-   Is there a 'widening participation' student identity?
-   What factors influence identity transformation of widening participation students?
-   How does an evolving identity impact on the sense of belonging both within the institution and within social groups?

Methodological Approach

This paper, although located within a wide body of research concerning university choice, is also situated within policy discourses around widening participation in the UK. Students, who identified themselves as being the first in their family to go into higher education, across the three years of an undergraduate joint honours programme, were invited to participate in the research. This provided us with a longitudinal aspect to the research in which we could consider the idea of a

change in habitus over time. Students comprised 210 in total and ranged from 18 – 25 in age.

The methods used within this research seek to uncover the complexities of identity transformation through the students' understandings and perceptions of how they believed they had changed as they progressed through their undergraduate course.

In order to explore this issue, the following methods were used:

- questionnaire
- e-mail communication
- focus group discussion
- individual interviews.

Ethics

This research complies with the code of practice for the conduct of educational research as provided by the British Education Research Association (2004).

Preliminary Findings and Discussion

In teasing out the complexity of student identity, three areas of influence emerged: institutional; family; peers. It is acknowledged that these are inextricably linked and that there is an 'inevitable degree of overlap and blurring of boundaries between peer group, family and institution' (Reay, David et al. 2005: 59). However, what came across clearly in the interview data was a sense of students being able to establish a fit within the institution because of the support networks they had outside of the university through for example, their family and friends. We now discuss these areas in relation to the question of whether the students entered into a process of transformation or transgression.

The Comfort Blanket of Home

The 'cultural characteristics' (Reay, David et al. 2005: 37) of a post-1992 institution have been identified as being different than those of a traditional institution (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Many of the students in our study were attracted to the university given its close proximity to home, confirming literature that suggests that working class students lead localised lives (Healy, 2006). The idea that university can influence a student identity needs to be considered in light of the propensity of the students to remain in the family home. Rob, for example explained,

> Because I live at home still, I had that kind of comfort blanket of when I went home, it was like that first day at school, my mum was like how was uni, what have you done and everything like that and for me that was really nice because then I could let out and tell her how I was feeling.

(Rob: Interview: 24/1/11)

However, in relation to the key questions posed above some initial insight into our current third year students would indicate that there are some tensions between family members and their decision to go to university.

Perceived Acts of Transgression

Some of our students highlighted the discomfort that family members had about their decision to go to university where the 'transgression' is experienced in terms of pursuing a path that is not necessarily supported by the family. For example, Ella states that being the first in her family to go to university is

> [s]cary, a lot of emphasis is placed on how well I do, they [parents] disagree with my career choice so there is a lot of pressure to do well and prove them wrong.
>
> (Ella: e-mail communication: 10-12-10)

Rob also hinted that all was not well within his family as he went through the process of applying to university:

> My dad would have liked it if I had gone straight into work, my mum would have been horrified because she would have thought well, you've got the GCSEs, you've got the A levels, it would be stupid not to go and further that even more. Where dad, I think he's quite scared of education because he didn't have a good experience whatsoever at school, like he left school at 15, then like literally on that Monday, like he left on the Friday and on the Monday he was in a job and he kind of has that idea that everyone should do that, there shouldn't be any academics or anything like that.
>
> (Rob: Interview: 24/1/11)

For our students, 'spatial notions of proximity and distance' (Reay, David et al. 2005: 51) help us to understand the process of transformation and/or transgression that is at play during their time at university. The students in our study discuss their attempts to belong in various social positions where the stability in their own identity is disrupted through their decision to enter the HE field.

Evolving Identity

Bourdieu describes the difficulties in establishing position within social fields as individuals attempt to develop an 'inherent part of belonging' (Bourdieu, 1990: 67). The competing tensions between what the students were leaving behind and their attempts to fit into their new contexts, is a consistent theme that emerged within our data. Josie reflects upon this as she illuminates the complex process of forming friendships as she attempted to gravitate towards similarly minded people.

> I'd say at first I didn't really speak to anyone, but I didn't mind not speaking with anyone because I thought it's alright, I'll be alright by myself. But the more I spoke with anyone, the more I thought it's kind of alright kind of thing – they're all similar to me kind of thing.
>
> (Josie: Interview: 22/2/11)

Josie also goes onto to describe the ambiguity of her social position. In stating 'I'm not quite there yet' (Josie: Interview: 22/2/11), Josie is articulating a sense of dislocation in terms of understanding the disjuncture between her 'university' self and her 'outside university' self. Here, the notion of habitus clivé (Bourdieu, 2004: 130, cited in Reed-Danahay, 2005:3) is helpful in explaining the tension experienced by Josie as she attempted to align herself to both social groups.

Conclusion

Whilst analysis is at a very early stage, there are initial indications that work around widening participation students' identity could tell us something about the ways in which such young people transform throughout their undergraduate programme and the ways in which they adapt to the context of university life. The process of adaptation is not problem free despite the idea that 'going to higher education [has] become far more normalized than it once would have been' (Thomas and Quinn, 2007: 84). The deliberation of the tension between 'transformation' and 'transgression' is therefore extremely complex and further analysis of our data intends to tease out such complexities. This work is timely given the recent move to increase tuition fees from 2012 where it is expected that student expectations of their HE 'offer' may change and the influence of the institution in identity trans/formation will become critical in processes of social mobility.

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[i] See http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/category/2/32/141/ for details of participation rates

[ii] The terms widening participation and first generation student are used interchangeably to represent students who were first in their family to go to university, given the strong correlation found between the two