"Walking a tight rope"- a risky narrative of transition to University

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Abstract

The study of the transition of young people to university necessarily confronts the semi-dependency of the lives of contemporary youth: on the one hand they remain largely economically dependent and on the other they are becoming socially independent. We therefore seek to illuminate engagement with learning as situated in the midst of semi-dependency typical of adolescence, at a time in the life-cycle when typically young people experience a strong "pull" to socialise with peers, but have not yet become fully economically and socially adult. The paper examines the consequences of this contradiction on students' transition to university, from the subjective experience of students as they transition to university. We suggest disengagement and even drop out from studies can arise from a contradiction between the students' social and study (economic) domains. The dependency is not only economic, but is culturally mediated and may therefore be experienced by some students in more acute forms. Cultural aspirations and family expectations and ties can provide the impetus to succeed and so overcome the emotional challenges encountered, and these ties may help them walk a tight rope to success. Finally, we explore the consequences for policy and practice.

Keywords: Higher Education; Drop Out; Student Experiences; Transition; Learner Identity.

1. Introduction

Many students look forward to the move to University and have expectations of increased social independence, but this may not be so easy to negotiate once there (e.g. McInnis, 1995; Briggs *et al*, 2016; Tett *et al*, 2016; McGhie, 2016). This pattern mirrors the transition to secondary school, when most children indicate considerable anxieties about their forthcoming change, but also often positive anticipations about the new opportunities (Anderson *et al,* 2000; Lucey & Reay, 2000; Hernandez-Martinez & Williams, 2013). Our own data on transition to university also suggests this, with students expressing excitement as well as anxiety about moving to University. The first year of University is associated with high drop out rates, non-attendance and lurking, which prove problematic across the Western World (McInnis, 2001, Kantantis, 2009). Indeed, in the U.K. support for the first year experience has been given prominence in a drive to improve retention rates (Palmer *et al*, 2009).

The changing lives of contemporary young adults has been conceptualised as a period of extended transition to adulthood (e.g. Ahier & Moore, 1999; Arnett 2000, 2004;Brynner, 2005; Hall *et al*, 1999; Jones and Wallace, 1992). This has given rise to the use of new labels or social identities, such as "emerging adult" or "extended adolescent". For example, Arnett (2004) describes 'emerging adults' as being particularly skilled at maintaining contradictory emotions; 'they are confident while still being wary and optimistic in the face of large degrees of uncertainty'. Although, we note that Brynner (2005) offers a note of caution to a normative reading of "emergent adult" and reminds us that youth transition comes in various modes, including both new and traditional kinds of social identity.

Emerging adulthood is grounded in the relatively new phenoma of young people living for an extended period of time economically dependent yet socially independent lives. Ahier and Moores (1999) point out that "*the situation today is seen as a consequence of major changes in those areas (work and family), which had previously remained stable. The impact of these changes is further amplified by factors such as the expansion of higher education and changes in the benefit system; all of which combine to make the situation of youth far less secure, less predictable and structured, and enforcing a much more protracted period of ambiguous dependency'* (p516).

This paper considers students' learner identities at a time when many experience a marked shift in social freedom as they move away from home, whilst remaining dependent, or at least semi-dependent, on their families for economic support. We are particularly concerned here with how students experience social and academic transition, and how these interact. We suggest that a marked disconnection between students' "emergent adult" inflexed learner identities and the institutional and pedagogic norms typically encountered within Higher Education Institutes can sometimes lead to student disengagement or drop-out. We

therefore seek to illuminate engagement with learning as situated in the midst of semi-dependency typical of adolescence (Kantantis, 2009; McInnis, 1995). This is a time in the life-cycle when typically young people experience a strong "pull" to socialise with peers, but have not yet become fully economically and socially adult. We argue, like Yorke (2000) that understanding the transition to adulthood as *interwoven* with the transition to higher education has the potential to offer solutions to smooth the transition into Higher Education.

2. Methodology

This paper reports on the work of the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded research project "*Mathematics learning, identity and educational practice: the transition into Higher Education*" no. RES-062-23-1213. This project builds on our previous work "*Keeping Open the Door to Mathematically Demanding Programmes in Further and Higher Education*" no. RES-139-25-0241. As part of this research project, interviews with 80+ students, captured individual students' educational-life stories as they progressed through college-university transition and mainly into STEM degrees.

Interviews were conducted either in the summer prior to going to university, when students talked about their expectations (40 interviews), or during the first three weeks of term (40 interviews). The same group of students were interviewed again between 5 and 6 months after the start of the academic year (70 interviews). Interviews were semi-structured, lasted approximately thirty minutes and were either conducted face to face or by telephone.

The narrative analysis revealed four narratives of transition. There was a broad and readily identifiable narrative of being a student who moves away from home and has to balance a tight rope of social and academic demands. We called this narrative "*walking a tight rope*". Three other narratives of transition were highlighted with regard to university students who remain in the family home: "*live-at-home-as-savvy*", "*stay-at-home-as-gender-ethnicity-preference*" and "*worker student*". However, discussion of these three other narratives is beyond the scope of this paper in which the focus is the "tight rope" narrative. The "*walking a tight rope*" narrative was chosen because it resonated in the stories of many of the students who were young and had moved away from home as a traditional right of passage. Although universities have a diversity of students, the traditional move away to university following "A" Levels remains a significant passage to university and into young adulthood.

The analysis presented in the remainder of this paper focuses on students who are young adults moving away from home for the first time, those who by definition experience a

marked shift in their social freedom as they begin university. It is within this group where we would expect to find most noticeably tensions between strong emergent adult identities and University pedagogic cultures. If *emerging adult* is worthy of the status of a new social identity then it is in social transitions such as the mass movement to live away from home on campus or in other university associated accommodation, where we would expect to find it, and so provide the conditions from which emerging-adult-student learner identities might be expected to occur.

For the purpose of this paper the analysis is illustrated with references to one student studying Mechanic Engineering, who we call Hamid. His case was chosen as a typical example of a student with good entry grades, enthusiasm for going to University and familial support. We suggest the sense of ordinariness in his talk (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992) in Hamid's story about playing strategic games with his degree provides an important insight into the complexities of being a university student. Hamid sees himself as on his own with his books from which he is pulled away by his peers, but also fear of letting down his family kicks in and spurs him on to do enough to survive academically, to do enough but not too much more that necessary. While there are aspects in the detail of the substantiation of Hamid's story that may reflect his gendered and ethiced being, his narrative was typical of many of the students we interviewed, regardless of their gender or their ethic heritages. We suggest that this narrative, which we called "*walking the tight rope*" may offer insight into understandings of some students' disengagement with learning and sometimes drop out as they transition to university.

3. Emergent Adults hit University

Moving away from the family home to university sets up a changing relation with the socioeconomic basis of society - as socially independent yet economically dependent young people who are legally adult. When many students of a similar age move away from home in order to attend university, we witness a societal level mass movement to university, which creates a shift towards social independence for a significant proportion of the population. As is the case for many students it was the move out of the family home, which supplied Hamid with an injection of a rapid change in social independence. In this way, the social identity of a university student is transitional, en-route to adulthood, and as such falls between child (socially and economically dependent) and adult (socially and economically independent). Students talked about experiencing a troubling tension between a desire to socialise and the demands of study "*Yeah that sort of, that sort of feeling like I went out last night and didn't do my work and I'm now worrying about it now.*" "*You know, .. the problem with me is I'm, I'm scared of the freedom of not being able to do no work, well, erm, erm make me lazy again" (Hamid).* Our reading of the interviews, typified in

Hamid's account as an example *generic* of many of the students interviewed was to conclude that there can be an almost unbearable tension between the pull of the social in late adolescence/emerging adulthood and newbie university students' experiences of academic learning as a relatively isolated, autonomous activity. The social pull to fit in and establish and maintain relationships is, as Palmer *et al* (2009) pointed out, critical to students' sense of well-being as they transitioned into university. Hamid's eagerness to be social is highlighted here, "*I need to get out of it [*room in Hall of Residence]. *Once I'm in that room and I've done my work, I just wanna get out of that room and go.''(Hamid).*

Our data tells of the student who rolls late out of bed after a night out, or who studies through the night to complete an assignment that needs to be handed in the next day: these are well recognised scenarios, even to the extent of having become cultural models that teachers and others often used to renegade students. However, academic laziness comes with a conscience and often a sense of guilt. Hamid's case presents a typical (partially) alienated learner, whose push to study is for the much part driven by cultural affinity and family influences, as well as by career and/or lifestyle aspirations, but who is pulled away by the immediacy of the desire to socialise with his peers. For example, six months into university an image of having to look his parents in the eye and tell them he had failed the year became a powerful resource for Hamid: "*The thing that scares me is not passing this year. That's what scares me, cos I've never failed anything in my life….At the moment I think I'll pass, but it's like I said, I think in a couple of areas it'll be quite lucky I think, but cos, you see, I've never failed anything before you can, I couldn't look in my parent's eyes and say...*"

Hamid acknowledges he has a deal with his family, which he needs to uphold, or else risk threatening his identity as a respected and successful community and family member. This threat to his designated identity to instead be seen as someone who can't be trusted and messes around provides Hamid with a motive to knuckle down and prepare for impending end of year examinations:

H: *Oh yeah, they're supporting me, oh yeah. But like I said, if I'd moved out one hundred and thirty miles away from home, not to fail a year. If I fail this year, they're gonna think, 'what are you doing? What have you been doing instead of doing your work'? You know, cos they're just thinking right you do your work before you go out, obviously to your parents 'I'll do it yeah don't worry'. But you know obviously it's different cos they can't keep an eye on me out here, so it's different, but I keep my end up, and they'll keep their end up, innit. If I keep working hard, keep doing my work, keep passing my years, I won't have my parents on my back about it, do you see what I mean?*

In choosing to case study Hamid and illustrate this scenario, we aim to provide sufficient detail to problematise this "walking the tight rope" learner identity, and offer an alternative

perspective to the more simplistic "lazy student" response. That Hamid scores highly in cultural, social and educational capital and self-identifies as a resilient learner with good entry grades, and so would not usually be counted as "at risk", we believe makes the argument all the more poignant. Rather than confining Hamid to "lazy student", we suggest instead that living out his learner narrative is hard work because it requires on going identity negotiation to maintain a consistent self in the face of fundamental and on-going dissonance, a dissonance that arises in part because of his new found freedom, socially at a time in his life when the need for sociality can be experienced especially acutely.

"Still haven't got used to it yet. But no I'm starting to knuckle down now, it's end of year exams soon and all the modules are starting to come to an end….A big difference, a big, big difference. Obviously, the education's a step higher but also what's expected of you is a step higher as in you know, make sure you allow yourself enough sleep before the next lesson, make sure you come into lessons on time, coursework hand in dates. You know, all these things are quite obvious, but its easier said than done. "(Hamid).

Yet Hamid's fear of letting down his family (his semi-dependent proxy for his economic domain) gave him the impetus to study hard as the time of his exams approached. In our study, rather than the hard economic dependency on the family, it was cultural and aspirational ties that acted to fuel a trajectory of success.

4. Pedagogy in HE

Hamid stated that he hasn't found the support he feels he needs either in or outside lectures: in contrast with his pre-university course, large class sizes at university were sometimes experienced as intimidating and posed a barrier to asking questions, *sometimes with a class of fifty to sixty people it's very intimidating to put you hand up, because especially if you're thinking those other fifty to sixty people understand it and you don't.* Hamid says that he finds university lecturers not so approachable. *'I find sometimes the teachers they get a bit angry I suppose sometimes. If you don't understand certain concepts or you ask them this question they kind of look at you like "have you been listening to me for the past….", & which I have been listening to them but I still don't understand'*. He contests this, positing a view that lecturers ought to be approachable and by implication sociable. Hamid commented that were he a teacher he would '*aim to be a very friendly teacher in respect that, "I'm here to help you*."'

Hamid's account reflects a common "troubling" experienced by many students in our sample as they transitioned into university learning: the social relationships they had developed with their previous teachers were no more, and at the same time, the immediacy of access to the teacher had become a step removed and needed negotiation. For example,

another student revealed, '*it's not like there's a relationship between the lecturer so if you're like, slacking off they're not going to be like "oh work harder" then*'. Harris & Pampaka (2016) identified the lecture as a barrier to learning as students transition to Higher Education. In addition, there was wide expectation that university students learn independently i.e. to learn to take notes, to learn from text books and revise on their own: independent learning for many meant "learning on your own", with relatively little access to support outside formal teaching hours. By the time of the 2nd interview, some students were part of informal critical friends learning groups, which had "emerged" and belonging was claimed to help understanding, serving also as a social space promoting bonding. Hamid, like most of his immediate peers, was, however, less keen about learning with friends. He explained this by drawing on a model of teacher as expert, making the point that when he works with his friends they do not always know whether they are tackling problems correctly. In addition, Hamid spoke of his successful route to learning prior to university as being a type of social engagement with the teacher in a relationship which he nostalgically misses, contrasting this with his sense of anonymity as a student at university.

Hamid's model of "teacher-as-expert" mediated his learning approach at university by acting to keep his social and academic spheres distinct and so positions "independent learning" to mean learning on his own. We conclude from this that for Hamid, who acutely experiences this commonly voiced tension, the "teacher-as-expert" model needs challenging to enable the development of a pedagogy for academic learning that is social in construction. We argue that this will require the development of a pedagogy that merges the social and academic domains of students, using a social rather than traditionally transmissionist pedagogy.

5. Conclusion

The transition to university can give an impetus towards social independence that is challenging to manage for the young person leaving home for the first time. This transition may lead to a separation of the social from the academic arena because higher education pedagogy often uses transmission learning approaches. An inherent need for sociality then may become a major factor in a student's academic adjustment, which if not managed appropriately can lead to disengagement or even drop out. We suggest that this arises from a shift in the students' locus of control in their social and study (economic) domains. Cultural aspirations and family expectations and ties can provide the impetus to succeed and so overcome the emotional challenges encountered and these ties may help them walk a tight rope to success. Yet, when the social is removed from pedagogy the learner identities that result can be more opportune, promoting surface rather than deep learning.

The study of the transition of young people to university necessarily confronts the semi-dependency of the lives of contemporary youth. Our study demonstrated a contradiction at play for the student who becomes largely socially independent but remains economically dependent on their family. The contradiction is, however, not only economically mediated, but is culturally mediated and may therefore be experienced by some students in more acute forms. Sometimes the economic or cultural dependency can act against eventual drop out. Indeed, our interpretation placed greater weight on the cultural mediation than the hard sense of economic of Ahier and Moores (1999).

The implication of this is to encourage universities to consider the imperative of developing a more social pedagogy by recognising more fully the inherent sociality of human beings and their learning. We suggest that a social pedagogy has the capacity to engender a deeper engagement in learning and so help strengthen students learning identities and depth of participation. The quality of the learner identities we engender in our students is paramount (*see* also Briggs *et al*, op cit.). Unless we confront a more social pedagogy, we can expect that a do enough to get by learner identity may continue to pose a risk.

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