

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Realising the spatial in higher education research

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the application of Massey's spatial concepts in critical research on higher education systems and structures, arguing that her feminist geographical perspective on space, place and power (1991, 1993, 1994, 2005 *inter alia*) energises intersectional analyses of lived, gendered experiences in the sector. The paper outlines key spatial ideas applied in recent investigations of gender and career (Carruthers Thomas 2019) and of student 'belonging' (Carruthers Thomas 2018): space as the product of social relations shaped by power; space as a simultaneity of stories so far and the heuristic device of activity space. It explores how these ideas inform understandings of gender as a geography of power within higher education (Carruthers Thomas 2019) and of student belonging as inherently geographical (Carruthers Thomas 2018, p5). Finally, the paper shows how the spatial has been realised through the research methodology of these investigations, which foregrounds interactions of space and power.

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Massey's idea of space is based on three propositions: that space is the product of interrelations on multiple scales, that distinct and heterogeneous trajectories coexist in space and that space is always under construction' (Carruthers Thomas 2018: p40). She rejects the philosophical division of the

spatial and the temporal, preferring the term 'space-time'. Her description of the academy and the science park as 'part of a network of specialised places of knowledge production (elite; historically largely male) which gained (and continues to gain) at least a part of its prestige from the cachet and exclusivity of its spatiality' (Massey 2005 p.75) emphasises an understanding of space as the product of social relations shaped by power. The academy and the science park share a lineage: the enclosed masculine societies of the monastery, and the early universities. Both are now competitive, knowledge-based markets in which employees (of all genders) must 'continue to reproduce and enhance the value of their own labour power by keeping up with the literature, going to conferences, maintaining the performance of networking' (1998 p.158).

Massey argues that time-space is plural and fluid, 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far and places as collections of those stories' (2005, p11). In HE this includes corporate narratives 'reproduced, formalized and embedded in corporate literature and communications' (Carruthers Thomas 2018, p61) and the multiple narratives of staff and students' lived experiences. Juxtaposing these leads not only to an appreciation of complexity, but also of different, unequal ways groups and individuals are positioned in relation the power geometry of institutional flows and interconnections (Massey 1994).

Massey brings space and place together through the heuristic device of activity space: 'the spatial network of links and activities, of spatial connections and of locations, within which a particular agent operates . . . within each activity space there is a geography of power' (2005, p.55). Activity space challenges the idea of place as stable and coherent, capturing power dynamics and complexity within and across perceived boundaries. Thus the academy is framed as 'the product of social relations shaped by (geographies of) power socially coded masculine ie: academic and disciplinary discourses, tradition, patriarchy and government (Carruthers Thomas 2019, p.193). Activity space is multiscalar, so that individual universities are 'activity spaces positioned more or less powerfully within the wider activity space of the sector (ibid).

The research project Gender(s) At Work considers a post-1992 UK university as activity space in an investigation of the role of gender and intersectional factors in shaping workplace experiences and career trajectories. Despite established equal opportunities legislation and interventions including the Athena SWAN Charter (Advance HE 2019), a significant gender pay gap persists in the HE sector; 'women and minority groups remain under-represented in particular disciplinary spaces and the higher echelons of management'. (Carruthers Thomas 2019, p189). These inequalities are significantly exacerbated for women of colour (Rollocks 2019, Gabriel and Tate 2018). 45 staff participants 'of all genders, in academic and professional services roles at all levels of seniority across the university hierarchy (Carruthers Thomas 2019, p188) were interviewed for the project. Lived experiences of the workplace were captured through narrative enquiry and a visual mapping tool to explore how gender operates as a geography of power in the contemporary academy, particularly in relation to notions of 'career'.

The project *Dimensions of Belonging* also uses the device of activity space to critique an influential narrative of student belonging which privileges a model of the university student as a young school-leaver, studying full-time and resident on or close to campus: 'By considering each of four case study universities as an activity space, whose culture, character and campus are shaped by geographies of power which construct differential claims to belonging, this research articulates the interaction of institution and individual in uneven territory and points to dominant and marginal practices of

belonging'. (Carruthers Thomas 2018, p47).

Focusing on spatial relationships of HE ie; how campus spaces are inhabited and by whom, uncovers power dynamics within the institution. This shifts thinking away from belonging as taken for granted and equally available to all, towards a relational, contested phenomenon, always in process: 'an understanding of belonging as inherently geographical, connecting matter to place through various practices of boundary making and inhabitation' (ibid. p5).

Both projects provide testing grounds for the development of a research methodology sensitised to 'the social as inexorably also spatial' (Massey 1993, p80). A 'spatial storytelling' approach combines narrative enquiry articulating 'the singular and particular within a social context (Creswell 2007) with mapping activity which 'disputes the internal coherence, the singular uniformity to which the map lays claim' (Massey 2005, p109). Research participants in *Gender(s) at Work* were asked to map their perception in relation to a shape representing the university. In *Dimensions of Belonging*, mature part-time students were given a map of their campus different coloured pens and asked to indicate the places in which they felt they 'belonged' and did not. Spatial storytelling captures interactions between individual and institution, maps and reports stories beyond dominant and exclusionary narratives, uncovers spaces between' (Carruthers Thomas 2019, p202).

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