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The triple shift: Student-mothers, identity work and engagement with low status vocationally-related higher education

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The triple shift: Student-mothers' experiences of identity work and engagement with low status vocationally-related higher education

This paper discusses a piece of qualitative research that examined the narratives that a group of learners articulated when they discussed their experiences of studying on a relatively low status, vocationally-related higher education programme. These students were school-based teaching assistants who were undertaking Foundation degree study at a post-1992 English university. Data collection was primarily undertaken via semi-structured interviewing with first and second year foundation degree students. Eight group interviews were carried out with 44 participants. These were followed up with 12 individual interviews. Participant observations and documentary analysis of course-related documents were also drawn upon as contextualising sources of information. The accounts that were provided by students who undertook study alongside mothering are focused upon within this paper. These learners were routinely found to be involved in a triple shift of identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987). This stemmed from their positioning in the home, higher education and their workplaces. It is suggested that Goffman's (1963) concepts of identity management, disidentifiers and stigma can be usefully employed alongside Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1997) habitus and field to make sense of the accounts that are documented.

Keywords: student-mothers, Foundation degree, Bourdieu, Goffman, habitus, stigma, teaching assistants, identity work

Introduction

The challenges that mothers encounter when they engage with higher education has been documented by a number of researchers in a range of international contexts (Books 2012, 2014, 2015; Merrill 2015; Moreau and Kerner 2012; Lynch 2008; Stone and O'Shea 2013). This valuable and insightful body of research has primarily focused upon learners' interpretations of balancing mothering with the demands of studying on traditional academic degrees. However, there is far less research on student-mothers' experiences of and reactions to vocationally-related higher education. Scholarship in this area is particularly important as such provision is expanding globally and student-mothers are increasingly accessing vocational 'zones' within a variety of higher education systems (Parry 2015).

Foundation degree education is one significant vocationalised space within UK higher education that such learners have been found to be entering in increasing numbers (Barkham 2008, Dunne et al. 2008a, 2008b). This paper draws upon the insights of Goffman (1959, 1963) and Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990, 1992) to primarily explore the accounts of a group of Foundation degree students who were also mothers. Those sampled

were studying for a Foundation degree which was primarily designed to upskill school-based teaching assistants. Significantly, Morris (2010) has outlined how commitments to and the pressures of motherhood are central to why large numbers of women become teaching assistants and latterly enter Foundation degrees that are specifically aimed at such workers.

This paper begins by exploring literature that has examined the nature and development of Foundation degrees. Wider international trends and discourses related to the vocationalisation (Lamoure and Rontopoulou 1992) of higher education are examined to contextualise this discussion. Research that has explicitly explored teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degrees is then critically reviewed. The second part of the paper proceeds to provide discuss learner accounts of their experiences of being a student-mother who has participated in Foundation degree study.

The vocationalisation of higher education and the emergence of Foundation degrees

In recent decades, higher education policy discourses in a number of countries have linked economic decline to higher education's failure to adequately promote vocational education and training (VET) (Fleckenstein and Lee 2016). One outcome of this discourse has been a global expansion of vocationalised provision. Countries such as Australia (Graf 2013), Germany (Jacob and Solga 2015), India (Gandhi 2013), Portugal (Hasanefendic, Heitor and Horta 2016), the UK (Parry 2015) and the USA (Graf 2015) have all experienced significant expansion of vocationally-related higher education. However, the desirability of such expansion has been the subject of considerable academic debate and critique.

Some of those who have supported an extension of vocationally-related higher education have been accused of promoting a destructive instrumentalist discourse, where education becomes commodified and is solely defined as a measurable investment (Stich 2012). Critics in the United States have long expressed their concern about vocationalisation, especially in relation to declining academic standards and intellectual simplification (Weinstock 1968). Elsewhere, it has also been alleged that many vocational degrees lack depth and are a threat to 'the traditional liberal arts model' of higher education (Stich 2012). It has also been alleged that the exponents of vocationalised higher education offer a narrow and outdated notion of employability which underestimates the demise of lifetime careers and the subsequent need for workers to consequently develop transferable skills (Gibbs 2000).

Despite these concerns, there has been a substantial global expansion of vocationally-related higher education programmes. In the UK, a rapid increase in the number of Foundation degrees has played a significant part in this growth. These qualifications are vocationally-related sub-degrees which were launched in 2001 by the New Labour Government of the time. Foundation degrees require learners to study 240 degree credits. Half of these credits must be studied at level one and half at level two. They are therefore officially classified as the equivalent to the first two years of Bachelor's degree. Foundation degrees often focus upon occupations that are predominantly populated by non-graduate para-professional workers and offer a vocational route into higher education. Work-based and academic learning are promoted as being equally important facets of the Foundation degree experience (Doyle 2003). These qualifications are required to offer a progression route to a 'top-up' year where students can achieve a 120 credits at level six in the UK qualifications framework. Students who successfully achieve these credits are awarded a full honours level degree.

Foundation degrees can be studied on either full or a part-time basis. At their launch, they were partially justified within a neo-liberal discourse which connected economic failure, workers' inadequacies and the need for more vocational education. Alongside such rhetoric, the social democratic discourses were drawn upon, notably around higher education's capacity to promote social mobility when it is accessed by disadvantaged groups. Here Foundation degrees were promoted as vehicles of social change that would increase the life chances of the socially disadvantaged (Lammy 2009; Parry 2006). This intertwining of neo-liberal and social democratic discourses might be viewed as reflecting New Labour's desire to achieve electoral success by advancing a set of diverse messages in order to reach different parts of the UK electorate.

Foundation degree numbers have grown significantly over the last decade from 19,585 in 2004-05 to 35,700 in 2012-13 (Hansard 2014). In 2012-13, 3% of higher education qualifications in England were awarded at Foundation degree level (HESA 2014). Between 2006-07 and 2008-09, half of all full-time Foundation degree learners were over 20 years of age at the start of their courses. For part-time students in the same period, the figure was 90% (HEFCE 2010).

Research has also revealed a highly gendered pattern of subject choice at Foundation degree level (Nelson 2006). The subject area of 'Education' has consistently had the highest level of female enrolments and the fewest male participants. Only 3% of

students on these courses were male in 2010 (HEFCE 2010). This highly gendered pattern of participation needs to be assessed in a context where just over half of full-time students and around two thirds of part-time Foundation degree students are female (HESA 2014). Foundation degrees have also been found to recruit well amongst mature learners from low participation neighbourhoods, where high levels of social disadvantage exist (Fenge 2011; HEFCE 2010; Robinson 2012). Many of part-time learners are mothers who face multiple social disadvantages. Foundation degrees have been likened to the associate degrees that some community colleges in the USA offer (Wilson, Blewitt and Moody 2005). Both these qualifications have identified as meeting the needs of comparable groups of excluded learners (Robinson 2012). In the light of this context, the relative lack of explicit research into student-mothers' engagement with these programmes is a particular concern.

Reflecting some of the criticisms that have been made more generally of vocationalised higher education, Foundation degree's critics have expressed strong reservations about their development and expansion. For instance, the notion that such degrees will lead to enhanced social mobility has been challenged (Gibbs 2000; Doyle 2003). Indeed, it has been argued that Foundation degrees maintain inequitable social divisions, partly as a consequence of the lowly position that they occupy within the status hierarchy of UK higher education (Robinson 2012, 465). Concerns have also been raised about the disproportionate influence that employers can have on determining the content of Foundation degrees (Gibbs 2002). Such provision has been accused of primarily aiming to provide employers with an enhanced pool of upskilled, but uncritical and malleable workers. Greenbank (2007) has also claimed that the practical nature of Foundation degree learning produces students who are unequipped to undertake future academic study. Progression to a more traditionally academic honours level study may consequently be problematic. This proposition has, however, been disputed by other researchers (Morgan, 2010).

The expansion of teaching assistant numbers, roles and Foundation degrees

The development of Foundation degrees aimed at teaching assistants has been regarded as 'a timely response' to role adjustment that these workers have experienced in UK schools (Morris 2010, 481-2). 'Role stretch' and 'role creep' (Warhurst et al. 2014, 159) amongst teaching assistants has led Webb and Vulliamy (2006) to the claim that they are now operating as assistant teachers. Accompanying this dramatic role change has been an equally striking increase in teaching assistant numbers (Tucker 2009). According to

the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) statistics, there was a tripling of employed teaching assistant numbers in English schools between 1997 and 2009 from 49,700 to 157,200 (Morris 2010). By 2014 there were 255,100 full time equivalent posts in English schools (DfE 2014).

The increasing employment of teaching assistants in schools has been documented in Australia, Canada, China, France, Hong Kong, Iceland, Italy, Germany, Malta, South Africa, Sweden and the USA (Houssart 2013; Radford et al. 2014; Trent 2014). The OECD has noted how by 2009, 30 countries employed such workers within their schools (Edmond and Hayler 2013). Such expansion has also been identified as being part of a wider international trend where increasing numbers of paraprofessionals have been employed in a range of social services (Tent, 2014). The UK teaching assistant workforce is highly feminised. Ninety-eight percent of these workers are female (DfE 2014). Researchers have highlighted how gendered notions of parenthood, and specifically motherhood, are linked to the inequitable position that teaching assistants experience in terms of their employment. It has been claimed that teaching assistants' work is often 'seen as women's work' and in some respects can be regarded as 'an extension of the historical roles of 'housewife' and 'mother'' (Barkham 2008, 852).

Over the past decade, a comparatively small body of research literature has been produced that has directly examined teaching assistants' experiences of studying on Foundation degrees related to their workplace roles. Constructively, learners on these programmes have been found to gain improved self-confidence (Morris 2010) and enhanced self-esteem (Dunne et al. 2008a, 2008b). Studies have also revealed that such students feel more valued within their workplaces (Bedford et al. 2006; Dunne et al. 2008a). Moreover, it has been suggested that student-mothers who study on these courses believe that their children view them more positively (Tierney and Slack 2005; Woolhouse, Dunne and Goddard 2009).

Research has indicated that Foundation degree learners sometimes encounter serious financial pressures, difficulties with academic writing, inadequate employer support and challenges when attempting to apply academic theory to their workplace practices (Tierney and Slack 2005). Additionally, it has been maintained that learners on these programmes often believe that Foundation degrees are not 'real' degrees (Dunne et al. 2008a, 239) or valuable standalone qualifications. For mothers, balancing the

combined expectations of Foundation degree study and parenthood has been found to present particular challenges (Morris 2010; Tierney and Slack 2005).

The strategies and resources that Foundation degree learners draw upon as they navigate their studentship has also been discussed by scholars, albeit briefly. Peers (Taylor 2014) and family networks (Morris 2010) have been found to be important sources of support that these students draw upon. However, what these support mechanisms might indicate about conceptions of the self and social inequalities is an under explored area of investigation.

Woolhouse et al. (2009) have further claimed that teaching assistants who study for Foundation degrees accrue limited amounts of cultural, economic and social capital. Unusually for research into teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degree study, Woolhouse et al.'s (2009) analysis links empirical findings to wider debates about social inequalities, power, class and social reproduction. Bourdieu's (1977, 1979, 1984, 1992) sociological analysis of forms of capital, education and social reproduction is effectively drawn upon to cast doubt on the extent that Foundation degree study is likely to generate a range of rewards. Such an outcome is, however, not specific to teaching assistants and similar findings have been found amongst other groups of Foundation degree students (Ooms et al. 2012; Simm et al. 2012; Wareing 2008).

Fenge (2011) has also argued that Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990, 1992) conceptual framework provides a useful analytical tool that can be used to explore the sense that Foundation degree learners make of their experiences and identities. Bourdieu's conceptualisations are employed alongside the notion of identity work to explain how her sample defined themselves and their educational experiences. Usefully Snow and Anderson (1987, 1348) have explained how identity work encompasses 'the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept.' Fenge's (2011) research suggested that Foundation degree students who study at further education colleges regard their experiences as having been structured by a combination of individual and institutional habitus which enabled them to maintain an established sense of self.

Fenge (2011) has argued that the Foundation degree students who she researched possessed a distinctive habitus and identity that was partially informed by their studies having taken place within a further education college where high levels of individualised support had been accessed. Their outlooks incorporated a sense of being 'second chance

learners' undertaking 'not quite education'. Positively, the latter seemed to have encouraged them to believe that they could enter undergraduate study as not 'not quite education' seemed more accessible than traditional university-based study.

Whilst Fenge's (2011) work raises important issues about the influence that on habitus and field can have of Foundation degree students' conceptions of self, there is an exclusive focus on the influence of the educational setting and habitus related to this. Interestingly, the six students who were sampled were all mature workers and it is therefore surprising that the influence of family life and work were not examined in great detail. Fenge's (2011) work does however illustrate the potential value that Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990, 1992) work offers in terms of explaining such students' identities and the practices that individual's undertake to sustain these, that is identity work. The analysis that is presented in this paper also draws upon aspects of the sociological analysis that have been provided by French social theorist Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990) to explore Foundation degree study as a form of identity work. Bourdieu's (1990, 53) influential concept of habitus is drawn upon which he defines as:

a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious at ends or express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.

Habitus encompasses often taken-for-granted outlooks or 'the feel for the game', habits and other social practices. It is viewed as a product of players' life experiences within a series of social contexts where power, amounts of capital and positioning structures agency. Achievement in particular social contexts or fields are defined by how suitable players' habitus and capital is. The paper that is presented suggests that habitus is a particularly useful concept when it is examined in conjunction with the theoretical insights from the American sociologist Erving Goffman (1959, 1963). Bourdieu himself had a great interest in Goffman's work and edited five translations of Goffman's books into French. Swartz (1997) has outlined how Goffman had been an important influence on Bourdieu's constructs, even though he rarely explicitly cites his work. In particular, it is noted that 'Bourdieu finds in Goffman's strong sense of agency a strategic corrective to French structuralism' (Swartz 1997, 26).

This paper argues that Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma and his discussion of how it can inform identity construction provides particularly useful insights that can be usefully applied to Foundation degree students' accounts of their understandings. He explains that the outlooks that an individual hold are modified as a result of the interactions and the success that they have in achieving successful identity management. In this way, his work might be regarded as providing detail of the mechanisms that can promote a change of an individual's habitus. Potentially it also affords a position whereby outlooks are not always part of an unreflective outlook and can be consciously modified as a result of lived experiences. Goffman's (1959, 1963) emphasis upon the transformative capacities of agency to structure an individual and group outlooks (habitus) therefore particularly useful.

For Goffman (1959, 1963) agency is an important part of the identity construction process. He contends that the construction of self involves performances on a variety of stages. Crucially, 'being' and 'acting' are inseparable as social life is played out (Lawler 2014, 127). Within this analysis is an emphasis on how the gaze or perceived gaze of others agency or performance. Avoidance of stigma (Goffman 1963) is identified as a key influence on agency. Goffman's (1963, 9) conception of stigma encompasses 'attributes' that are 'deeply discrediting' and 'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance'. Agency and social relationships are integral to turning an 'attribute' into a stigma. Social relationships, power differentials and social context are lead to stigmatization in some circumstances and not others. The construction of identifiers and disidentifiers is a significant part of identity construction and stigma evasion. Bryant (2014, 66) explains how the latter are often employed by presenting 'attributes or elements of one's presenting self that contradict' a stigmatised identity.

Research methods

This paper draws upon a piece of empirical research that was carried out over a relatively long period of time between 2008 and 2015. Although this investigation did not adopt what is traditionally regarded as an ethnographic format (Aggleton 1987; Ball 1981; Bhatti 2012), it did draw upon key aspects of the research design that this approach adopts (Trowman 2006). The ontological position of this investigation was interpretivist in that human beings were viewed as socially constructing their worlds through interpreting and acting upon the understandings that they have of it. Largely qualitative data was collected

over several years at one English post-1992 university in the North of England, with semi-structured interviewing, participant observation and documentary analysis employed to collect a range of qualitative data. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of three years on an individual and group basis. Fifty-six teaching assistants who were enrolled on a Foundation degree related to their work consented to be interviewed. Forty-four students took part in eight group interviews and 12 participated in individual interviews where emerging themes were explored in greater detail. Fourteen modules were observed and documents including class lists, National Student Survey data, Head of Programme interview records, programme validation documents and timetable information were also analysed.

Table1. Characteristics of interviewees

	Group (N)	Individual (N)
Female	43	11
Male	1	1
Aged under 30	12	3
Aged 30-39	26	7
Age 40 plus	6	2
First year of study	20	0
Second year of study	24	12
Mother	38	9
Father	1	1
No children	5	2
<i>School sector</i>		
Primary	41	11
Secondary	3	1
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
White British	42	12
White Eastern	1	0
European		
Nigerian	1	0
<i>Employed</i>		
Employed	42	11
Volunteer	2	1
<i>Married</i>		
Married	29	8
Single parent	6	1
Cohabiting	4	1
Single	5	2
Total number of respondents	44	12

The Foundation degree students mainly attended university classes on an evening and in addition to university-based learning, work-based learning was an integral part of their studies. The university where the students were enrolled had a relatively small student population of just over 6500, with over two thirds of it being females. Ethnic minority students were under-represented within the student-body compared to many other UK universities. Purposive sampling (Richie et al. 2014) was used to select interviewees, classes for observation and relevant documentary materials. Samples were taken from four cohorts of Foundation degree students were taken. All those who were sampled were

studying for a Foundation degree that was primarily aimed at school-based teaching assistants. Forty-nine of those who agreed to be interviewed were parents and 47 of these were student-mothers. Of these 29 were part of heterosexual marriages. The vast majority were mature students who did not hold the traditional Advanced level qualifications that are standard entry requirements for UK universities.

Learners' interpretations of being a Foundation degree student were prioritised over those of their lecturers and employers. The rationale for this focus was that the voices of Foundation degree learners are seldom heard in debates about higher education. The accounts discussed in this paper were largely gained from these interviews with these students. Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and just over two hours. Fourteen modules were observed.

Thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1978) was employed to make sense of interview data and emerging codes were reduced to a number of core themes. Data analysis was an ongoing process that occurred throughout the various stages of the study. It comprised of a relatively complex and shifting process that involved description, coding, analysis and abductive and retroductive reasoning. Participant observations and documentary materials were also analysed thematically. The responses of student-mothers were isolated and compared to those provided by individuals who did not fall into this category. Ongoing ethical reflexivity (Brooks, Te Riele and Maguire 2014) was also a feature of the research process. The British Educational Research Association's *Revised Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA, 2004) were drawn upon as the study was designed, executed and written up. The second part of this paper explores some of the findings that were largely generated from the semi-structured interviews that were conducted as part of the data collection.

Findings

During eight individual and five group interviews, students discussed a number of practices that they claimed to have employed in an attempt to avoid a series of potentially stigmatising identities. Evading such negative categorisations was part of a struggle to develop a preferred version of self. Part of this process involved attempts to display the traits and dispositions that would lead to the achievement of identities that were perceived to bestow higher levels of esteem. Although all types of Foundation degree students were found to be engaged in identity work, student-mothers frequently described themselves as having been involved in a particularly complex set of practices. Three major 'shifts'

of identity work were described in their accounts. These are discussed in the next part of this paper.

The first identity shift: Maintaining established and normative familial identities

The need and often a wish to sustain established familial roles and identities was a strong theme in student-mothers' accounts. Many of these learners claimed that they had attempted to limit the impact that their studies had on their families. Confining study-related activities to times and spaces that did not impinge on their performance of established mothering and partner identities was frequently discussed. Relegating university related work to late at night or the early hours of the morning was commonly employed in an attempt to maintain the familial status quo. These strategies can be viewed as part of an attempt to achieve 'academic invisibility' (Lyonette et al. 2015) in the field of the home.

Abigail: I get up at five o'clock so they don't see me doing it.

Karen: I stay up until four in the morning so I'm there to do things for the kids. I refuse to do it in the day. (Group interview response)

Likewise, Nadia explained in another group interview that she had aspired to reduce the effect that her studies had on family life by completing assignment work while her children and partner were asleep:

You do it when you can. I am that one on Moodle at two o'clock. Don't think I'm sad. It is just the best time, when I can do things without it making waves with the children or husband.

Identification with what was viewed to be 'reputable' mothering and the disidentification from 'improper' motherhood was embedded in such performance narratives. In Goffman's (1963) terms, such practices can be regarded as identity markers that promoted motherhood as a concern that was primary. These views existed amongst mothers who were married, single parents and cohabitantes. Amongst married females, established spousal identities were identified as having been prioritised over studentship and there had only been slight adjustments to conjugal roles. Interestingly, the small number of female students who had claimed to have experienced an alteration of conjugal roles defined such change in terms of male spouses 'helping out' more, with the implication that they had continued to undertake the majority of domestic labour.

My husband's been fantastic for me. If it's his day off, he will do my washing and my ironing for me [*gasps from most of the other students who were present*]. He's brilliant. (Susan's group interview response)

This absence of significant “familial negotiation” around established patterns of domestic responsibilities has also been found by others who have investigated student-mothers at newer universities (Brooks, 2012, p. 488). Within a Bourdieusian (1977, 1979, 1984, 1992) framework, such practices and dispositions can be interpreted as being part of a process whereby the domestic self is constructed by a socially reproductive habitus which encompasses patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and familial roles. These might be considered as being framed by the inequitable positions that the women experienced within family life and society more generally. Brooks (2012) has also raised questions about whether such a habitus is in part class-based. Her research found outlooks of this type were more typical amongst working class student-mothers than their middle class peers.

The small number of student-fathers who were interviewed did not suggest that their learning had needed to fit around their existing familial responsibilities. On the contrary, they claimed that they had established periods of ‘ring-fenced’ time for their studies. Tom, in his individual interview, explained this in terms of his partner understanding the priority that he needed to give his studies:

The way I deal with it is quite straight forward. We had a conversation at home before I started this and I said I needed time to do this. It was about doing something that was good for the family in the long-term. She's [*his wife*] great at making sure the kids are kept busy, to be fair when I need space for assignments and other things. I need my ring-fenced time where I can get on with things. It's the way I have to work in that way. It's just the way I have to work. I can't do short bursts and then stop and then start again. It's not me. (Individual interview response)

Alongside pressures to maintain favoured mothering and sometimes partnership identities, student-mothers also suggested that they had been involved in additional ‘shifts’ of identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987). These were connected to the inequitable positions that they experienced in the workplace and the hierarchy of higher education. Previous research has indicated that student-mothers on academic degrees do not experience these additional demands in the same ways (Lynch 2008; Merrill 2015, 1999; Stone and O'Shea 2013).

The second identity shift: Covering, stigmatisation and the limited status of Foundation degree study

Students who were mothers, fathers and non-parents discussed how they had tried to disidentify from being defined as a Foundation degree student. They expressed a strong view that this designation had not provided a positive social identity. Students commonly claimed that they omitted any reference to the term 'Foundation' when discussing their studies with others who were not aware of the exact qualification that they were studying for. Covering (Goffman 1963) was frequently employed to counter the negativity that they believed being a Foundation degree student encompassed.

Dawn: Well I don't you know say Foundation degree. I say it's going to be three years so it's going to be an honours degree.

Paul: Why do you say that?

Dawn: Well because the Foundation degree doesn't sound as important and because I'm putting my heart and soul into it, I want people to realise that it's a big jobbie. (Individual interview response)

Identity practices (Lynch 2008) around concealing and covering were discussed by both genders, different age groups and amongst parents and non-parents. Other researchers have similarly found that Foundation degree students recognise that the apparent lack of prestige of their awards (Dunne et al. 2008a; Woolhouse et al. 2009). Robinson (2012, 454) has found that students on such programmes offer accounts which emphasise the 'stigma associated with less valued Fd'. Christina drew explicitly on the idea of 'stigma' when describing the negativity that she believed the label of Foundation degree student encompassed and a consequent need to engage in covering. In her individual interview, she commented:

I do feel a little bit of a stigma about saying you're doing a Foundation degree. I do think it's the polytechnic/university thing that they had when they changed everything to universities and it got rid of the stigma of whether you went to a poly. I think that Foundation degree has that same stigma and people don't understand what you're doing when you say it, so I don't.

Attempts to manage and avoid a spoiled identity (Goffman 1963) and the consequent maintenance of a positive notion of self were evident in such accounts. Student-mothers frequently claimed to have undertaken such activity together with that which they carried

out in an attempt to sustain being a ‘good’ mother. Consequently, it is argued that for this group of students, managing the stigma of being a Foundation degree student had frequently embodied a second shift of identity work. An awareness of the socially stratified and inequitable nature of higher education may have informed these performance pressures and narratives.

The third identity shift: Managing being a workplace learner and worker

Many of the Foundation degree students suggested that work-based learning had needed to be completed in a way that did not impinge on their established workplace practices and personas. Frequently, work-based learning tasks involved gaining access to their employer’s policies on a variety of issues, undertaking classroom observations and interviewing colleagues. Giving precedence to such activities was identified as having the potential to generate a tension between being an employee and a student. In an attempt to reduce such pressures, work-based learning was said to have been carried out in lunch breaks, before the school day and after it had ended. This aspect of their learning to a large extent took place on the margins or in the shadows of the workplace. Interestingly, these practices were reminiscent of those employed by student-mothers as they attempted to achieve a sense of ‘reputable’ motherhood. Yet, work-based learning on the periphery was a feature of all types of students; irrespective of gender, marital status and whether or not they were parents.

Students linked these practices to an effort to maintain an appropriate workplace role and identity. In a number of interviews, this was expressed in terms of a wish to evade a detrimental image in the eyes of significant others (Mead and Mind 1934), especially head teachers and other teaching assistants. Nadia’s and Christina’s accounts of how they managed their work-based learning was typical of many students.

I have to do it in my own time. I can’t be going through the policy documents or anything during the day so I have to do it at lunchtime or before work. That sort of thing which I suppose is fairly normal. (Nadia’s group interview response)

Because it’s work-based it creates a really good bridge. I have to congratulate you on that, but work-based tasks cause problems. When you do work-based tasks is when everything is done, if you’re lucky. You know, you don’t want to get a reputation (Christina’s individual interview response)

When a couple of the students had asked to be released from their workplace duties to undertake work-based learning, they had been reminded by their managers that first and foremost they were employees. Many students also expressed feelings of guilt at drawing on the good will of time poor workplace colleagues; seeing this as a further constraint on work-based learning. Student habitus therefore frequently defined work-based learning as a peripheral activity which had the potential to generate guilt, even though they were studying for a work-related qualification that aimed to ‘improve’ their performance as an employee. For a number of student-mothers, identity management within the workplace flowed from such dispositions and can be viewed as a third major shift of identity work.

Discussion

The findings presented in this paper outline how students who studied for a low status vocationally-related higher education programme claimed that they had developed a number of performance strategies to construct a series of identities that they believed would best enable them to pursue studentship without stigmatisation. Disidentifiers and identification were drawn upon as they attempted to manufacture a sense of being an ‘appropriate’ and ‘reputable’ learner, parent and worker. Communicating identity markers (Goffman 1963) was found to be an important part of this process. It is suggested that practices related to this identity work were therefore an important feature of the Foundation degree experience. Identity construction was ‘an ongoing process’ where the students sought ‘to integrate a range of diverse knowledge and experience into a coherent image of self’ (Clarke, Michell and Ellis 2016, 7).

Whilst all learning inevitably involves some identity work, as familiar ways of reading and understanding the world and one’s relation to it make way for others (Wortham 2006), the Foundation degree students indicated that the preservation of valued identities was also part of their studentship. Student-mothers regularly suggested they had been involved in a triple shift of this activity as they sought to maintain a positive sense of self. Researchers who have not explicitly considered the distinct identity dilemmas of student mothers (Brooks 2012) on vocational courses may therefore underestimate the distinctive experience that these learners encounter. Equally, it is suggested that studies of mature students on Foundation degrees and other vocationally-related higher education courses need to explore parental identities in their analyses. The findings presented in this paper imply that analysis of teaching assistants’ engagement with Foundation degrees,

and mature students' participation in vocational education more generally, also underplays the impact that parenthood can have on ways of studying and learner identities.

Gendered notions of parenthood have the potential to place particular pressures upon Foundation degree student-mothers. The compulsion, and sometimes desire, to sustain a traditional mothering identity together with being a higher education studentship was found to be a significant concern for many students. Student-mothers' narratives often portrayed them as multi-tasking figures in a way that is reminiscent of other Foundation degree researcher findings (Ooms et al. 2012; Tierney and Slack 2005). Within these accounts is the notion that entry to higher education should make a limited impression on established family roles and identities. Identifying with 'reputable' motherhood and disidentification from potentially stigmatising alternatives produced practices related to studying on the periphery. These findings cast doubt upon research which has proposed that entry to Foundation degree study has a transformative impact upon the familial roles and identities (Webber 2015).

Alongside identity work related to the achievement of 'reputable' mothering, student-mothers highlighted a desire to avoid the perceived stigma that they believed that being a Foundation degree student presented. This situation can be regarded as partly a consequence of the continuing 'low status and negative societal sentiments that countries such as the United Kingdom generally routinely assign to vocational education and training (Billet 2014, 2). The Foundation degree students recognised that being a university student, and the rewards it can bequeath, are unequally distributed (Brooks 2012). They were 'wise' (Goffman 1963, 28) to their social positioning in the hierarchy of higher education (Robinson 2012). This finding suggests that habitus is not always a semi-conscious state and individuals can operate with an overt awareness of it. Identity work that involved covering and distancing from being a Foundation degree student was subsequently carried out. Covering was identified as a second shift of identity work for a number of student-mothers, although these practices were not exclusive to this group. Narratives of this form seems to counter criticism that Foundation degrees would produce uncritical learners with limited awareness of their social situation (Gibbs 2000).

The findings and analysis that are offered further illustrate how learner habitus and related identity work can also structure the ways that work-based learning is experienced. Although other research has found that mature students (Stone, 2008) and

other undergraduates (Callender 2008; Martinez et al., 2009) are often required to balance employment obligations and study, for Foundation degree students the need to undertake work-learning generated particular dilemmas which required distinctive identity work practices. Relegating work-based learning to the peripheries or shadows of the school day was chiefly employed to fit with individual and institutional habitus which stressed the maintenance of established workplace roles and associated identities by making their learning relatively invisible. In this way, vocational student-mothers' experiences can be viewed as differing appreciably from their counterparts who undertake traditional academic degrees. For the Foundation degree student-mothers, their work-based learning practices were therefore part of a third shift of identity work that may have been to some degree gendered and class informed.

This paper has maintained that Goffman (1959, 1963) and Bourdieu (1977, 1990 1984) offer useful insights and frameworks which can be drawn upon as to analyse teaching assistants' responses to Foundation degree study. It is suggested that identity management (Goffman 1959), and in particular attempts to avoid stigmatisation (Goffman 1963), can be regarded as being structured by a habitus (Bourdieu 1990). that can vary with gender, parental and marital status. Dispositions are viewed as being informed by the inequitable positioning and relative lack of power that these learners possessed in the home, higher education and the workplace. That is not to deny the capacities of individuals to engage in reflexivity and question the desirability of dispositions. Indeed, students' practices were sometimes informed by a consciousness of the social circumstances that they were experiencing.

The research that has been presented also raises questions about the desirability of encouraging disadvantaged groups, such as working class student-mothers, to enter higher education via vocational options that have limited social status. Such a concern partially arises from the finding that these students face additional performance challenges that their academic peers do not routinely encounter, notably connected to work-based learning. Furthermore, the limited esteem that these qualifications provide may result in reduced levels of status and limited identity enhancement. Yet, it must also be acknowledged that these programmes are highly effective in providing accessible high education routes to members of disadvantaged groups who may be otherwise excluded from such study (Craig 2009; Harvey 2009; Nelson 2006). For these learners and others, the vocational and part-time format of their Foundation degree can enable them to view

higher education as something that they could participate in. Previous research has also indicated that the low status of their degree was also sometimes an initial attractor as it was perceived as ‘not quite degree study’, which seemed less daunting than traditional undergraduate study (Fenge 2011).

They also offer potential social mobility via future occupational change. Some of those who took part in this study did eventually achieve social mobility by entering the teaching profession. Moreover, global moves towards a vocationalisation of higher education are liable to further expand the prevalence of these programmes. Increasing numbers of disadvantaged students are therefore likely to enter higher education in this way. Consequently, the final part of this paper discusses the ways that such qualifications and the learning experiences that they provide could be fashioned to lessen the pressures that student-mothers and others encounter.

Those involved in the design and delivery of vocationally-related higher education programmes need to acknowledge the potential dilemmas and challenges that identity work can pose for these learners. Endeavouring to minimise disruption to existing patterns of domestic and occupational lives could be potentially beneficial in this respect. Considering the time when university-based teaching sessions take place is likely to be important here. Evening class provision that follows the school year is likely to assist working student-mothers in particular, as they attempt to maintain their existing lives as parents and workers. Higher education institutions which provide semester based teaching need to offer an alternative termly format if they are to successfully engage with such learners. Class start times also need to allow parental and employment obligations to be fulfilled and identities to be performed.

One possible way to further reduce pressures for such students is to provide teaching sessions off-site nearer to the home residences. Workplace settings, closer to students’ homes could be used for this purpose. However, although initially seeming to be attractive, such a strategy may be problematic. For some students, offering provision in a workplace setting could further exacerbate the identity dilemmas that they face when undertaking work-based learning. Providing formal teaching sessions at local further education colleges (FECs) is another alternative option to university-based study that has the potential to provide provision that is geographically closer to many students’ homes. Such a strategy could to a small degree reduce the time pressures that some students experience as they balance the commitments of work and study. Indeed, large numbers

of Foundation degree students already learn within these settings (HESA, 2014). Creasy (2013, 38) is highly critical of such provision and claims that further education colleges are 'HE-lite'. He claims that higher education students in further education colleges do not experience an authentic higher education experience culture where research and scholarship are to the fore.

The programme design of Foundation degrees should also be undertaken with an awareness that occupational groups who are low in status are unlikely to be released from their workplace duties to engage with learning. There must be a recognition that these students encounter significant constraints that flow from their workplace positions and social identities. Requirements for work-based learning therefore need to be carefully crafted to allow for these restrictions. It would, for example, be beneficial to avoid work-based learning activities that require students and their workplace colleagues to give up considerable amounts of time. There could also be increased communication between HEIs and employers, in order to solicit greater understanding of student needs. Finally, whether sub-degree qualifications should carry the title of 'Foundation' is also debatable. The research presented here suggests that for some students, such terminology devalues their educational experiences and the consequent sense of self that they gain from engaging in higher education.

Conclusion

This paper aims to enrich understanding of the differentiated experiences that can exist as different groups of learners engage in vocationally-related higher education by providing situated accounts of the lived experiences of student-mothers who are involved in Foundation degree learning. In doing so, it addresses some of the oversights and limitations of previous research. The relative omission of scholarship on student-mothers' experiences of low status vocationally-related higher education, when compared to other social groups in the student body, may to some extent reflect the gendered and classed biases of the research community.

The paper has outlined how students who had participated in Foundation degree study often provided accounts of their experiences which highlighted the importance of identity work. The management of identities that they held in their homes, higher education and the workplace are documented as having led to specific identity work practices. It has been suggested that Goffman's (1963) concepts of identity management,

disidentifiers and stigma when combined with Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990, 1992) concept of habitus, field and social reproduction can be utilised to theorise about why and how such mature students experience vocational higher education. Student-mothers undertaking Foundation degree study were found to experience particular challenges in terms of avoiding stigmatisation. Often this situation was presented as having led to them undertaking a triple shift of identity work. The desirability of encouraging student-mothers, and other excluded groups, to enter higher education via low status vocationally-related routes is problematised, although it is recognised that they can increase access to higher education and offer the possibility of limited social mobility. As the growth of vocationalised higher education is liable to continue and consequently attract such socially disadvantaged student-mothers, the possible ways that such provision might be structured to improve equity and access are considered. It is, however, acknowledged that even if these changes were to be implemented, learners on these programmes will continue to be subjected to significant inequalities.

Word count 7,311

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