

The sociology of reproduction and the psychosociality of transformation: transitional space, object relations and les ‘miraculés’ in higher education

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Introduction

In this contribution to the symposium we consider particular interdisciplinary ‘psychosocial’ frameworks, which can help illuminate the experiences of non-traditional learners in higher education. We want to build theories of change and transitional processes in less reductive, more interdisciplinary ways. To this end we connect the object relations school of psychoanalysis, and ideas of transitional space, with Bourdieu’s sociological perspectives. This is part of a wider search to build holistic understanding of the lived, embodied, affective as well as cognitive experiences of students. In doing so, the paper straddles the sociology of social reproduction and psychosocial perspectives on learners’ experiences of change.

Biographical narrative interviews

To chronicle student experience, in depth, the project partners have developed biographical narrative methods to chronicle and illuminate the dialectics of learning and agency. We have used sensitising concepts such as habitus and disposition, drawing on Bourdieu’s work (1977/2000), and Winnicott’s (1971) notion of transitional space. However, methodological and theoretical assumptions within the project team vary, despite a common commitment to biographical approaches. The differences encompass biographical narrative interviewing itself and what is needed to generate ‘good’ or ‘valid’ narratives, as well as how to interpret them and represent learner lives. The differences of approach are not simply technical but also epistemological and, to an extent, disciplinary.

As biographical researchers we tend to favour relatively open, in-depth interviews, using only the most general of guides to enable the subjects to construct and explore their experience (Merrill and West, 2009). But if biographical researchers interview in relatively open-ended ways, the differences are also important. Some researchers, in the interests of being more scientific and objective, initially ask a person to tell their life story – and nothing else – and then retreat into the background as part of preserving a de facto claim for the work as scientific, in the sense of maintaining clear distance between the researcher and the object of her study (Alheit, 1982). The aim is to build replicability and reliability into the process, and to minimise researcher bias: the nature of the narrative would, or should be, more or less similar, regardless of the interviewer.

However, other biographical researchers, like us, favour more interactive or relational forms of interviewing. Asking a question such as ‘Tell me the story of your life’ can produce disappointing, brief and even terse results. Stories can flow more freely when questions are asked: the narrative interview, as represented above, can suppress researcher creativity and insight as much as any survey instrument. Some interviewees might take time to feel confident and trusting about the purpose of a study. In our approach, time is taken to explain who we, as researchers, are and about the nature and ethics of the research and who and what it was for; and to identify topics we want to know more about. A prime aim, in the language of Donald Winnicott (1971), is to minimise anxiety and build confidence; to create, in other words, a ‘good enough’ space for more open, honest and creative story telling. The role of the researcher is relatively proactive: recognising that her behaviour will inevitably affect the other and story telling, including unconsciously. The narrative consequences might be seen as idiosyncratic and less scientific; or, on the other hand, as more creative and productive. This is the territory of auto/biography where a process of co-creation of text is explicitly acknowledged. Story telling, like higher education itself, can change as the self negotiates its position in relation to the other and new senses of legitimacy and self-understanding can emerge, via richer narrative but also legitimacy in the eyes of the other (Sclater, 2004).

Some differences are also played out in analysing texts, including the extent to which analytical protocols leave room for reflexive engagement with the auto/biographical dimensions of story generation. Lynn Froggett (2010) writes, for instance, of moments of mutual attunement in which the listener responds to a person's 'embodied idiom' in highly connected counter-transferential ways, using this to build more sophisticated understanding. A serious effort is being made to create a psychosocial and auto/biographical approach to interpretation in the Canterbury team. We use an analytic proforma, devised in earlier auto/biographical research, which gives attention both to themes but also the research process; and to the feelings and even fantasies of researchers in the counter-transference. It includes psychoanalytic interpretative strategies, linked to clinical perceptions and practices, which can illuminate some conscious but also unconscious reasons behind individual investment in learning and resistance to it (Merrill and West, 2009). A 'binocular' account is generated in which insights and procedures from different traditions are shared.

Bourdieu and the miraculé

Bourdieu's work (1997/2000) teaches of how a learner with limited social and educational capital (as it may appear at first sight) can struggle in a traditional university habitus. Bourdieu's structuration approach enables us to explore how working class students may be positioned and constrained by the capital it privileges. Yet, as Chapman Houlst (2009) has observed, Bourdieu fails sufficiently to engage with how some students may survive and prosper, even in what appears to be a culturally exclusive space. We need to understand more of this experience, including any 'capital' they might bring.

Bourdieu offers relatively little in the above regard when writing of the education mortality rate and the disastrous effects of the unequal distribution of capital among students in higher education, which only increases as we move towards the classes most distant from scholarly language. But some - les miraculés - appear to defy 'death', despite the gloomy prognosis. Of course Bourdieu was well aware of this phenomenon and argued, structurally, that les miraculés served to mask systemic inequalities. Yet, to repeat, Bourdieu fails to engage with les miraculés and 'the subjective experience of objective possibilities' (Houlst, 2009: 22).

Object relations can help to interpret and explain more fully such experience. Social science often lacks a convincing theory of the subject, who is often reduced to little more than a cognitive, rational, and information-processing creature (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) with little recognition or understanding of bodily and affective states. Object relations theories offer a subject who is social and psychological, more or less open or defended in facing new experience. Psychological dynamics are conceived as the product of relationships between people, infused by elements from the wider culture. Relationships may be imbued with imprints of class or gender, for instance, in restrictive ways. The lack of particular capital - shaped by class, for example - can inhibit a person's sense of self and legitimacy in interaction with a university 'other', provoking anxiety about the capacity to cope and defensiveness in relation to learning (in object relations theory, anxiety is considered fundamental to the human condition, stemming from our utter dependence on others at birth and in earliest experience). Present anxiety - 'are we good enough?' - may feed on deeply embodied past anxieties: 'can I cope or do I or my ideas deserve to be taken seriously?'. This is what Melanie Klein (1998) called 'memory in feeling'.

Winnicott (1971) was interested in the infant's struggle to separate from a prime caregiver and the anxieties this could create. Of how anxiety might become unmanageable and the infant might retreat, literally and symbolically, into compliance, for instance. He applied such ideas to separation and self negotiation in adult life: posing the question as to what enabled people to move from dependency and defensiveness, for instance, towards greater openness, independence and creative forms of endeavour. Spaces can take varied forms, such as a seminar at university or even a research interview (West, 1996). Significant others, and their responses, can be important in claiming space,

as they (maybe a lecturer or other respected professional) contain anxiety and encourage risk taking, perhaps with a new idea. The processes at work here can be considered to be primitively emotional as much as cognitive: of feeling seen and legitimate, of being understood and valued in the eyes of significant others (West, 1996). They may be people with whom we identify – a teacher from a similar background to ourselves - whom we respect and consider respects yet also challenges us. Such characters or objects may be symbolic: a good theoretical narrative, like feminism, for instance, that helps us to re-story past, present and future; they may be fictional, a character from literature with whom we identify and whose resistance becomes a resource in our own struggles (West, 1996). Moreover, students themselves bring into the academy psychological and emotional resources or what we may call capital. This can be a product of life struggles; it may include religious capital.

Bourdieu's gaze, in the above terms, is more systemic, less intimate. What we are chronicling are very complex patterns of interaction in university spaces, including quite traditional habitus. In an 'elite' institution, for example, there are *les miraculés* – an older, working class woman, for instance - who seem to prosper in what might be considered the traditional, masculinist habitus of a law faculty. Her narrative suggests that students and tutors cannot be reduced to stereotypes, while her own internal resources are considerable, including the resilience born of surviving marital and financial breakdowns.

A case in point

In the Canterbury team, we are also working with a student called Nathan from a mixed race background and materially poor part of London. Nathan's story is, at times, full of anxiety about his capacity to cope with academic assignments, which were problematic for him at school. Comments from tutors like being 'overly descriptive' and 'insufficiently critical' brought him to an edge. He struggled too over accommodation, sharing a house in difficult circumstances. Nathan's story also encompasses difficult material around racism in his local community. Yet his narrative contains many good objects that come into play, including his family, which enable him to keep on keeping on, as he perceives it. The solidity of these relationships - full of support but also challenge – found expression in a story of how the family descended to help him clean the house and make it habitable. There is rich material on how, every night, there was 'skype' communication with his academically successful sister, when problems were most intense. There is rich psychosocial 'capital' drawn on here, in managing anxieties and in building a learner identity.

However, socio-cultural understanding is also required, as is an auto/biographical sensibility, not least in challenging deficit assumptions. Psychologically, these may have been lurking in Linden's initial reading of Nathan's text: of *overcoming* a difficult background, using a range of significant others as well as his religious faith, in the manner described above. In a more socio-cultural reading, Mehri challenged this: Nathan's multi-cultural background could be seen as rich in capital, enabling him to deal with unempathic and even racist encounters. We noted, in thinking of these responses, how Mehri's biography was implicated in her reading of the story: as an Iranian woman whose complex cultural heritage had, on occasions, been reduced to a one-dimensional, exotic otherness. Such auto/biographical sensibilities, alongside interdisciplinarity, created a more complex reading.

Conclusion

Being and becoming a student in the many spaces of an increasingly diverse university system requires different levels of understanding. A feminist cultural anthropologist, Jennifer Crawford (2005), emphasises the importance of taking time with narrators and of being attentive to the other, as we might in relation to music, art or poetry. Of the need to listen for the rhythms and poetics of the everyday, and how transitional moments can appear in surprising ways. How the struggle to become a learner may be idiosyncratic as well as representative of more general trends, at one and

the same time. Of how a range of characters can enter transitional spaces – from past, present as well as future – to enable a person to claim some space and manage the anxieties of becoming. Perhaps, in moments of transition, structuring processes, like class or gender, may diminish and a common humanity – as between a tutor and student, a sister and brother – is created. A student may also find new agentic possibilities, exploiting perceived notions of deficit. Nathan used his mixed race heritage to gain attention and access to new resources. Our paper is one contribution to understanding these processes in more nuanced, psychosocial ways.

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