



JOURNAL OF THE SOUTH WEST DOCTORAL TRAINING CENTRE

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## We are delighted to present the second edition of – TOR: The Open Review for the Social Sciences

When TOR was initially created, the vision was to create a peer-reviewed journal for students, run and edited by students. As students ourselves, the team involved with the development of TOR recognised that the world of academic publishing can be a daunting one, especially when just starting out on ones academic career. Our aim was to provide a supportive, yet rigorous platform for students to communicate their research, and to have their work reviewed by their peers, both academic staff and students from across the South West Doctoral Training Centre (SWDTC). Our first edition was a great success and received national press coverage as an important innovation for postgraduate students within our community.

Building on the success of the first edition, this current edition has seen TOR become further embedded in the life of the SWDTC. A number of the papers published in this edition began life as conference papers, given at the 4th annual SWDTC student conference, 'Inspiring Research'. Their development into published articles has enabled the strengthening of links between these key student activities: the conference and the journal.

The first section of this edition comprises five papers, all authored by students at various stages of their doctorates. The section has a broad educational focus, with papers communicating research across a range of themes.

The second section of this edition includes a number of short 'blog style' commentaries on the topic of

migration. The aim of this section is to provide a forum for contributors to the journal to share short, non peer reviewed, opinion pieces focussing on issues that are both topical and of interest to the SWDTC community.

The final section of this edition includes an interview with former TOR editor and SWDTC student Ben Bowman, who is now working as a Teaching Fellow in Comparative Politics at the University of Bath. In this interview Ben discusses his experiences as a PhD student within the SWDTC, including his involvement with TOR.

We hope you enjoy this second edition of TOR: The Open Review for the Social Sciences and would like to thank all of our contributors for taking this opportunity to communicate their research through us. We would also like to thank all who have been involved in the process of producing the journal, including members of the editorial board, peer reviewers and our colleagues at the SWDTC for their continued support.

With our best wishes,

The TOR Editorial Team

# It's not all fart jokes: Why the social sciences should embrace stand-up comedy



**Ioannis Costas**

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**"They say you write for the Open Review of the Social Sciences twice in your career.**

**Once on the way up.**

**Once on the way down.**

**It's great to be back."**

**(Adapted from Ian Macpherson's classic joke)**

Stand-up comedy does not play a significant role in how the mainstream social sciences are communicated. The structures and techniques used to deliver academic knowledge are usually infused with seriousness. Humour, as a vehicle for expressing an argument, is often seen as antithetical to the 'proper' delivery of ideas (Watson, 2015). In this essay, I will argue that the social sciences have a great deal to learn from the structure of stand-up comedy when it comes to sharing research, both in written and oral formats. Comedians use techniques to hold an audience's attention whilst they guide them through complex, and at times uncomfortable, topics. Simultaneously, through the use of stand-up comedy structures, comedians deliver hard-hitting and powerful messages. I should be clear: my aim is not to produce a comparison between the disciplines of comedy and the social sciences, nor will I present an exhaustive list of stand-up comedy structures. My purpose is twofold. Firstly, to demonstrate that the techniques of stand-up comedy can be used to disseminate social science research, be that through journal articles, lectures, or public engagement. Secondly, to argue that embracing comedy structures can enhance the quality and strength of messages communicated by academics. As anthropologist Kate Fox said, "*at its best ... social science can sometimes be almost as insightful as good stand-up comedy*" (2004, p. 71).

What is stand-up comedy? Fundamentally, stand-up comedy is exactly 'what it says on the tin': someone standing up, interacting with a live audience. To think all stand-up comedians are similar because they 'do comedy' is like saying all footballers are equally dumb because they 'do football'. That is totally untrue: some

footballers are really dumb. Consequently, I have to define what I mean by 'stand-up comedy' in this paper. Different comedians strive to communicate different messages to their audience, and thus adopt diverse styles unto this end. Performers like Woody Allen and Richard Prior are story tellers; individuals like Jerry Seinfeld or Michael McIntyre offer insights of an anthropological nature through observational comedy. Performers such as Rodney Dangerfield or Tim Vine entertain their listeners with one-liner jokes riddled with puns: "crime in multi-storey car parks. That is wrong on so many different levels" – Tim Vine). As great as these forms of humour can be, when I speak of stand-up comedy, I speak of 'social commentary comedy'.

Social commentary comedians use stand-up comedy structures to highlight social injustices and challenge the audience's perception of the world. Individuals like George Carlin, Bill Hicks, or Louis CK use a variety of techniques to communicate clear-cut and poignant messages with the goal of encouraging an audience to think critically. Isn't that what social scientists aim to do when sharing their research?

Though you probably did not realise, I wrote the previous paragraph following a stand-up comedy structure. I used it to highlight the similarity between social commentary comedians and social scientists. It is likely you did not notice because the end of the paragraph, where I made my point, is devoid of humour. Which, I admit, is a bold initial gambit for a paper that is defending the wonders of comedy. Nevertheless, I will wager that, upon reading the last sentence of the previous paragraph, you thought something along the lines of "hmm – good point, I had not considered that before!" This is not an attempt to massage my ego, or to be condescending. The purpose is to draw your attention to the use of a popular stand-up comedy technique, the 'set-up – punch'. 'Punch' is shorthand for 'punch line', which refers to a final sentence intended to generate humour or hammer home a point. To implement this structure, one starts with the message they wish to convey (the 'punch'). You then work backwards to create a suitable 'set-up' that will

accentuate your punch line:

*"I hate how the NFL [National Football League], particularly, has been turned into a commercial for the military [...] They are always flying B-52 bombers, for some reason, overhead of the games [...] They always have an announcement, like this great big announcement: 'Ladies and gentlemen, flying overhead, is the 101st airborne division with B-52 bombers!' I wish, I wish these announcers would tell the truth, I wish they would be like: 'Ladies and gentlemen, flying overhead, are B-52 bombers. Each one of these B-52 bombers could be 50 libraries in your community! You would actually have an infrastructure that wouldn't look like it was held together with spit. But instead, all you have is an outward manifestation of imperialistic evil! Enjoy the game!'"* (Eddie Pepitone, 2014)

Eddie Pepitone's goal is to criticise the US government for spending money on military arsenal instead of on community development. This 'punch' is delivered via the sentences "each of these B-52 bombers ... enjoy the game!" To magnify the punch line, the 'set-up' describes how parading military vehicles at professional sports games have become commonplace and normal. So, as we have seen, the 'set-up – punch' technique can be used in a humorous or serious way. This is a property that holds true for most stand-up comedy structures, which is why such techniques should not be synonymous with 'being funny'. However, generating laughter is clearly what comedy structures excel at. Since academic social scientists already communicate their messages in a serious manner, the rest of the article will focus on the value of sharing knowledge using techniques that prompt laughter.

Humour can be a powerful tool for growth and development. Whether it is used in the workplace (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006), education (Hackathorn et al., 2011), or counselling (Goldin & Bordan, 1999), laughter can be beneficial for learning or well-being. So then, why is it that "the child with musical talent may be sent to the music room, and the one with artistic ability may go to the art room, but the child with a good sense of humour is sent to the principal's office"? (Morreall, 2014, p. 120). The answer to that question partly lies in the ambiguous nature of comedy: social commentary comedy is usually subversive; its aim is to critique. This entails undermining another's position, or authority. Therefore, humour can be helpful for one's growth depending on how it is used. In a seminar, responding to each student's contribution by pointing at them whilst you laugh hysterically at what is 'the worst idea since Napoleon invaded Russia' is unlikely to stimulate intellectual development. Trust me – I am talking from experience here. However, collectively dissecting an idea through comparison with an amusing analogy can be greatly rewarding:

*"All of you, myself included, we all have to live under the weird and oppressive regime of health and safety regulations. [...] See, the Dutch, they treat you like you're an adult. You're in Amsterdam, you're in the city [...] there's push bikes, with women, with kids, strapped to the*

*front of them. There's a road, next to a canal. Is there a fence? No! No fence! England: there'd be a big sign, big fence – 'Don't go in the water. Don't fall in the water and drown'. Amsterdam: 'is your bike wet?' – 'Yeah' – 'Well, you're on the wrong bit, mate'".* (Steve Hughes, 2011)

Stand-up comedy has thus far only dipped its pinkie toe into the vast pool that is academic social science. Or rather, academia has only permitted a sliver of comedy to enter its realm. Initiatives such as the Bright Club ("where researchers become comedians for just one night" – Bright Club, 2009) or the Science ShowOff (which welcomes social scientists, despite its natural science focus – Science ShowOff, 2011) are examples of spaces where researchers can use comedy to interact with members of the public. The growing importance of public engagement for UK universities (which entails disseminating research to people not affiliated to universities) has helped to welcome comedy into academia (Riesch, 2014). In turn, this public engagement growth has helped to fuel a small body of academic literature that addresses stand-up comedy. To help us make sense of how stand-up comedy can be applied to the social sciences, I will draw upon the three major comedy theories: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, and Relief Theory. These theories are not mutually exclusive; usually, humour and jokes can be explained by using a combination of them.

Superiority Theory (Perks, 2012) stems from early thinkers (Greek philosophers and Christian scholars) who perceived laughter to be an unpleasant deformation of the face. It was also associated to demonstrating superiority, like when one scoffs at a skateboarder who painfully collides into a wall. Given classical Greek philosophers' penchant for skateboarding (and the inevitable comedic slips it entails), it's no surprise these thinkers denounced humour. For Morreall (2014), the historical influence of Superiority Theory on academia explains academia's aversion to comedy. This aversion is eloquently captured by Watson (2015): "humour may be regarded as a legitimate topic for the sociologist but by and large they prefer to present their research – and expect it to be taken – seriously. Genres of academic writing do not readily admit the humorous and those who employ it may find themselves dismissed as lightweight and trivial" (p. 407). Despite the social sciences' unwillingness to embrace comedy, we should be careful not to simplistically view Superiority Theory as outright undesirable. After all, social commentary comedians' material sometimes features an aspect of superiority. When Eddie Pepitone (quoted earlier) critiqued the US government's morality for prioritising military spending over community development, he was implicitly asserting his own moral view as superior. This can be healthy, and, at times, necessary, to communicate a meaningful message. The fact that humour is used to express an academic's view as superior to another does not imply researchers will start responding to critiques of their work with zingers like 'your momma is so fat, you used her for snowball sampling and she crushed half the county'.

The other two major comedy theories applicable to the social sciences are those of Incongruity and Relief (see Billig, 2005). Relief theories view laughter as a means to defuse a tense situation: if you are in a lift and a stranger passes gas, giggling will disarm the emergent social discomfort. Apparently, the giggling approach does not work as well when deactivating a live bomb, or flying Ryanair. Incongruity Theory, on the other hand, suggests that “the core of humour is that we adopt a playful attitude toward something incongruous and enjoy it” (Morreall, 2014, p. 126). This is precisely what social commentary comedians do. They lead us to make certain assumptions or think of a topic in a particular way. Then, they pull the rug from under our feet, making us realise how absurd or incoherent our assumptions were. The dissonance between what we expected and what actually happened generates laughter. This stand-up comedy technique is called ‘misdirection’.

*“To me, the thing that offends me the most is every time I hear the ‘n-word’. Not ‘nigger’, by the way, ‘the n-word’. Literally, whenever a white lady on CNN with nice hair says ‘the n-word’, that’s just white people getting away with saying nigger! It’s all that is ... It’s bullshit, because when you say ‘the n-word’ you put the word ‘nigger’ in the listener’s head. That’s what saying a word is. You say ‘the n-word’ and I go ‘oh, she means nigger’. You’re making me say it in my head! Why don’t you say it instead, and take responsibility?”*  
(Louis CK, 2008)

After the first sentence, Louis CK generates an expectation of the direction he is going to pursue. He lets the audience assume that he, like most people, is offended by the word ‘nigger’. That is his ‘set-up’. His ‘punch’, which he reveals after misdirecting the audience, is that ‘nigger’ is not what truly offends him; it is when people use ‘the n-word’. The dissonance between the audience’s expectation and what Louis CK actually ends up saying is what makes his argument humorous. The technique of misdirection relies on the power of expectations: if you do not see something coming, it will hit you harder. That is true for an idea, research finding, or a baseball bat.

The technique of misdirection can be thought of as a variation of the ‘set-up – punch’ structure. It can be effectively used in academic social science writing and speaking because having one’s expectations thwarted provokes a significant emotional response. In turn, that emotional response is often what makes an idea or circumstance memorable (Caine et al., 2009). Let us put the theory to the test: what was more memorable, your dinner two weeks ago, or your first kiss? Unless your first kiss was during dinner two weeks ago, chances are you will struggle to recall what you ate. However, I am sure you can vividly remember your first kiss. Why? It was infused with emotion. Communicating social science research using laughter and the technique of misdirection can equally ‘strike a chord’ with an audience. It can leave an emotional, lasting impact. Is that not what social scientists aim to do when they publish an article, teach a class, or lobby to influence policy? A word of caution: misdirection almost

exclusively works in short bursts. A three page set-up has failure written all over it. Literally. Not only is that too lengthy to prepare a reader for the punch, it is also a substantial amount of words dedicated to what would likely result in misinforming an audience.

Louis CK’s quote showcases the brilliance of stand-up comedy for a further reason. Using the structures of stand-up comedy, good comedians guide us through trying and sensitive topics. They force us to think about points they have made so obvious we could not possibly ignore them. For instance, does a similar phenomenon to others saying ‘the n-word’ – and thus obliging the listener to think of ‘nigger’ – happen elsewhere in language? Yes, it does: hearing ‘the f-word’ or reading ‘f\*\*k’ is far more commonplace than ‘n-word’. So why do people say ‘n-word’ and ‘f-word’ instead of ‘nigger’ and ‘fuck’? Why is it unacceptable to write ‘fuck’, whereas scribbling ‘f\*\*k’ – which people will read as ‘fuck’ anyway – is OK? This line of thinking opens another proverbial can of worms, one revolving around the power of words and a discussion about words society has come to view as damning. My goal is not to address the issues or questions raised in this paragraph, nor dwell on them. The point I am making is that Louis CK, by serving his argument on a platter, has forced his audience to reflect on an aspect about the society they live in.

Some readers will have been uncomfortable with Louis CK’s example. Others will have disliked reading certain terms in the last few paragraphs. Some may have even found them offensive. Social commentary comedians excel at making an audience feel uncomfortable. That is an important component of intellectual growth. However, making a listener, or reader, uncomfortable is not in itself enough to make you a comedian, no matter how much Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump may try. There is a difference between being purposefully offensive (intending to cause harm) and accepting that, regardless of what you say, someone will always be offended:

*“What some people might find offensive, others will not. Such is life. Offence is rarely about right and wrong but rather about feelings. Feelings are personal. Trying to have a consensus about what is objectively offensive is rather like arranging books in a library in order of merit. We’d all have a completely different order in mind.”*  
(Ricky Gervais, 2012)

I do not support being offensive for the sake of it. When we move into unfamiliar territory as a result of discussing sensitive subjects, we are often apprehensive. This particularly happens when we are discussing ideas that flow against the mainstream, or when we think we might offend someone. The structures of stand-up comedy shine in these situations due to their capacity to defuse a tense atmosphere through laughter (the aforementioned Relief Theory of comedy). Social science academics have to grapple with unsavoury topics, such as human trafficking, homelessness, and the Research Excellence Framework. The perennial question is: does everything have a funny side? I would

say yes, it does. For example, during his lecture entitled “How Funny is Genocide?” (2012), Dr Ugor Ungor explained that, whilst there is nothing amusing about genocide itself, “the history of genocide, also, the history of genocide studies, is replete with various humorous treatments”. Finding humour in sensitive subjects can be empowering and illuminating:

*“When we’re not invading some sovereign nation ... then we’re usually declaring war on something here at home ... We love to declare war on things here, in America. Anything we don’t like about ourselves. We have to declare war on it. We don’t do anything about it; we just declare war on it. It’s the only metaphor we have in our public discourse for solving a problem. It’s called ‘declaring war’. We’ve got the war on poverty, the war on crime, the war on litter, the war on cancer, the war on drugs... but do you ever notice, there’s no war on homelessness, is there? Nah! ... You know why? Because there’s no money in that problem! ... Nobody stands to get rich off of that problem. If you could find a solution to homelessness where the corporate swine and the politicians could steal a couple of million dollars each, you’d see the streets of America beginning to clear up pretty goddam quick.”*  
(George Carlin, 1992)

There is nothing amusing about the concept of homelessness. In spite of that, George Carlin succeeds at finding humour in the subject by examining homelessness under the light of social responsibility. Carlin argues that the self-interest of those in power prevents homelessness from being addressed. Therefore, to find the comedic side of a sensitive topic requires a combination of using comedy structures and creativity. For social science academics to effectively communicate research using comedy structures, researchers must be willing to express their arguments through imaginative ‘set-ups’ and ‘punches’. They must gradually learn how to use misdirection, and what constitutes as effective misdirection. This process of creative thinking and subsequent expression not only benefits the reader, it serves as valuable intellectual stimulation for the author. As another example, George Carlin, in his stand-up *Life is Worth Losing* (2005), lampooned the American Dream. If he had used a structure attuned to the social sciences, he would have initially offered his argument and then supported his claim with examples. Instead, he relied on a stand-up comedy structure, mainly consisting of creatively crafted ‘set-up – punch’ segments. Finally, for the final ‘take home’ message, he unified his ‘set-up – punches’ under the superb banner:

*“You do know why they call it the American Dream, don’t you? Because you have to be asleep to believe it”*  
(George Carlin, 2005)

In addition to creativity, there is one further aspect that brings out the best in stand-up comedy structures: language. Social scientists (as academics from any other discipline, for that matter) are often renowned for expressing themselves in complex and impenetrable ways. To the point that a dense piece of text is often

praised on instinct as ‘well written’ whereas a clear one may be ‘too dumbed down’. I briefly considered inserting a joke here, until I realised that I could not write anything funnier or more comically absurd than the previous sentence. Unlike academia, a key hallmark of a good social commentary comedian is one whose arguments can easily be understood. Given the immediacy of the crowd’s response, comedians cannot afford to send confusing messages. Their ‘set-up’ has to be clearly delineated, and the audience must appreciate when the punch line has been delivered. If the ‘set-up’ is too long, or unclear, the punch line will fail. If this sounds insultingly simple, that is because it is. Yet social scientists often forget about how crucial straightforward language is to effective communication.

Stand-up comedy works when the comedian manages to forge a relationship with their audience. Said differently, the audience must be able to relate to what the performer is arguing. Social scientists also have to form a bond with their audience when they communicate their research, whether it is orally (such as teaching) or in writing. Using unnecessarily complicated language is the best way to a) alienate anyone wanting to engage with your work and b) make George Orwell turn in his grave. Comedian Bill Hicks was notorious for addressing his audience in the same way he would talk to his friends. It enabled him to effectively share his view of the world:

*“Wouldn’t you like to see a positive LSD story on the news? To base your decision on information rather than scare tactics and superstition? Wouldn’t that be interesting? ‘Today, a young man on acid realised that all matter is merely energy condensed to a slow vibration – that we are all one consciousness experiencing itself subjectively. There is no such thing as death, life is only a dream, and we are the imagination of ourselves. Here’s Tom with the weather.’”*  
(Bill Hicks, 1993)

Academic social science has a lot to gain from adopting the structures of stand-up comedy. Through using techniques such as the ‘set-up – punch’, misdirection, and simpler language, the social sciences can considerably improve how they communicate research and knowledge. That includes journal publications, lectures, and policy recommendations. It is not an easy thing to do, which speaks volumes as to why the best social commentary comedians have honed their craft for decades. Whilst I have argued that social scientists can adopt the structures of stand-up comedy, I have not provided an in depth comparison between comedy and the social sciences. I purposefully avoided debates revolving around imagined communities, culture, gender, and class. This is not because I deemed those issues to be insignificant, quite the contrary. Discussing those subjects would have lengthened, and ultimately detracted, from the core message I wanted to communicate in this article. So, what is the point I want to make? Stand-up comedy is a powerful way of delivering meaningful insights. There are many instances where ten minutes of stand-up comedy can deliver a stronger message than an hour long lecture.

Why? Comedians do not shroud their message amongst layers of contextual material; they use contextual material to magnify their point. If you want to be heard, you are better off shouting from the top of a mountain than from the inside of one.

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# Unpicking the tapestry: Using visual ethnography to explore a primary school's notion of community

Claire Lee

*Claire Lee has just completed an MSc in Educational Research at the Graduate School of Education, Bristol University. Before that she raised a family and worked as a primary school teacher for a number of years. Her research interest is the education of children from service families in UK primary schools, and during her MSc year she developed an interest in ethnography. She also runs a women's choir which she founded in 2010 and which now has around 50 members.*

## Abstract

This paper reports on a small-scale visual ethnography project which I carried out in a UK primary school, exploring how the school presents itself as a community through wall displays and its website. I argue that the displays promote and present the school as a uniform, Christian community and that aesthetically they draw on motifs traditionally associated with feminine styling. I discuss the rationale behind using an ethnographic perspective for the research question, and the ethnography as both process and product. I also reflect on the methods used for analysis and presentation, on ethics and on the experience of researching as a partial culture member, exploring how this insider-outsider position affects the approach to research and informs the findings.

## Rationale for an ethnographic approach

The question I wish to address is 'How does this school construct itself as a community?' Punch states that, 'When studying a group of people, ethnography starts from the assumption that the shared cultural meanings of the group are crucial to understanding its behaviour' (2014:128). Culture and community are complex and contested notions. What I am seeking to understand are ways in which one primary school promotes, reinforces and exhibits the values, goals and attitudes it sees as desirable for itself as a community.

Underlying this question is the notion that schools do not simply exist; they construct and reconstruct themselves, influenced by external forces such as national policies and inspection systems, and driven by a changing group of people with their own ideologies and values. In the UK, school leaders are expected to 'move the school on, constantly refining, innovating, empowering and developing' (Matthews, Rea, Hall and Qing Gu 2014:20). Thomson, Hall and Russell talk of a school 'steer[ing] its own course through changing government policies' (2007:386). An ethnographic approach harmonises well with a constructionist conception of reality: '[E]thnographers portray people as constructing the social world, both through their interpretations of it and through actions based on those

interpretations' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:10-11).

An ethnographic approach also allows me a great deal of freedom with the design of data collection methods. Bourdieu and Wacquant recommend that, rather than subscribing to a single methodology, 'we must try [...] to mobilize all the techniques that are relevant and practically usable, given the definition of the object and the practical conditions of data collection.' (1992:227).

Two sites where I can observe construction in action in the school are the display areas throughout the building and the school website. I use these as texts that can be interpreted to tease out layers of meaning. In their visual ethnography of school displays, Thomson, Hall and Russell make the case that 'the walls of a school [...] constitute one aspect of its meaning-making system. They are a deliberate construction' (2007:385). Similarly, the website deliberately constructs a desired view of the school, and is recreated regularly.

Brandt and Clinton argue: Figuring out what things are doing with people in a setting becomes as important as figuring out what people are doing with things in a setting (2002:348).

My aim is to construct an understanding of how the displays and website are intended to communicate messages about the school as a community, how these might be interpreted and how they contribute to the construction of that community: in short, to begin to understand what people are doing with displays and what displays are doing with people. Using displays and the website as static texts has limitations, however: how people interact with the displays is restricted to my memories and understanding of the policy and practice of display. I judge this to be acceptable in this small-scale inquiry, or 'micro-ethnography' (Bryman 2012:433).

## Data collection and analysis

The use of the present tense throughout this account is intended to position the reader as a witness to the

fieldwork and meaning-making process, aiming to remove some of the conventional distance between reader and researcher (Gergen and Gergen 2002).

As qualitative researchers, ethnographers make problems, grounding them in the everyday meanings and realities of social worlds and social actors, rather than taking problems from policymakers, general theorists, or others' (Coffey and Atkinson 1996:5).

To address the research question, my study starts at the school itself. I spend a great deal of time looking at displays, reflecting on them and comparing them. The data take the form of detailed notes and photographs gathered during this field work. Ideas are generated through analysis of the data collected within the setting.

I use two methods of analysis. The first is an inductive, reflexive process, in which I start with detailed, concrete description, contextualise the findings from a local and a wider perspective and ask questions at increasing levels of abstraction: What can I see/read? What message is the display intended to communicate? Who is it aimed at? How does its physical location affect how this display has been constructed and how it might be used and interpreted? What evidence is there of interaction, acceptance or resistance? In what ways might it be interpreted? How does it fit within a wider context? What is the interplay between all these aspects of the display?

The second approach is the methodical activity of coding and grouping my data. I identify common themes within my field notes and photographs and group the data accordingly. This allows me a more objective standpoint, to check that my findings are grounded in the data and my interpretations can be justified. This more structured approach enables me simultaneously to oversee the development of the ideas and narrow the focus of my attention. The two approaches complement each other usefully:

Analysis is not about adhering to any one correct approach or set of right techniques; it is imaginative, artful, flexible, and reflexive. It should also be methodical, scholarly, and intellectually rigorous (Coffey and Atkinson 1996:10).

## Ethics

My research field is the school I taught in for many years. As a staff member, I have free access to the site. For transparency, I have obtained consent to carry out this specific project, rather than covertly researching in another role. I set myself boundaries though: I remain outside the office areas, which I consider to be private. I also ensure my photographs preserve the school's and individuals' anonymity.

My insider status gives me certain licence to question and challenge. As I have helped develop policies and practice, I feel this affords me the right—indeed the responsibility—to adopt a 'critical friend' role. This takes some tact, informed by my knowledge of people, their roles, relationships and ways of working. I do not

wish to offend. Following my research, I put some of my observations to the head teacher. We discuss the way displays may reflect individual staff members' personalities and priorities. We agree that this project is merely a snapshot; it would be unjust—and slapdash—to assume that it reflects a single, unchanging reality. We also consider how ethnographic tools might be used in school development.

My member status allows me to question school policy and practice. Yet it also places certain limits on how far I can challenge individuals. Being critical from an insider's position is a value-laden act:

there is a long history of difficult relationships in 'native ethnography' as it is called: the colleagues you observe may be surprised, even upset by the reflections and comments you make as a researcher (Blommaert and Dong Jie 2010:27)

I decide not to discuss the displays with the colleague who created them, judging that my comments might be taken as personal criticism. After all, she has devoted hours of effort, beyond her everyday duties, into creating the materials. I may be over-cautious, but an insider cannot claim the "innocence" of an outsider who is merely posing a question. Thus I am experiencing a tension between the neutrality of the outsider and the politically involved insider, with my own relationships, priorities and desire to influence change.

## The ethnography as process

I carry out my inquiry during the school holiday. While I am unable to observe people interacting with the materials, I have the freedom to choose where I go and how long to linger, and to take notes without getting in anyone's way. Before entering the building, I spend time researching the school website. Having been involved in consultations about the website's design, I know its purposes. It is both the public face of the school community and a resource for community members. It also links to wider communities, such as the education authority and Ofsted<sup>1</sup>. At this stage I feel I should attempt to place aside any expectations. I could easily construct an account of how the school sees itself as a community, purely from my memories and expectations. This would be a short-cut to making meanings that may not, however, reflect what is actually there. Hammersley (2008:3) speaks of 'forcing [the data] to produce an answer that [they] will not support'. In addition, the school has changed since I last taught full-time and I am keen to see how it is presented now, not how I remember it.

I make detailed notes and quote all references to community, implicit and explicit. There are many, from the front page statement 'We gain strength from our Christian community' to information about values, the school council, house system, sports teams and photos. The following extract from my field notes will illustrate this first stage of the research:

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<sup>1</sup> Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills



*Banner at top – logo – within a circle is an outline of the school building and the church with the river and bridge in the foreground and three trees. Capitals – GREENWOOD CHURCH OF ENGLAND PRIMARY SCHOOL<sup>2</sup>*

*Motto 'Learning together actively... in a happy, safe environment built on a strong foundation of Christian values' - maroon background. Changing photos of the building and grounds, children posed by signs + play equipment, or writing – all individual, 1, 2 or 3 children.*

*Text – we gain strength from our Christian community. Our school is proud of its links with the local and wider community. Breakfast Club + After School Club.*

Keeping these notes in mind, I approach the next stage of my fieldwork. Starting in the school grounds, I spend time reading notice boards before stepping inside. I make comprehensive handwritten notes, challenging myself to describe what I see in detail, keeping inference and evaluation for later. I continue to note what I see, rather than what I remember. I also take photos for future reference. The following field notes and photograph (fig.1) demonstrate my attempt to describe concrete detail:

*Entrance hall – Red carpet, low rectangular maroon chairs with fabric cushions. WELCOME letters on cushions in maroon and light blue. Ahead against wall Christian Aid tree made out of branches – paper raindrops, Christian Aid logos, orange paper maple leaves suspended from branches. Photos of children in uniform behind fete-type stalls, adult visitors at the stalls are on 'leaves' and on wall behind tree. Wall divided into green and beige with backing paper. Large stylised painted church and school (same as on school logo) also on green side of wall behind tree, wavy blue river and bridge in foreground. Above and to right large bronze coloured bell on wooden frame. Plaited rope bell-pull. Plaque - HRH the Duke of H— opened this school in 1989... (field notes 25/05/15)*



Fig 1. Christian Aid 'tree' in foyer

According to Coffey and Atkinson:

The process of analysis should not be seen as a distinct stage of research; rather, it is a reflexive activity that should inform data collection, writing, further data collection, and so forth (1996:6).

During this session of fieldwork, I become aware of

certain aspects of the displays. Most conspicuous is the highly religious nature of most of the material in these public areas. Three 'trees' with Christian themes stand in the foyer; against one wall is a shrine-like arrangement of an open, antique Bible, candles, flowers and a silver cross; opposite that is a 'Thankfulness' display. Scrapbooks evidencing children's values-related work are on show; there are framed prayers written by children. Christianity is everywhere. I wonder whether this has always been so—and I simply have not noticed—or whether it is a new development. In either case, the school is presenting itself very strongly as a Christian community. Thus I am beginning to interpret and analyse what I am seeing.

It is expected that the initial interests and questions that motivated the research will be refined, and perhaps even transformed, over the course of the research' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:3).

I decide that this idea—the school constructing itself as a Christian community—will be the next day's focus. I revisit the entrance area and go into the school hall. Adding to my field notes, I form questions and identify patterns. Comparing the Christian displays—by far the majority—with displays about sports or learning, I sense different priorities represented here, but the Christian theme dominates. I question how the displays differ; it occurs to me that the Christian displays draw on a style traditionally associated in Western culture with female fashions. With pastel-coloured motifs such as heart shapes, sparkle, ribbons, flowers, fabric and candelabra, they bring to mind the Victorian boudoir, the female territory. They are also clearly conceptualised and executed by adults with little evidence of children's design involvement. There is a similar style to many of the religious displays: white painted "trees" with dangling messages, often an invitation or instruction to interact with them

I am surprised at how explicitly Christian these displays are, with Bible quotations and interpretations of these presented as personal truth: 'God has your name on his hands – he will never forget you. This is a reminder that God knows who you are.' I am perturbed by the assumptions underlying the 'People Tree': 'Pick up a frame and draw a picture of someone you know and who you would like to pray for. Write a prayer for that person on the back of your frame'

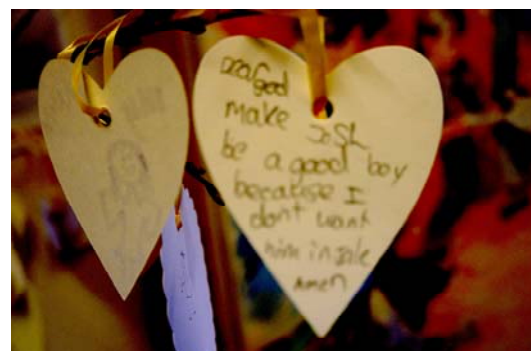


Fig 2. Prayers hung by children onto 'People Tree'

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym

Children's responses (fig.2) show unquestioning acceptance: 'Dear god make Josh be a good boy because I don't want him in Jale Amen.' There are no signs of any resistance to the displays; however, this might simply take the form of ignoring them or choosing not to participate. Any responses deemed inappropriate may well also have been removed. Some of the interactive displays, such as the trees, are materials from (and evidence for) "Days of Reflection" in which children move around the materials, encouraged to interact with them and supervised by their teachers. Children's responses are, then, directed and compliant, rather than spontaneous and individual. Also displayed are Christian symbols created by children. These are remarkably uniform: each child's cross is made to the same design. I remember seeing specifications for the crosses on the staff room notice board. I notice that an adult's spelling error ('Holy Spirt') on a label has gone uncorrected for several weeks, suggesting that once created, the displays are largely ignored, and raising further questions as to their purpose and effect.

I contemplate these ideas at length, in classrooms and outside. Similar styling is particularly evident throughout areas for the youngest children, extending notably to learning displays: a great deal of effort has clearly gone into making these attractive with bunting, flowers, sparkle, beads and ribbons (fig. 3). That the books are open at pictures of blonde princesses troubles me, however. The styling of these displays seems to reinforce traditional constructions of gender, status and race and fail to represent the diversity of the school community.



Fig. 3 Literacy display in KS1 classroom

In the classrooms for older children, while religious displays are styled in this elaborate, flowery way, others appear to allow for greater individuality, such as this rainforest display (fig.4) which has a variety of creatures made by children:



Fig 4. Rainforest display outside a KS2 classroom

Sitting later in the foyer to reflect on these ideas, I notice once more a weaving (fig.5). I remember its creation: during an activity in the church, each member of the school added a strand to this tapestry. It occurs to me that this weaving connects the ideas I have been forming: a traditionally female craft, laced with religious symbolism and memory, it represents the individuals in school 'woven' into a common and uniform Christian tapestry (fig 6).



Fig. 5 Tapestry in foyer

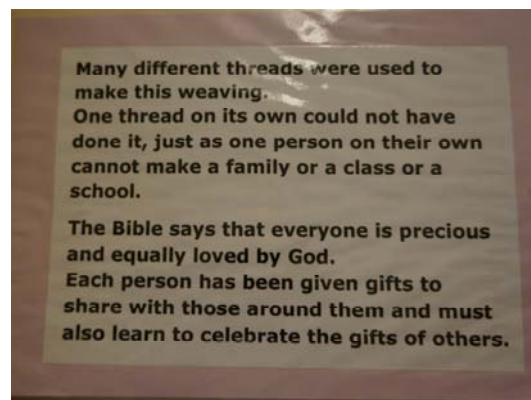


Fig. 6 Text accompanying tapestry

I know that the development of the Christian ethos within the school has been a deliberate policy. The displays are evidence of this ethos, aimed in part at inspectors; however, I suspect that its dominance is less intentional, and the style in which it is presented in displays has been unproblematised. In a discussion with the head teacher, I mention this styling. She finds this interesting in the light of the school's recent focus on engaging boys. In my study I am clearly constructing a

different narrative from the one the school is making for itself. Fielding talks of ethnography as a 'debunking exercise' (2008:269): it can construct truths beyond the official ones in a setting.

Ethnographic research usually entails the researcher being 'immersed in a social setting for an extended period of time' (Bryman 2012:402). In a full-scale ethnography I would refocus and pursue one of these ideas. However, I feel that I have gained a sense of how the school presents itself as a community. I stop collecting data formally, although further visits to the school inform my ideas and allow me to reflect on how people interact with displays. For example, one lunchtime I observe a teaching assistant working on a display with a group of volunteers, all girls. They are sewing white paper doves to a swathe of pink gauze. Later this is draped from the hall ceiling as part of a biblical creation story display.

### The ethnography as product

The term ethnography refers to both the research process and to the resulting text. These are closely interlinked. The writing of the ethnographic text is integral to the reflexive process itself.

Thinking about how to represent our data also forces us to think about the meanings and understandings, voices, and experiences, present in the data. As such, writing actually deepens our level of analytic endeavour' (Coffey and Atkinson 1996:109).

Reflecting on how being a culture member has affected the research process, I decide to incorporate this idea in the text. This also gives me the opportunity to separate out, and connect, what I perceive as intended and unintended constructions of community within the school. The resulting text consists of a fictional conversation between myself as the ethnographer, an outsider, presenting observations and interpretations, and myself as an insider, whose responses reflect underlying policies and discourses. I include some authentic 'insider' voices, comments from people I have encountered during my fieldwork. The following excerpt gives a flavour of it:

*Outsider: Well, firstly, what strikes me incredibly strongly is how religious it all is. Start with the logo. You see it everywhere – on the uniform, on the signs, the front doors, on the stained glass window in the central Atrium. It's on an embroidery in the entrance - and a banner - and painted onto the Christian Aid display. The school and the church within a circle. In fact, the church is in the foreground, with the school behind, which suggests the church is more important. It's almost as if the two together make a perfect inclusive circle.*

*Insider: I guess that's reflected somewhat by the layout of the school: the classrooms are all arranged around a central space, almost in a circle. So you're suggesting that it's like some sort of closed community?*

*Outsider: Well, when you walk into school you could be forgiven for thinking you've walked into a religious*

*community. Take the pebble bowl, with its Christian fish symbols. A framed text explains that each pebble in the bowl represents a member of the school community, all contained within a round bowl: a bit like the circle on the logo perhaps.*

*Insider: We've had that bowl a long time. We have a sort of induction, where newcomers put their pebbles in the bowl to show they've been welcomed into the community. And when they leave they take their pebble away. It's like a rite of passage. You often see the children sitting here, rummaging through. They like finding their pebbles. But it definitely represents the school as a community and I guess it's a faith community too.*

*Outsider: There's a very powerful Christian voice coming through. It's everywhere.*

*Insider: Is it? That's funny because I just met Angie and she said the same thing – she was surprised by how religious it'd all got since she left, or perhaps she hadn't noticed it before. I certainly hadn't seen it that way.*

In the language of the text I intentionally move away from traditional academic style. Gergen and Gergen argue that:

[i]n their formality, their cryptic phrasings, and their certitude, they imply an author who is a bounded, autonomous entity—different from and superior to the reader' (2002:14).

As a dialogue, my text questions and suggests, positioning the reader as a bystander in a discussion. The informal style is intended to complement this, to invite the reader to consider the observations as one possible interpretation out of many. I wish to acknowledge the highly contextual and subjective nature of my findings, especially after a brief period in the field at one time of the year.

## Reflections

### Insider-outsider position

My role within the school is that of a visitor, but one with an in-depth understanding of the discourses, policies and practice of the school, a sense of belonging and a certain authority and autonomy. This positions me as both culture member and observer. This insider-outsider notion is one that permeates this project. I experience it also as a tension between inference and description, between the subjective and the objective, between the historical and the current, 'a tension between what we might call participant and analytic perspectives' (Hammersley 2006:4).

Whether such a position is an advantage is contested. Fielding, for example, states that '[t]he experience of being simultaneously an insider and an outsider generates creative insight' (2008:273). On the other hand, Hughes argues that 'a detached perspective can offer interpretations which the more involved eye cannot see' (1994:40). I attempt to treat the setting as 'anthropologically strange' (Hammersley and Atkinson

2007:10) by making detailed handwritten notes initially, trying to describe the concrete, rather than evaluate or infer. However, this in itself involves a degree of interpretation and 'textualizing' (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011: 20). Even photographs, while capturing details I might not notice, are edited by what I choose to place in the frame.

I make explicit occasions when 'insider' ideas inform my interpretation. For example, I recognise that a depiction of the church and school is taken from the design of the school logo. Such knowledge provides a short cut to understanding. At the same time, I intentionally aim my outsider's lens at things an insider might overlook, such as school uniform. In British schools, uniform is so ubiquitous as to be unremarkable, yet the messages it is used to communicate are powerful ones. I find I am able to mentally compartmentalise the insider and outsider voices fairly easily in the early stages of fieldwork, and remain at a descriptive level, in an attempt to make meanings out of the data, rather than from personal memories.

Later, however, I sense that my insider knowledge provides a historical and contextual dimension that can and should no longer be ignored. Coffey and Atkinson talk about dialogues:

In the same way that there should be a constant dialogue between the researcher and the data, so should there be the internal dialogue of reflection on the part of the analyst (1996:191).

I find I am engaging in an internal dialogue, or even debate. For example, I recognise that displays often reflect tensions between local and external forces. Brandt and Clinton suggest that:

we can ask what is localizing and what is globalizing in what is going on [...] What appears to be a local event also can be understood as a far-flung tendril in a much more elaborate vine (2002:347).

I know, for example, how the school has historical obligations to the church. Inspectors recently recommended that the school develop a distinctively and visibly Christian character. The school complied: an overtly Christian ethos was duly developed. Thus I understand external forces, rather than a desired cohesion from within, to drive at least some of the uniformity, or conformity, I see. This points to a whole web of influences upon and within the school: the desire for a good inspection report; the head teacher's personal ambition; the school's reputation; its accountability towards its community; personal faith or the absence of it; a desire to promote Christianity, or a reluctance to proselytise.

I reflect on how much the school has adopted, embedded or embraced the Christian ethos. That children should pray for their friends seems to be unproblematised. Yet does this not simply reflect an expectation from external authorities? Moreover, to what extent are those expectations changing and

narrowing, towards a rejection of diversity and the promotion of a single religious truth – and what drives this? I am learning that through a combination of outsider observation and insider contextualisation, complex questions can be asked and meanings developed.

## Conclusion

The question I wished to address in this project was 'How does this school construct itself as a community?'. I wished to explore how a school might communicate—and thereby reinforce—its sense of community, shared goals and values. I half expected that I would simply reinforce what I already knew. I had many presuppositions. I already knew that the school was located in a web of external communities, such as the church and Ofsted. I knew that the school incorporated a number of communities, such as families from a nearby military base, and I suspected these would be evident in displays and on the website. What was distinctive about my ethnographer role was that it enabled me to perceive community as a construction within the school, and question what drove that construction and how it was presented.

I used this project to build a practical understanding of the inductive nature of ethnography. I learned to trust that starting with a wide lens and gradually focusing in is a productive, and sound, way of approaching a research project. By grounding my research in the data I constructed an honest, albeit subjective, understanding of what I saw on these occasions, rather than manipulating the data into supporting an a priori concept. Ritchie and Spencer talk of allowing 'emergent ideas and concepts to be captured so that analysis remained grounded and data were not 'bullied' to fit preconceived categories' (2004:2).

I also learned the value of displays as a source of data. This could provide a starting point for a research project, could be used as one of many methods in a full-scale ethnography, or could be used as a study in itself. Clearly my project was limited by the absence of people in school; these were static documents, rather than objects to be created, reacted to, resisted or ignored. Observing how, and by whom, displays are conceptualised, designed and created, and when and how they are used, would be a fascinating and informative project. Investigating to what extent particular groups within the school are represented in display materials, and how they interact with them could be another interesting avenue to explore.

Finally, I discovered that alternating between insider and outsider perspectives is a helpful way of making meaning. I have taken a highly subjective approach to this subject. I clearly do not know what I have missed that others might see; however, I have learned that it is possible in ethnography to treat a familiar environment as 'anthropologically strange' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:10) and make meanings that move beyond what I already think I know.

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# What is strategy in universities during turbulent times?



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## Abstract

In current turbulent economic and political times, higher education policy has been constantly changing, while universities have to adapt to much more intricate environments. This is a challenge faced by universities around the world (e.g. from the Netherlands and South Africa, to Mexico and Australia). However, changing economic and political environments have been particularly important in Anglo-Saxon countries, which have been especially impacted by neoliberal agendas in higher education. Because of the latter, strategic management has become more important than ever in universities, demanding then a review on what strategy means in higher education institutions and what its challenges are. Using particularly the case of Anglo-Saxon countries, especially the United Kingdom and the United States, a conceptualization of strategy and what it means in higher education emerges from the analysis done in this paper. Strategy will come to be conceived as a complex, distributed, contested, and intricate process in universities, which ideally is directed towards a holistic integration, in order to enable universities to adapt, survive and grow in their demanding environments.

## Introduction

For some decades now, universities around the world have been subjected to increased external pressures (Altbach, 2011; Readings, 1996). The environments in which universities are embedded have been constantly changing, generating for universities new challenges. As the expansion of higher education systems has incremented costs, funding structures have been reformed, producing uncertainty for universities, academics and students (Altbach, 2011; Wooldridge, 2005). Higher education institutions have been subjected to public policy change, which has sometimes pulled them in contradictory directions, from increased autonomy, to cost reductions, intensified competition and an accrued demand for ex-post accountability (Enders et al., 2013; Horta, 2009; Kenny, 2009; Marginson, 2013). Broadly speaking, the direction of

travel of a significant part of policy changes throughout the world (e.g. Australia, the United States, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom among many others) has been towards “increasing emphasis on moving the control from the input side (funds) to the outputs (research, teaching and services), enlarging university autonomy on strategic decisions, but introducing new requirement in evaluating performances” (Arnaboldi and Azzone, 2005, p. 553-54). Furthermore, as knowledge and its production have become more intricate and expensive, universities have felt increased pressure on their capacity to do research (Clark, 1998). In addition, the recent global financial recession of 2008/2009, did not make things any easier for higher education institutions. By contrast, in some cases it pushed for further cuts or reformation (Altbach, 2011). These changing environments have impacted universities throughout the world, yet they are particularly important in Anglo-Saxon countries, including most especially the United States and the United Kingdom, where at least since the 1980s neoliberal ideology (see, for example, Centeno and Cohen (2012)) has permeated the higher education sector too. The latter has placed increased focus on competition, market fetishes, student choice, and consumerism. This ideology has come to be expressed, for example, in the increased importance of rankings of universities, of which some of the main ones are produced precisely in the United Kingdom.

Given the increased pressure that uncertain and constantly changing environments are putting on universities, especially in Anglo-Saxon ones, strategic management is more important than ever in universities. Strategy is about creating a link between an organization and its environment (Burgelman, 1983; Chaffee, 1985; Mahon and Murray, 1981; Noda and Bower, 1996; Parker, 2001), in order to improve the fitness of the organization and allow it, therefore, to survive and grow (Anderson, 1999; Freedman, 2013). Given their pluralistic nature, among many other factors, universities are organizations in where strategizing can

be particularly challenging. Thus, in current times of increased uncertainty when strategic management is more important than ever for universities, it becomes essential to revise what strategy is in universities and what its challenges are. In this paper, I will, therefore, provide a general review on how strategy gets problematized in universities, focusing particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. This analysis will identify some of the challenges of strategy in modern universities.

### The university: a multi-mission organisation

Universities are essential to society (BIS, 2011a; Browne, 2010; Etzkowitz et al., 2000; Readings, 1996; Scott, 2006), they educate a significant fraction of the future workforce of most countries, they produce research which impact can change and transform the quality of life of nations, they provide a space for the collegial sharing of ideas and discussion on the future of societies, and they expand the horizons of students that become part of them. However, universities' pluralistic nature makes them particularly complex in terms of their strategizing. Pluralistic organizations, as universities, have "...divergent objectives... and multiple actors... linked together in fluid and ambiguous power relationships" (Denis et al., 2001, p. 809), creating particular challenges for those leading and managing them. Because of the latter, and given the current changing and demanding higher education environments, there has been a tendency to increase or improve the power of universities' senior leadership teams (Bolden et al., 2014; Callender and Scott, 2013; Enders et al., 2013; Shattock, 2013), in an effort to make of universities organizations that could respond more quickly to their environmental pressures. Certainly, the managerial turn in universities, evidenced particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, has not been completely accepted, with many faculty and other relevant stakeholders opposing it (Callender and Scott, 2013; Kenny, 2009).

To understand the university, the university should be acknowledged as a multi-mission organization (Altbach, 2011; Grant, 2013; Jarzabkowski, 2005; Readings, 1996; Scott, 2006; Shattock, 2010). Historically, since the early medieval European university, teaching has been and continues to be a core mission (Altbach, 2011; BIS, 2011a; Readings, 1996; Scott, 2006; Shattock, 2010; Watson, 2014). However, teaching is not as straightforward as it sounds, as universities teach at various different levels and with different purposes, such as undergraduate teaching, postgraduate teaching, and continuing education teaching, among others. In spite of being an ancient mission, teaching is still the focus of many debates and challenges. Particularly in the United Kingdom (UK), teaching continues to be one of the shortcomings of even some prestigious universities, which have been criticized for their lack of focus on teaching. The latter has pushed the government to promote policy changes that are supposedly oriented to redirect British universities' focus from research to teaching (see, for example, the English Browne Review (2010)). More recently, the government has also proposed a criticized Teaching

Excellence Framework to allegedly rank universities based on their teaching outputs, although this remains a proposal at this time. A second mission of universities comes from the German research model (Altbach, 2011; Readings, 1996; Scott, 2006; Temple, 2013). Through its Americanization and the success it had, research became a widely popular and globalized mission of universities. Thus, research has been for a long time now and remains today an important mission of the higher education sector (BIS, 2011b; Shattock, 2010; Watson, 2014). Research also illustrates the multi-layering of missions, as there are different research sub-missions, including, for example, pure research, applied research, or both (Scott, 2006; Stokes, 1997).

The idea of universities as free of external influence is a utopia (Altbach, 2011; Henkel, 2000; Scott, 2006; Shattock, 2013; Tasker and Packham, 1990). For instance, the medieval university was influenced by the Roman Catholic Church (Rowland, 2008; Scott, 2006). Later on, with the rise of nation states, the government started to intrude also in universities (Scott, 2006). Therefore, universities developed another mission: serving the state/nation (Readings, 1996; Scott, 2006). Governments became aware of how universities were capable to develop and inculcate national cultures (Readings, 1996; Scott, 2006). Examples of the latter include Thomas Jefferson's idea of using universities to foster the emergence of American values (Scott, 2006). Many countries throughout the world evidence the complex and intimate relationship between the state and universities. For example, the UK is no exception to difficult and changing university and government relationships. After World War II the government became the main funder of British higher education (Clark, 1998; Shattock, 2013). While the sector's funding body, the University Grants Committee (UGC) operated within the Treasury, the UGC served as a buffer between universities and the government by providing funding and autonomy to universities (Henkel, 2000; Perkin, 1972; Shattock, 2013; Smith et al., 2002; Tasker and Packham, 1990). However, that buffer gradually decreased, and as the Thatcherite neoliberal reforms of the 1980s came in, things significantly started to change (Henkel, 2000; Shattock, 2010, 2013; Tasker and Packham, 1990), where on the one hand, universities were given more autonomy in some regards, such as in their organizational decision making, but were monitored more on their outcomes.

Probably based on their long held beliefs on equal opportunities (Nelson and Shavitt, 2002), since the 19th century the United States (US) has worked to promote equal access to higher education, making of democratization yet another university mission (Scott, 2006). Democratization took longer to arrive in other countries, but eventually widening access to higher education, and thus, expanding higher education systems came to be a popular public policy promoted by many countries throughout the world (Barber et al., 2013). In the UK, democratization was best illustrated by the 1960s Robbins Report (Henkel, 2000; Perkin, 1972, 1984; Shattock, 2013; Watson, 2014), and it has been the former polytechnics, known as post-1992

universities, which have contributed the most to expanding access to higher education (Henkel, 2000; Raffe and Croxford, 2013). Importantly, this global trend towards massification has produced many of the current challenges of higher education (e.g. funding) (Altbach, 2011).

During the Progressive Era, the American ideal of universities' public service mission was promoted (Scott, 2006; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2014). Public service became best portrayed in the US by the Wisconsin Idea. At the beginning of the 20th century, the University of Wisconsin championed the idea that the university's impact should reach everyone in its community. The latter made the university to become involved in advising legislation, and interested in understanding how its research could help the local economy (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2014). In Europe, a similar trend towards public service emerged since the 19th century, when, for example, Cambridge initiated its extension programme (Perkin, 1984). Additionally, in the UK, civic universities (i.e. those founded around the late 19th and early 20th century in industrial cities) had from inception a public service ethos, as they were founded precisely to fulfil the needs of their cities (Shattock, 2010). However, the former British polytechnics, or post-1992 universities, have been the closest to their local communities, given their dependency on local authorities, regional aspirations and training of local workforces (Henkel, 2000; Shattock, 2010). The push toward public service and public impact has continued in the UK, where for instance, the public impact of research has become a central topic, especially through the public engagement agenda.

In recent times, an entrepreneurial mission has become important too, which emerged partly given the pressures and uncertainties on higher education funding. Entrepreneurism in universities has become a tool to provide alternative funding to universities, thus giving them some protection against their constantly changing environments, where government funding has become uncertain. In his famous account on entrepreneurial universities, Burton R. Clark (1998) describes these precisely as institutions capable of generating alternative funding streams from sources that differ from the usual government basic contribution. Thus, accumulating resources to strengthen the academic work of universities has promoted the idea of the entrepreneurial mission of universities (Barnett, 2013a; Shattock, 2010). Clark, additionally, describes entrepreneurial universities as having several other related features, including a strong steering core (e.g. more developed management teams and structures), a novel structure that allows them to be closer to their periphery (i.e. their surrounding communities, industries, governments, etc.), an entrepreneurial belief that is shared throughout the organisation, and an academic mission that is respected as the core aim of the organisation (Clark, 1998; Henkel, 2000; Shattock, 2010). Additionally, in the current knowledge economy, knowledge is an essential resource (Kogut and Zander, 1992; McEvily and Chakravarthy, 2002; Wooldridge, 2005). And, therefore, knowledge

transfer activities have turned into another expression of entrepreneurship in universities (Etzkowitz et al., 2000; Rasmussen and Sørheim, 2006; Wooldridge, 2005).

In addition to the missions that I have described so far (i.e. teaching, research, access, serving the state/nation, public service and entrepreneurship) there are many others. I will mention and focus on a final one in particular: the global mission (Scott, 2006; Wooldridge, 2005). The global mission involves the increased flow of international students, faculty, and knowledge, among other things (Marginson, 2008). Not all specializations or skills can be found in the amounts needed in every country, so international students (Whitty and Mullan, 2013) or faculty (Horta, 2009) provide an opportunity. Globalization has also pushed for isomorphism in universities worldwide. Having said that, higher education still has regional and varied faces. For instance, Latin-American colossal-universities that are also national political-actors are an example (e.g. UNAM-Mexico) (Marginson, 2008). Another localized example would be the German idea of exiling the research-mission into its binary research-institutes-system (i.e. some do applied research, like the Fraunhofer-institutes, and others pure, like the Max-Planck institutes) (Etzkowitz et al., 2000; Marginson, 2008).

The plethora of missions illustrate how universities, as pluralistic organizations (Denis et al., 2001; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985), possess many and diverging objectives (Altbach, 2011; Scott, 2006; Shattock, 2010). The different missions play an important role in the management of universities. First of all, universities are generally an ensemble of departments (Scott, 2006; Shattock, 2010). Usually, each department focuses on a different discipline, and therefore, experiences a differentiated environment (Rhoades, 2000; Shattock, 2003). Hence, departments could diverge in their interpretations on what strategy requires, and since all of them experience different sectors and markets, their needs could be different. Thus, strategizing is not unitary in universities. Universities need to be understood as an ensemble of missions and academic disciplines, and thus, strategizing in universities is necessarily fragmented and distributed, where the challenge is to integrate the various organizational perspectives. Furthermore, the varied missions make senior leadership teams at universities complex themselves, because among the senior leaders different top managers (e.g. Vice-Presidents) may protect different university missions or disciplinary fields (Rhoades, 2000).

Universities are also characterized by a diffusion and ambiguity of power. The workforce of universities (i.e. the academics) has considerable autonomy and power since academics are the ones that do the research and publishing, which is what many ranking indicators consider (Horta, 2009; Shattock, 2010). Additionally, academics could be leaders in their intellectual fields, give consultancy to influential organizations, and have sometimes better networking than senior leaders of the



university. Therefore, academics are generally autonomous, empowered, and resistant to authority (Jarzabkowski, 2005).

These particularities of universities introduce challenges regarding what strategy is at universities. Strategy at universities generally involves setting a broad direction (Barnett, 2013b; Shattock, 2003, 2010), consistent with the essence of strategy as long-term goal achievement (Chaffee, 1985; Hamel and Prahalad, 2005; Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Pye and Pettigrew, 2006; Teece, Pisano, and Shuen, 1997). However, given the pluralistic nature of universities, strategy at universities aims to integrate the plethora of views and missions (i.e. a holistic strategy) (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Shattock, 2003).

A related challenge regards the governance of universities. Given their pluralistic nature, universities have usually been governed through a participatory collegial governance system. Exemplars of the latter would be Oxford and Cambridge (Palfreyman, 2001), where academics are involved in decision making (Kligyte and Barrie, 2011; Rhoades, 2000; Rowland, 2008). Participatory governance could enable bottom-up strategies to be integrated or agreed; although its risk is the much slower strategizing process that might not keep up with changes in the environment. Thus, given environmental turbulence, a turn has been taken, sometimes, to more managerial governance, where senior leadership teams have increased their importance (Callender and Scott, 2013; Enders et al., 2013; Shattock, 2013). Nevertheless, there is still a significant legacy of collegial governance, which is partially why managerial governance has been resisted at some universities (Henkel, 2000; Kligyte and Barrie, 2011; Rowland, 2008; Taylor and Baines, 2012). Furthermore, in spite of what current challenges might demand, efforts should be continued to include the multiple voices that converge in universities and allow academics to be participative, in some way, in the strategizing of a university. Thus, "strategy in a university context cannot hope to be effective without the critical input of key stakeholders, including academics" (Kenny, 2009, p. 632).

### Differentiation of the higher education sector

Despite most universities sharing many of the aforementioned features, university sectors tend to be stratified (Marginson, 2008; Raffe and Croxford, 2013), opening up the possibility that the strategizing across universities is also affected by particularities of each university or by their local interpretations of the previously discussed missions. In Bourdieusian terminology, higher education is a field (Bourdieu, 1983; Enders et al., 2013; Marginson, 2008; Naidoo, 2004), where a field is "a social universe with its own laws of functioning. It enjoys a variable degree of autonomy, defined by its ability to reject external determinants and obey only its own specific logic" (Marginson, 2008, p. 304-305). Fields tend to be fragmented into autonomous and heteronomous poles (Bourdieu, 1983; Naidoo, 2004). The higher education field in Anglo-Saxon countries, including particularly the

US and the UK, is thus thought to be structured by many subfields encompassed between two polar subfields (Marginson, 2008). The first polar subfield is the restricted production -or elite- subfield, where universities (e.g. Harvard or Oxford) aim at increasing status, prestige, research performance, selectivity, etc. (Marginson, 2008; Naidoo, 2004). The dominating position of this subfield is illustrated by its increased autonomy -institutions here might be more autonomous from the state-, or their predominance and success in rankings, among other factors (Bourdieu, 1983; Marginson, 2008; Naidoo, 2004). The second polar subfield is the mass production subfield (e.g. University of Phoenix or the Open University), which is more heteronomous, as it might depend more on the state or market demand, or other factors (Bourdieu, 1983; Marginson, 2008; Naidoo, 2004). The mass production subfield includes vocational, regional or teaching universities either for-profit or non-profit that tend to fulfil popular educational demands (Marginson, 2008). To belong to a subfield, certain capital -especially social and cultural- is needed (Bourdieu, 1983; Naidoo, 2004). More importantly, institutions in each subfield are characterized by a way of viewing the world (Bourdieu, 1983; Naidoo, 2004; Raffe and Croxford, 2013), specific beliefs, and "a disposition below the level of consciousness to act and think in certain ways" (Naidoo, 2004, p. 458). In between these two polar subfields intermediate institutions exist, which represent different combinations of the two polar subfields (Marginson, 2008).

The perspectives/approaches of both polar subfields differ (Henkel, 2000; Marginson, 2013; Naidoo, 2004), and therefore, strategy might mean or require different things in different subfields. The position of restricted production universities has tended to be enhanced, as they are usually research-intensive elite institutions, and rankings generally reward precisely research (Altbach, 2011; Horta, 2009; Marginson, 2008; Naidoo, 2004; Salmi, 2014). As higher education democratized, mass production universities have become more relevant (Henkel, 2000; Scott, 1992). However, an unfair reputational bias against mass production universities (e.g. former polytechnics in the UK) seems to continue (see, for example, Raffe and Croxford, 2013). Elite universities (e.g. The Ivy League or the British Russell Group) continue to recruit the best students, students continue prioritizing them, and these universities continue to be the wealthiest, most prestigious, influential and rewarded universities (Raffe and Croxford, 2013; Watson, 2013). Additionally, given elite universities better student recruitment and their prestige, employees favour graduates from these universities (Shattock, 2010). Before higher education massification there was inequality because only a few went into university (Perkin, 1984). Today, regrettably, inequality continues because given the hierarchical field, those attending elite universities continue to be privileged (Perkin, 1984; Raffe and Croxford, 2013). Efforts have been done to change this, but they have usually been insufficient. For example, in the UK the widening participation agenda pushed by the government has promoted increased access of

disadvantaged groups into elite universities. Yet this remains widely insufficient as promoting equity for teenagers when going to universities might be too late. For example, to enter elite universities, students need certain dispositions and capital, which generally only students coming from privileged backgrounds tend to have, as marginalized groups might have already fallen behind due to previous unequal opportunities at more elementary levels of education. Thus, one of sometimes higher education's most significant and unfortunate social influences is that of reproducing the social structure and inequality (Béchar & Grégoire, 2005; Naidoo, 2004), which remains one of the core equity challenges in higher education.

Finally, and most importantly, universities in different subfields are likely to perceive their environments in differing ways, and thus, their strategizing might vary. To give a historical example, for instance, in the UK derived from policy changes in the 1980s, polytechnics (e.g. the current University of Brighton or the University of the West of England) and old universities (e.g. King's College London or the University of Bristol) were brought closer to the national government. Polytechnics came into national control through the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council, while the University Grants Committee and the autonomy it provided to old English universities disappeared and was replaced by the Universities Funding Council (Henkel, 2000; Scott, 2012; Watson, 2014). These changes had contrasting meanings for both groups. While polytechnics saw the changes as an improvement of their status, old universities perceived the changes as affecting their status because they represented the erosion of the highly valued autonomy that the University Grants Committee allowed (Henkel, 2000).

## Discussion and conclusion

I started this article by arguing that in the current complex and uncertain environments that universities face in many countries (e.g. the Netherlands, South Africa, Australia, the US, Mexico, the UK, among many others), strategic management has become more important than ever in higher education. I focused particularly on the case of Anglo-Saxon countries, discussing especially the cases of the US and the UK, where neoliberal ideologies and other types of sector challenges have for long disturbed universities and their environments, pushing for marketization, consumerism, rankings, competition for funding, entrepreneurship, and problems of equity. Because of the latter, I said that it was needed to review, assess and conceptualize what strategy is in universities and what its challenges are especially in fast changing sectors such as the American and the British. Due to the many complexities of universities here described, many challenges regarding what strategy is in universities emerged. Strategy in universities generally implies setting broad direction and objectives (Kenny, 2009; Shattock, 2003). However, given the many missions, varied departments and distributed workforce, one of strategy's challenges in universities is to be holistic. In other words, strategy in universities aims to integrate the plethora of views and missions (Shattock, 2003, 2010). In addition, because of

faculty's autonomy, top-down strategy in universities could be resisted, and furthermore, bottom-up strategizing might be stronger (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Shattock, 2003). Bottom-up strategy could be helpful in universities' internal entrepreneurship activities (Burgelman, 1983; Etzkowitz et al., 2000; Noda and Bower, 1996). Moreover, one of senior managers' key and most important roles in universities, therefore, is to integrate the fragmented bottom-up strategies. Traditions, autonomous workforce, and the varied missions can make strategic change difficult in universities. Nevertheless, it has been proposed that a reason of why faculty resists strategic change is because, sometimes, it is already changing at the departmental level (Rhoades, 2000). Nonetheless, as each department has divergent environments, each might propose different directions for strategic change. Thus, again the challenge is to integrate the varied departmental visions (Rhoades, 2000; Shattock, 2003, 2010). Furthermore, different universities could represent various Bourdieusian subfields, which importance was illustrated in the particular cases of the US and the UK. Universities in different subfields might have varied interpretations of their missions and values, which can generate wide diversity on how universities will react or strategize in response to environmental pressures. In conclusion, strategy in universities, particularly in Anglo-Saxon universities in the US and the UK, is "...a perspective... a way of looking at things" (Eacott, 2008, p. 355), which entails an integrative process that is complex, distributed, controversial, problematized and paradoxical, aimed at becoming holistic, inclusive and reflective of each university's culture and values.

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# A narrative inquiry into the experiences of three 'out' gay teachers in UK secondary schools



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## Abstract

This narrative inquiry explored the experiences of three 'out' gay teachers working in UK secondary schools. The teachers agreed to participate in the co-construction of the research and narrated their lived experiences and what enabled them to be 'out'.

The findings suggest that these teachers story their experiences in three ways; through the interplay of their professional and personal identity, against the backdrop of heteronormative contexts and in light of the pedagogical and personal benefits to being out.

## Introduction

The picture of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual) rights in the UK is a complex one. Being gay is both becoming more normalised as well as remaining 'othered' in terms of attitudes, representations and assumptions. This is illustrated in a change in populist discourse; from abnormalising surveillance to an ostensibly looser definition of what constitutes a 'normal' sexual identity. As a result, it could be argued that those who identify as gay enjoy a significantly greater sense of acceptance in today's society (Ferfolja, 2013). This has been a seemingly linear development that follows a timeline traceable from homosexuality's decriminalisation in 1967. A trajectory of greater legal and civil rights for LGBT people has resulted, with many of these occurring in the last 15 years. For example; the right of LGBT people to fight in the armed forces (2000), a lowering of the age of consent to 16 (2001), the right to adopt extended to LGBT community (2002), employment equality and repeal of section 28 (2003), civil partnerships introduced (2013) and the Marriage Act (2013) (Stonewall, 2015). The increased visibility of gay characterisations in popular culture (Glaad, 2015) has also supported this. However, despite this, public attitudes towards gay individuals are documented as remaining rather hostile; 3 in 5 people in a recent YouGov poll note that there is still public prejudice against LGBT people in the UK (Stonewall, 2012a) and moreover that the site of this prejudice lies in the lack of acceptance at school and work (Stonewall, 2012b). This carries implications for those LGBT teachers who are 'out' at work, as whilst they may now benefit from legislative employment protection, their daily experience in schools can be a challenging environment

in which to be 'out' and gay. This is also significant as it is the backdrop against which my participants tell, and re-tell their stories.

Moving from the broader context then to the specificity of UK secondary schools, we see a similar picture of legislative protection and enduring hostility emerging. In the Stonewall Teachers' Report (Stonewall, 2009), the current context for LGBT individuals in schools is shown to be hostile, both in terms of the language used in the classroom ("95 per cent of secondary school teachers and three quarters of primary school teachers report hearing the phrases 'you're so gay' or 'that's so gay' in their schools" (Stonewall, 2009, p. 4)) and in the lack of training available for teachers to enable them to challenge homophobia ("nine in ten teachers and non-teaching staff at secondary and primary schools have never received any specific training on how to prevent and respond to homophobic bullying" (Stonewall, 2009, p. 4)). It is an assumption of my study that in being out in school, gay teachers can provide role models and narratives that go against the grain of heteronormativity (understood here as the underlying societal assumption that genders are fixed and that heterosexuality is 'normal') and all that this discourse implies with regards to the lesser/abnormal nature of being gay. Given that the literature indicates that homophobia is a significant and limiting force in our schools, the enabling factors and stories of those that are out, despite their stories being in conflict with the dominant narrative, are interesting sites of inquiry.

## Thematic commonalities in the literature

### The personal and professional divide

One of the themes present in the literature about LGBT teachers being 'out' at school is the division between professional and the personal identity (Neary, 2013; Rofes, 2000), and the emotional work that ensues from this. Cosier notes that

"for queer teacher candidates, however, identity tensions can loom especially large because they are connected to fundamental issues of entrenched and threatening biases in our society—especially in conservative school cultures." (Cosier, 2008, p. 9)

The context of biases in society as categorised above,

make a 'splitting' of identity an option that may enable LGBT teachers to exist as 'gay' outside of work, and 'teacher' within work. This can create a conflict/ tension when gay teachers consider being open about their sexuality within the context of a largely heteronormative institution. As even for teachers who are 'out', a complex "public negotiation of (their) queer self" (Dejean, 2010, p. 233) is necessary in the secondary school context. The division of self and the apparent unmarriability of gay/teacher is echoed by Hidehiro (2010). This study found that, without exception, all of the participants chose to keep their sexuality hidden and that the teachers' stories tended to refer to the heteronormative nature of schools and their inherently conservative/conformist nature,

"Where schools are concerned, this is more than an assumption; it is an expectation. This expectation has made the classroom environment hostile for queer individuals, students and teachers alike."

(Hidehiro, 2010, p. 1023).

This is interesting when we apply these ideas to how teachers in this study experience being 'out' in that it would seem to indicate that those that choose to be 'out' will have overcome significant heteronormative bias. The silencing nature of heteronormativity has been cited in other similar research as a limiting factor (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000).

### **The heteronormative classroom**

Ferfolja (2010) furthers the idea of the heteronormative classroom by situating it within a Foucauldian analysis. The study asserts that "dominant regimes of truth operate within education, constructing particular discourses as truths" (Ferfolja, 2010, p. 408) and that these serve to define homosexuality as deviant/not normal. Whilst acknowledging that sexuality is at least in part socially constructed and performative, it argues that "through pedagogy and practice, schools perpetuate biological determinist and essentialist discourses" (Ferfolja, 2010, p. 408) and that the enactors of these practices can be found at all levels in schools. This is important as it sets a troubling context for teachers that choose to be out i.e. their identity does not simply function on an individual level but could serve to shake the foundational discourses of education. Moreover, it paints a complex picture of antagonism which lies not only in text (verbalisation/ insults/ policy) but also in the interactions and assumptions that exist within schools. Heteronormativity does not function in isolation and the experience of LGBT people is confounded further by the persistence of "heteromascularity" in schools (Gedro, 2014, p. 445) i.e. the privileging of both the male and the heterosexual. Here, lesbian teachers are doubly disadvantaged as both non-male and non-heterosexual. This is important for the teachers in my research, who may or may not recognise this double suppression as a reality in their lived experiences.

### **The impact of LGBT teachers being out**

With the understanding that "coming out is not an easy task for many gay and lesbian teachers, as this

action is socially, politically, historically and culturally complicated" (Hidehiro, 2010, p. 1025), the literature indicates potential benefits and costs to being open about sexual identity in the classroom for teachers, LGBT learners and non-LGBT learners.

It is generally agreed in the literature that coming out is still one of the most crucial elements in the development of a healthy sexual identity (Guittar, 2014; Ferfolja, 2013; Gregory, 2004; Kemp, 1997). Gregory (2004) who, in a self-reflective narrative, explores the importance of being 'out', presents four episodes from the writer's own teaching experience in adult education settings and is fervent in assertions of both the personal and pedagogical advantages of being 'out'.

"I believe that being out, not only about my sexuality/family life, but also about my intellectual enthusiasms, moral imaginings and political commitments—many of which are pretty queer—is necessary to my ability to live out these commitments and enthusiasms: to enjoy them, to protect and defend them, and to make the most of them, so that my life has as much integrity and beauty and purpose as I can manage." (Gregory, 2004, p. 54)

The above section of narrative introduces a new idea into the literature which sits against the risk/ difficulty narrative of being 'out' at school. It expresses that an LGBT teacher can enjoy this aspect of their identity, as well as defending it.

### **Methodology**

My research is positioned within the interpretivist paradigm as I am particularly interested in the insight, depth and privileging of individual experience that this lens allows. As research into identity formation, and the telling of lived experience is abstract in nature, fluid and situated in a particular time and place, this study will not be generalizable. Nor did it look to be representative of the views of the LGBT teaching community, rather I was interested in exploring and documenting a representation of the lived experiences of three gay teachers in UK secondary schools.

I chose a narrative approach to this research because it is useful for exploring lived experience (Lichtman, 2013). Furthermore, this method is particularly useful for work around sexuality and the professional/personal identity as "our identities form and develop through narrative" (Fox, 2006, p. 47). Here Fox suggests that we construct our identity through the telling/re-telling of self and experience. It could be argued that the experiences of LGBT teachers are changed, made new and represented through storytelling and that this makes narrative an appropriate form through which to explore their lived experience.

Three participants were selected through my informal networks, this was appropriate due to the content of their stories and the relational nature of narrative work which was noted as an important enabler by a participant in a pilot interview. This purposive method of sampling relied on participants meeting the following

criteria: working/ have worked in UK secondary schools in the last 12 months, identify as LGBT, 'out' to staff, students and parents in their schools and known to me. The participants were all female and this may have impacted upon their stories and positioning, although this isn't something that is to be foregrounded due to brevity of both the study and reporting. I used unstructured interviews as I wanted to encourage participants to guide the direction of the conversation. Participants chose the setting of our interview in an attempt to ensure they were comfortable and that they had a sense of agency over the process and experience (Nutbrown, 2012; Trahar, 2013). The interviews took place over three episodes (in person initially and then over skype or e-mail) to enable in-depth interviewing, as this "depends on rapport-building and a sense of common purpose between interviewer and interviewee" (Hampshire, 2014, p. 219). The data was narrative in nature, and co-constructed (where co-construction is understood as transparency of intent, and a reciprocity between researcher and participant at both the collection, analysis and presentation stages). This reciprocity was enabled through participants being known to me, my being a gay woman and educator, the process of episodic interviewing and the co-construction/validation of reporting by participants. The final meeting with each participant involved discussion around the findings with a view to seeking to agree that they were an authentic representation of their experience.

## Data analysis

Due to the scope of the study, a full and unabridged narrative outcome was neither possible nor desirable. I used holistic and thematic analysis to enable both a preservation of the sequencing and structure of narrative (Reismann, 2008, p. 12) and a drawing together of commonalities. To use these analysis methods concurrently, I transcribed my findings and stored them securely before repeatedly re-reading to become familiar with the participants' words and organisation of ideas. I prepared a short holistic narrative 'profile' that summarised the participants' story and I then colour coded the data thematically. I sought participant agreement to both profile and themes during the second interview.

## Findings and discussion

I explored participant stories through the lens of two key research questions: What is your experience of being an 'out' gay teacher? And what enables you to be 'out'? Watson (2006) notes the importance of the narrative being authentic and representative of an individual's experience and because of this, the majority of the findings presented below will concentrate on the first research question. The following findings use the words of participants where possible, have been co-constructed and agreed as trustworthy representations of aspects of their experience as gay teachers working in the secondary sector in the UK.

## Participant portraits

Given that, "a rich description of the context(s) needs

to be to the fore in all narrative inquiry accounts" (Trahar, 2013, p. 3), I will begin this chapter with a brief portrait of each participant. This is important to establish both their milieu and professional history. Participants' names have been anonymised.

Becky has been teaching for seven years and lives with her female partner and son. She has taught in three London secondary schools and has recently moved into teaching in higher education. She discusses her experiences in light of being part of wider social justice issues. She identifies as queer and notes that she presents in a "non-gender binary way" i.e. in her physicality she rejects the masculine/feminine divide and occupies a space between. Whilst acknowledging that being 'out' is still a 'risk' in schools (despite the repeal of Section 28, and supportive legislation i.e. the Equalities Act 2010), she has been open about her sexuality in all of the schools that she has taught in. She thinks an 'out' lived experience is important because it challenges the invisibility of gay women and enables young LGBT individuals to see diversity in their school communities; she notes "I am there to let them know we exist".

Teresa has been teaching for nineteen years and has taught in four London secondary schools, as well as a year in an inner city school in America. She is a senior leader. She identifies as gay and has identified as bisexual in the past. She lives with her partner. Whilst placing the accountability for teachers being able to be 'out' firmly in the hands of the school ("it's not about the individual, it's about what the institution does"), she asserts that gay teachers being 'out' can support other young LGBT individuals. For Teresa, the experience of being an 'out' gay teacher is one of congruence, "I'm not hiding who I am... I'm not like that, I am myself".

Nadia has been teaching for thirteen years and has taught in three London schools as well as one in Coventry. She is a senior leader. She identifies as bisexual and lives with her female partner. Her story explores the complex positioning that gay teachers experience in schools (Neary, 2013), as well as the pervasive impact of heteronormativity on her professional life. She has been 'out' to students and staff in one of the schools that she has taught in and notes that through that experience new pedagogical spaces were opened in her classroom (a commonality in the stories of Teresa and Becky). She isn't 'out' to students in her current school, but is to staff. She points to the religious demographic of the school's community, as well as change in her role (from Assistant Head to Deputy Head) as reasons for this. Her experience of being gay and 'out' is both a positive and negative one, she suggests that it exists at the intersection of other aspects of her identity, including social class and race.

All participants portray sexual identity as a fluid entity that can change over time, as well as asserting that being 'out' at school, where possible, is an important thing to do.

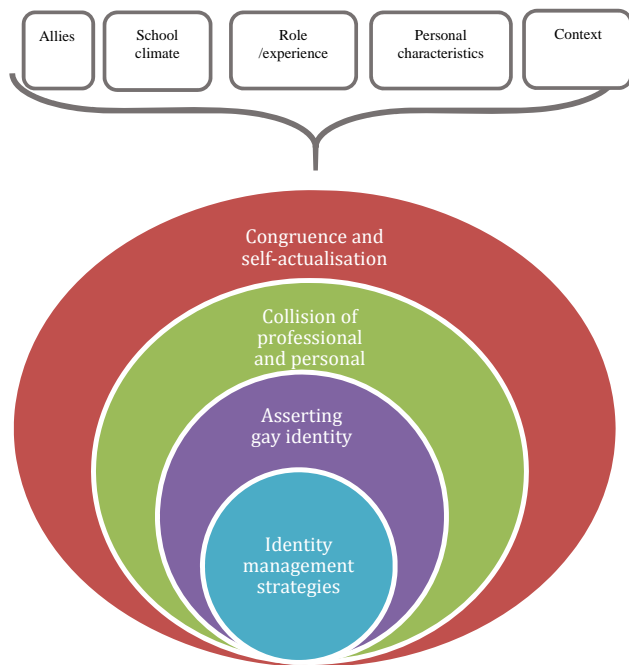
## Overview of findings

The findings present a complex picture: being 'out'

seems to be neither a wholly positive or negative experience, but one that is contextually driven and exists at the intersection of other influences i.e. school climate, gender representation, time in school and role. Despite this, it is worth noting that all three participants have chosen to be 'out' to staff and students in some of the contexts they have worked in, and report that overall these experiences have been 'fine'.

## Framework

Broadly speaking, whilst the participants narrate very different experiences of being 'out' in school there are four commonalities. Firstly, for some, beginning their careers and obscuring their gay identity through identity management strategies. Secondly, asserting their gay identity and then the ensuing collision of the professional and personal realm. Finally, in some cases, they talk about moving towards congruence and finally, self-actualisation (in 2 of the 3 participants' experiences). The proposed framework (developed from my research) which demonstrates the research findings, can be seen below in figure 1. It is worth noting that the progression through the experience circles is affected by the boxed enablers that act on the individual. Equally, this is not a framework which is moved through once; all three participants note that when changing schools they effectively have to come out again. Equally, being 'out' is not a state that is reached and then settled in. The findings show that gay staff negotiate how much to reveal of themselves depending on who they are talking to, where they are and their relationship with that person/group.



Aspects of the lived experience of gay teachers. Fig 1.

## Identity; the interplay of aspects of the gay teacher's identity

The way that gay teachers experience being 'out' in school is directed, to differing extents, by the interplay of the 'gay' and 'teacher' aspects of identity. A commonality the participants narrate is the importance of their identity as 'gay teacher' as an influence which informs, guides and localises their professional experience. This is something that Becky explains she was aware of during her teacher training and an identity marker that all participants use throughout their narratives. This finding is supported by the literature where being both 'gay' and 'teacher' is seen to impact on their experience (Neary, 2013; Rudoe, 2010; Gray, 2013; and Rofes, 2000).

## Obscuring gay identity and identity management strategies

When narrating the earlier episodes in their careers, some participants explored the difficulty of negotiating their identities within the context of the classroom. They talked particularly about how they managed questions about their personal life whilst developing their professional persona. Nadia says that,

"I'd never said I had a boyfriend but I hadn't said that I hadn't got a boyfriend, or male partner, so you know, I wouldn't say it was avoiding, I would say it was more...just being quite vague."

This ambiguity as a way to traverse the meeting of 'teacher' and 'gay' is echoed in Becky's narrative, although she does not identify with having used passing or covering strategies.

"I would teach, and I would use non-gendered pronouns for my partner."

On the one hand, the findings are in line with current literature, as one of the participants used these strategies whilst in the early stages of her career (Gray, 2013; Edwards, 2014; and Humerstone, 2008). On the other hand, the findings move away from the literature. Teresa reflects that whilst she could empathise with the gay teachers that she has worked with who have felt the need to employ such identity self-management strategies she hasn't herself, although she does say that she probably wouldn't have come 'out' in her second year of teaching if she hadn't been 'outed'. Equally, as the participants became more senior and experienced teachers some moved towards congruence and spoke about their partners with ease. This is illustrated in the section below from Teresa's narrative,

"Sometimes year sevens will come up and say 'I've heard you're gay? Is it true?' because they can't believe that somebody is out. I will always say 'yes, I'm a lesbian' and they ask 'are you married?' and I say 'yes' and sometimes the question is 'is it true that your wife is black?' and I say 'yes, that's true as well.'"

Here there is a repetition of the word 'true' which summarises this particular participant's intentions in



being 'out' very well. The participant reflects on the importance of "not hiding" and presenting truths to students about the diversity of the community in which they learn.

### The collision of the professional and personal

All participants choose to story their experiences in the light of the tension that is produced when institutional dilemmas present and intersect with their gay identity, for most this is presented as a struggle which is incidental and part of being an 'out' gay teacher. An example of the tension between professional expectation and personal identity is demonstrated in Nadia's narrative. She explains that in her role as being in charge of behaviour at her school, she runs a student support panel. In her story, she says that there had recently been a girl who had been brought to the panel for two reasons; explicitly for her challenging behaviour and implicitly for her sexuality, as she has recently come out. She notes that,

"during the conversation it was not even implicit, it was explicit that her behaviour and disruptiveness was a result of her sexuality, or that the two things were intrinsically linked, so that in dealing with issues around her sexuality we would deal with her behaviour issues... one of the things that was mentioned was that we should tell the parents because it was a child protection issue... it was quite telling that the pastoral manager couldn't even say 'lesbian'..."

The worrying concept of a gay identity being incorrectly perceived as a child protection issue is echoed in Teresa's narrative. Two other ideas are evident here, the first is the pervasiveness of the heteronormative institution - i.e. where an outsider/other sexuality is perceived as threatening and potentially abusive to the individual that purports to identify in this way. The second is that in refusing to engage in either the performance of a 'good learner' (i.e. an individual who conforms to the education system's expectations and norms) or a 'good female' (i.e. an individual who conforms to societal expectations of gender performance and heteronormativity) (Butler, 1990), the assumption from those in established positions of power is that these two deviances must in some way be linked to/driving each other. This is deeply problematic and as a gay teacher, Nadia expresses the desire to challenge these assumptions whilst being limited by both the confines of her role and the way that others may perceive this.

"The tension for me is this, I have a lot of insight into these issues, and I knew that the other staff members' perspectives were tainted by their own experience, but also, I felt that... because I am out that (they thought) my sexuality was impacting on my decision making ability. So that meeting became very, very difficult for me... I mean the behaviour role is quite an emotive one and quite a visible one too. My relationship with these two colleagues has been damaged because of the interventions that I have approved/not approved on behalf of this young woman... it is very difficult to have credibility in the conversation because they think my

view is biased."

Here, her professionalism is questioned directly because of an alignment with gay identity. The experience that is portrayed is one of intricacy and complication; with the gay identity and teacher identity affiliating to support a young LGBT person but also to threaten the professional persona of the gay teacher. This is echoed in the literature, particularly in Gray's work, which indicates that the experience of being a gay teacher can be likened to being "bayoneted" from two sides (Gray, 2013, p. 704). Gray notes the double bind of the gay teacher as being marked as 'other' and thus engaging in a dangerous activist act, whilst wanting to acknowledge their sexuality out of psychological necessity. This is similar to the experience outlined by Nadia above in that she refers to conflicting demands being placed on her and the difficulty of negotiating them. It differs from Gray's work in that the source of conflict in Nadia's experience doesn't come from an activist act of agency, but rather from Nadia embodying the schema of a 'gay teacher' in the eyes of her colleagues. Colleagues can also provide teachers with a significant source of support in being 'out' and the teachers in this research also position their colleagues as allies. I will discuss the impact of colleagues as enablers in response to the second research question below.

### Congruence

Whilst there are clear consequences, both personal and psychological, to being closeted and to being 'out' in school, some of the participants in this research reference the importance of congruence in their professional and personal identity. This is echoed in Rudoe's (2010) study, which suggested that being 'in the closet' at work was painful and damaging. Certainly, "It takes emotional work to negotiate our queer identities within the discourse of schooling" (Dejean, 2010, p. 235), and this seems to be made more challenging when there is a gap between the self and the presented self in school. Teresa notes this in reference to a colleague who recently left the profession, stating that

"She had her teacher persona and her teacher persona was so different from who she was as a person... she never went back to teaching... she was doing a challenging job and it was exhausting not to be herself"

This particularly potent combination of the specific challenges of teaching and the work required to maintain a professional/ personal divide is a theme echoed in all narratives. Nadia explains that

"The process of not lying and yet not telling the whole truth is quite a difficult one...(that coming out was) a bit of a release. I think you have to make quite an effort to not talk about it... I think it takes energy to not be out, and so it becomes more difficult, and it's already a very difficult job"

She summarises that teaching is a difficult job made more difficult by the energy required to constantly

check your language choices and filter your experiences to make them fit with heteronormative expectation.

Equally, being 'out' at work can result in a newly balanced and congruent state for the gay teacher (Duke, 2007) where there is a 'truthfulness' to their experience. All participants imply that this congruent state can be an emotionally safe place to be and that the internal 'work' needed to remain closeted falls away when teachers choose to come 'out'. Becky states that her students

"know me as a teacher and a person and they like the fact that I'm quite different.. it's not all of me, it's part of me"

Teresa notes that in being 'out' she is moving towards "usualising gayness" in her school and Nadia notes above that being 'out' was "a release" for her. For the teachers in this study, reconciling the professional and personal aspects of their identity is a central part of their lived experiences as gay teachers (Jackson, 2006)

## Discussion

### Visibility

As a bisexual woman, currently in a relationship with a woman, Nadia feels that the identity of the bisexual functions as a further challenge to the acknowledged binary of gay/straight and is therefore doubly silenced in schools. She says "that I don't think that is an accepted identity". She also notes that others have been so uncomfortable with the positionality of her sexuality that she "has had occasions where people have told me what my sexuality is, despite me telling them something different". This is an interesting assertion as it removes the agency from the gay individual and could lead to further closeting. Rudoe notes that "Spaces are not neutral; rather they are host to power relationships, and may be hostile places for lesbians" (Rudoe, 2010, p. 24), this is particularly true of schools as heteronormative classrooms favour heterosexual experience. Nadia reflects on the impact of the heteronormativity of her school and society more widely and its impact on her professional life. In reference to her sexuality she notes,

"I wouldn't say that I was out as bisexual even, I would say that I don't talk about that element of identity anymore and it's just because it's easier, until I have articulated it now, I haven't really thought about it... I'm on the surface very open minded about all types of relationships, that, I think that when you are bought up with a certain stigma, there is something quite deep that sticks... Your sexuality makes you different and apart and separate from a young age."

This 'othering' is also evident in the literature (Edwards, 2014). Nadia notes that her sexuality is deemed so unacceptable that she self-censors and doesn't discuss it. Similar to the gap in the literature around LGBT teacher experience that Duke (2007) identifies, Nadia imposes a silence on her own identity. She presents as set apart from others because of her sexuality, and acknowledges that the impact of being

raised in heteronormative society is both fundamental and lasting.

This choice to not discuss sexuality in school is understandable when you place it in the context of the "risky business of choosing visibility" (Dejean, 2010, p. 236). Both Rudoe (2010) and Edwards (2014) characterise being a visible gay teacher as a risk. This is something that resonates with the lived experiences of participants in this research, Becky explains that

"There is always a risk in school, even though legally, section 28 has gone, especially in my last school, I was still taking a risk, I hadn't been there long and I didn't know how supportive the staff body would be... There is still an element of risk and I have been lucky in all honesty that the schools I have worked in have been supportive."

Teresa explores visibility in the importance of being 'out' lying in enabling young people to have "role models of people who are 'out' and normal". Nadia supports this idea, stating "children need to see and know about the diversity that they hear about". Conversely, Becky takes a slightly different stance, for her it isn't about being a role model or a confidant, it's about representation.

"A lot of straight people seem to think that if you are gay, a lot of these gay kids come running to you like you are the piper! And it's actually quite the opposite. I'm not there for them to seek me out for support, I am there to let them know we exist."

All participants agree on the positive impact of legislative change in helping gay teachers to have access to a previously heterosexual schema of domesticity and normality. This is particularly true of the Civil Partnership Act and the recent introduction of equal marriage in the UK. Teresa suggests that this has resulted in a repositioning of gay people and their experiences in the minds of others,

"It isn't simply anal sex and cunnilingus anymore. It is people having a home together and being married."

However, Becky suggests that simply having legal protection does not equate to a safe existence for gay teachers.

"A lot of straight people and teachers think (about being out) that it's not a big deal, what's the problem? They don't understand the complexities of being a gay person in society. Just because me and my partner can get married it doesn't mean that we didn't just experience a homophobic hate crime at the weekend and it doesn't mean that we don't still have to question whether to hold hands or not or how to refer to each other in public."

Here, Becky suggests that legality is only the start of a wider acceptance of LGBT people both in schools and society.

### Pedagogical impact

Being 'out' at school can support new ways of thinking

for learners and develop teaching and learning in the classroom. The main aspects of this pedagogical advantage are presented by participants as; having a safe space for discussion and authentic relationship building.

With regards to relationship building, Nadia notes the importance of transparency with students with regards to sexuality,

“I think that the stronger the relationships are in a classroom, the more likely you are to be able to be successful with some students that might be more disenfranchised”

When asked to summarise the most important aspects of her lived gay experience, she emphasises relationships with staff and students to be the most significant parts of her experience. Conversely, Nadia notes that not being ‘out’ was limiting the relationships that she could have with students – she says that “I always have felt that my job could have been so much better if that hadn’t have been the case” and that this was particularly damaging when trying to engage the more disenfranchised among her students. She also implies that this limitation in her teaching has perhaps lead her to pursue a different career path, noting that she might have done something more directly linked to pedagogy i.e. an AST<sup>3</sup>, if things had been different.

Both Nadia and Teresa reflect on the advantages that being ‘out’ has had on teaching and learning in their classrooms. Becky reports a similar impact in her classroom,

“Often, when I have had discussions with students, it has been really heart-warming, to be honest, once they know I’m gay then the mood changes in the room, the conversations happen, for example, a boy saying ‘I like baking’, him coming out as a baker! It became a safe space.”

In summary, the experience of gay teachers in UK secondary schools is a complex one. It involves the negotiation of potentially conflicting aspects of one’s identity, as well as relatively entrenched homophobia. Being ‘out’, however, has potential rewards for both pedagogy and the individual teacher in opening up spaces for dialogue and debate with students and allowing teachers to live congruently. The teachers who narrated their experiences in this study reported that being ‘out’ was both important and possible.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, this research aimed to present co-constructed narrative accounts of ‘out’ gay teachers experiences in the UK secondary sector. The literature indicates that within a broadly more accepting context for LGBT people, gay teachers still have to contend with a divided personal and professional self, the heteronormative classroom and the costs and benefits

of being ‘out’. Perhaps as a result of these challenges, most gay teachers are not ‘out’ at school. The narrators in this research are therefore atypical of their group, as they choose to be ‘out’.

The findings present a composite picture where being ‘out’ is important to participants and dependent on the presence of certain enablers. As in the literature, the experience that the participants narrate is that of the interplay of aspects of their identity and is contextualised within heteronormativity. However, whilst they acknowledge that there is still a risk to being ‘out’, they talk at length about the benefits as being both pedagogical and personal. This has important implications for further research. The findings imply that in creating an environment where gay teachers can be ‘out’ schools may see benefits in terms of teaching and learning as well as the well-being of their staff. Further research is needed to establish what these ‘pedagogical spaces’ discussed by participants as a result of their being ‘out’ look like and mean for school communities. Overall, for the teachers in this study, the risks of assumed homophobia, professional challenges and student reactions are superseded by the desire to be visible, open and congruent.

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# Marginalised students: blaming the disjointedness of transition for the loss of being known



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*I am first and foremost a teacher-researcher. I spent 15 wonderful years teaching mathematics in secondary schools in challenging circumstances - having originally studied Theoretical Physics to PhD level. When I became an Advanced Skills Teacher I took the opportunity to work more intensively with students removed from the mainstream classroom as I find that I am perpetually drawn to issues of educational equality and the plight of the potentially marginalized pupil - my current PhD focus at the Institute of Education in London. Ethnography and constructivist grounded theory are a natural fit for me, as I wish to let the voices of my students shine through.*

## Abstract

Through an ethnographic study in a London secondary school setting, this project sheds light on experiences of disengagement, by giving a voice to marginalized students. The participants are pupils who have spent some time being removed from the mainstream classroom setting to work in an on-site withdrawal unit, most commonly following a period of sustained low-level disruption. The research is primarily drawn from semi-structured interviews, with additional participant observation, as well as some small group or one-to-one teaching by the researcher within this unit. The data gathered is analysed through a process of constructivist grounded theory. The process explored in this paper is that of blaming the disjointedness of transition for the loss of being known. Specifically, it is the disjointedness of transition from primary to secondary school that is recognised as a possible factor feeding into the student's subsequent marginalisation. The rupture inherent in moving from a small school where the students - and their needs - are well-known by staff and students alike, to a larger unfamiliar school, necessarily means that a student will have to build connections again and may indeed fail to do so, leaving them open to remaining largely unknown by staff and students.

## Rationale and choice of methodology

'FSM<sup>4</sup> -eligible pupils have a lower chance of attending a good school in an area where choice is high than in an area where choice is low' (Burgess and Briggs 2006, p20).

There is a plethora of research that echoes these findings, arguing that choice, partitions and branching points all contribute to inequalities (Allen 2007, Ball 2003a/2003b, Gibbons and Telhaj 2006, Green et al

2006, Wilson 2011). Thus, with the on-going increase in the number of converter academies<sup>5</sup> and the already fragmented secondary school system fracturing still further, the urgency to fully understand the roots of student marginalisation has never been greater.

This increase in marginalisation generated the kernel of the idea for my research, since it is now surely more crucial than ever that not only should the roots of marginalisation be better understood, but also that efforts to support and reengage marginalised students are examined. As a teacher within the mainstream secondary school arena for fifteen years, working over a period of considerable disruption in schools in challenging circumstances, I had been in turn frustrated, fascinated, inspired, angered, and amazed by the experiences of many of my students. This had drawn me in more recent years, to take every opportunity to work with such students, which put me in a position where I had access to and relationships with, many side-lined young people, and so consideration and practise came together to prompt this ethnographic research.

'personal experiences may provide motive and opportunity for research' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p23).

The role the researcher in this case plays is nominally an overt one, of both being a teacher and a researcher. To be an effective and ethical researcher it is important that the complexities of the researcher-teacher duality are recognised and the potential for influence, be it on the behaviour and accounts of those in the field, or on the interpretations of and analysis work done by the researcher, are subject to careful reflection. It is essential to be self-critical and to recognise the role of

<sup>4</sup> Free School Meals eligibility is a readily available statistic within schools that is frequently used as a proxy for disadvantage.

<sup>5</sup> There are over 3,420 academies in England now, compared with 200 in May 2010. 41% of Secondary Schools have converted (Bolton 2015).

your own socio-cultural position, prejudices and opinions and to try to account for these throughout the research process, as opposed to trying to minimise or eliminate them. I intend to embrace reflexivity head on then, since, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) state:

'By including our own role within the research focus, and perhaps even systematically exploiting our participation in the settings under study as researchers, we can produce accounts of the social world and justify them without placing reliance on futile appeals to empiricism, of either positivist or naturalist varieties.' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p18)

There are many ethnographic works in education, where the complex influence of the researchers possible role in a school setting are struggled with, debated and addressed (see e.g Ball 1981, Hargreaves 1967, Lacey 1970).

It seems to me that the marginalised students themselves are best placed to shed light on the possible roots of marginalisation and that their stories and narratives, could not only give a voice to a few of the most vulnerable, disengaged and hard to reach students within the mainstream education setting, but also perhaps hold the key to understanding disengagement, disaffection and hopefully even to point to some effective interventions. This is the reason for my placing the students at the heart of this work, selecting an ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) and then seeing what emerges from their accounts, through the use of a constructivist grounded theory approach to analysing the data (Charmaz 2006, Strauss 1987, Glaser and Strauss 1968).

The student participants were selected from among those pupils who have spent some time 'removed' from the mainstream classroom setting, to work in an on-site withdrawal unit, most commonly following a period of sustained low-level disruption. The sense in which they are initially considered marginalized then, is through spending time in this withdrawal unit. The research is primarily drawn from semi-structured interviews, with additional participant observation, as well as some small group or one-to-one teaching by the researcher within this unit. The main reasons for undertaking the participant observations and the teaching, centered on immersing myself within this unit. Firstly, I wanted to better familiarize myself with the setting, learning the culture, its values, discourses and norms - as is usual within ethnographic work. Secondly, I also sought to no longer be seen as exclusively a mainstream teacher, to become at least in part accepted into this group, to be able to establish relationships and thus to identify potential participants for interview (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

In terms of selecting cases for interview, I firstly had to take into account ethical considerations and the matter of gaining informed consent. In focussing on students from the withdrawal-unit, who have been marginalised to some degree, many of their parents, carers and guardians were difficult to contact, let alone to elicit

support from. So, by the very nature of the focus of the research, limitations and constraints came into play. It is difficult at the best of times to arrange consent from parents, but with my particular focus on marginalised students, this obstacle was magnified. After much deliberation about the ethical issues surrounding informed consent and with reference to several ethics committees' standards, I decided to restrict my interviewees either to those individuals whose parents consented, or to those who had turned sixteen, an age that is commonly put forward as that at which a young person can give informed consent for themselves. This being the case, several of the participants may no longer be enrolled at the school at the time of interview. Even with post-16 interviewees, it should be noted that, where contact with a parent, carer or guardian was made, that their permission was sought nevertheless, as this seemed the most ethical approach.

As a starting point to finding willing participants for interview, and bearing in mind the requirement for informed consent also, volunteers were sought, after informal discussion in the withdrawal unit amongst small groups. From then there was some snowball sampling, with individuals suggesting their friends and peers. Also use was made of a key respondent, a popular and sociable girl, who was eager to assist in contacting further participants, several of whom had left the school previously. Later some theoretical sampling stemming from the analytical process was also utilised (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, Charmaz 2006, Strauss 1987, Glaser and Strauss 1968).

The choice of semi-structured interviews was a compromise between what might be theoretically best practise in terms of research design and data collection, and what could be achieved within the constraints of time and ethics. Since many of the students who were likely to be of particular interest to me, suffered from low self-esteem, could be inarticulate and often had difficulties expressing themselves, the likelihood of obtaining much fruitful data using unstructured open-ended techniques seemed remote. Indeed, I felt that such interviews might make them feel uncomfortable and pressurised, as opposed to free and empowered. With this in mind, I decided that semi-structured interviews were the way forward, with a framework of questions that essentially asked them to recall their educational experiences and tell their story chronologically. If they started to feel comfortable and began to talk freely, they could still be allowed to follow their own path. If not, offering prompts and encouragement, or even sharing personal experiences may put the students more at their ease and make them subsequently more forthcoming.

The data gathered was subjected to an ongoing scrutiny, through a process of qualitative analysis, based on principles underpinning the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1968) and revised later by Strauss (1987), and subsequently Charmaz (2006), to allow for more flexible qualitative analysis of research where the procedures are less stringently applied and the researcher is more free, for example to record

interviews, discuss the data and supplement the data analysis process with experiential data. The accompanying processes of coding, memo writing and diagramming formed an integral part of this analytical procedure. Resulting processes emerging from the data could then be identified (Charmaz 2006, Strauss 1987).

One area, which was raised repeatedly, was the students' experience of transition and several processes came to light. Here, I will focus on one tentative emergent process, namely, that of blaming the disjointedness of transition for the loss of being known. In what follows then, I will firstly narrate this one aspect that has emerged from my research, which draws on processes that arise across the experience of two individuals. Only after seeing what has emerged from the data, will I subsequently interlink my findings with reference to salient literature, showing where there is consistency and broad agreement, where there is greater friction and where there may be an illuminating instance or fresh perspective.

### Emergent theme: Blaming the disjointedness of transition for the loss of being known

When discussing with marginalised students it is perhaps not surprising that the issue of special educational needs and disability, henceforth SEND, should arise. Interestingly, there are two cases here, those of Faye<sup>6</sup> and Charlie, who connect the issue of their own needs and the issue of transitioning from primary school to secondary school.

Both students self-identify as having SEND and describe their own attainment as low. Faye talks about her physical disability and her learning needs, while Charlie describes himself as having learning needs and behavioural difficulties. They identify transition as a moment of discontinuity, from which point on, their needs were no longer known and understood. Arguably they go further, seeing the root of their subsequent difficulties within the education system as stemming from this point of transition.

Certainly, both Faye and Charlie do subsequently follow somewhat unusual educational trajectories. Whilst Faye is largely in mainstream classes for the duration of Key-Stage 3, over Key-Stage 4 she spends more and more time in the on-site withdrawal unit, so much so that by Easter of Year 11 she only leaves this unit to attend one GCSE subject. Charlie's journey breaks with the mainstream peer group at an earlier point. He is sent to 'alternative provision' and not allowed on-site at all for several months in Year 9. For Key-Stage 4 he is allowed back but is only permitted to attend the mainstream classes for Mathematics and English – the only two GCSE subjects he is entered for – and spends the remainder of his time either in the on-site withdrawal unit or on a college placement studying construction.

### Faye's narratives

Faye clearly sees the fact that she never received a statement of SEND at primary school as a significant contributing factor to making her later education more difficult.

LWE: *Is there anything else that you just think 'I wish I'd told someone this' about education or schools or ... ?*

FAYE: *No... Well... In Primary school we tried to get me statemented. Well I didn't but my mum did but they wouldn't. So I think, if I was, it would make everything a bit more easier. Like the whole part of school and they would probably actually like take a bit more notice and actually be like 'oh actually she does have a problem' like and not just think yeah ...*

It is Faye's opinion then that had her primary school supported her in obtaining a statement<sup>7</sup> of SEND 'it would make everything a bit more easier.' There would be a greater recognition of her having a particular problem and associated needs. This she relates broadly to 'like the whole part of school', however, as she continues, Faye specifically mentions moving from primary school to secondary school.

LWE: *And no one tried again later on or ... ?*

FAYE: *No. I should have been statemented and my mum was annoyed but it didn't ...*

LWE: *For your condition? Not for your learning?*

FAYE: *Yeah. And for me. For me it just made the fact that like ... I dunno like ... I don't really know coz I didn't get much involved but it would just make lots easier, like at secondary school, when I did the transfer from primary to secondary school and everything .... and make it all a bit easier.*

Faye herself connected the lack of a statement with having a harder time not just at secondary school but in particular also at transition. What then is this connection for her, between not having a statement and having a more difficult transition? From the earlier passage it can be seen that she has a sense that her condition, her 'problem', was dismissed and not taken notice of at secondary school. Is it this acknowledgement of her condition, her disability, that she sensed was lost in transition? For Faye then, is transition the disjuncture, which fractured any continuity in terms of a general understanding, appreciation and acceptance of her condition across her school community?

After many years in the same primary school, was it indeed the case that her condition was known and then at transition, without a formal statement of SEND, she would have to start again in terms of explaining her condition and having her needs recognised and met? Is

<sup>6</sup> All student names are pseudonyms.

<sup>7</sup> Although they were called statements when Faye was at primary school, statements were replaced with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHC plans) in The Children and Families Act (2014).

there anything else, in her own words that touches further on her attitude to transition? Certainly, she moved from a small primary school, with only one form entry per year group, to a secondary school with in excess of twelve hundred students.

FAYE: *We had a really small Year so it was ... we were all quite close.*

Her statement that at primary school, in her year group 'we were all quite close' offers an impression of security and familiarity. Potentially this could imply that her needs were indeed known, respected and met. Moving into the less familiar, the less known, at secondary school, with so many new faces, staff and students, necessarily means getting to know many new people. This would be the case, presumably, in varying degrees, for all students although those from smaller primary schools may perhaps feel it more acutely. Possibly Faye felt this more acutely for two reasons; not only because she came from a tightknit primary school but also because she felt conscious of having to explain her SEND all over again.

Through Faye's eyes, transition was harder for her without a prior statement of SEND in place, presumably since she would have to explain, inform and share these additional personal details with others herself. This knowledge was lost in transition. It would be down to her to claw back any recognition for her condition and perhaps, from her remarks, she never felt she managed to do this to any great effect. Thus, there is a sense in which she in part blames transition for her subsequent difficulties throughout secondary school. Prior to the move, she had felt comfortable and known. Subsequently, she never quite recovered that position of acceptance.

There are several of Faye's comments, which also shed light on the fact that she conceivably did not ever feel understood and known at Secondary school:

FAYE: *I find it really hard to talk to some people coz they don't get it and they don't understand.*

FAYE: *No-one here like really knows that much.*

FAYE: *But I don't think they realised just how bad it gets.*

FAYE: *Like no ones ever come round and actually asked me like 'is this alright?' Or anything. Or someone with like disability or a learning difficulty, or someone who just doesn't enjoy school and they know, they should take it more like ... think of them and ... but they just don't.*

FAYE: *It's just it's hard and they, they don't get it.*

For a student in possession of a statement of SEND at transition, their individual needs should at the very least have already been communicated to the pertinent staff. So to some extent then, Faye makes a very credible point, that the extra challenge confronting individuals with additional specific needs, at transition, would

surely be somewhat alleviated through having a statement, since some staff would be informed from the outset.

### Charlie's narratives

Charlie's story has many similarities with Faye's.

LWE: *Can you tell me anything you remember about Primary?*

CHARLIE: *Errr ....Well I got .... I was getting help with my English and that ....*

LWE: *Oh yeah. In class or extra lessons...?*

CHARLIE: *Yeah well separate ... like one-on-ones ... and then err...*

LWE: *What age do you think that was?*

CHARLIE: *Year 5 I think that was that time but and then .... Then when I moved up and they just .... They just never helped me really ....*

LWE: *In year 6, you got help too or ...?*

CHARLIE: *Yeah. Well it was like the end of year 6 and they was like clocking on that they was like thinking I was dyslexic and then .... when I got to year 7, there was no records or nothing so I was ...*

LWE: *Is that what happened? You they sort of like .... You had to start again. They like lost the information or something.*

CHARLIE: *Yeah and then I didn't get tested til year 11 and that ....*

Here Charlie makes it explicit that he thinks that something was literally lost at transition, stating 'when I got to year 7, there was no records or nothing'. It is however possible that he was actually never tested for dyslexia in primary school, so no official record would exist, but in his recollection his teachers were at the very least suspecting, 'clocking on', in year 6 that he may be dyslexic. He also recalls receiving extra help in primary school, showing that there was formal recognition of some additional learning needs, with him having one-to-one support with his English work. He contrasts this starkly with secondary school, saying that once he had moved up to secondary school 'they just never helped me really.' Even if no records were lost then, at the very least the knowledge that he may require extra help, at least in English, did disappear.

This echoes what Faye noted. For both Faye and Charlie, they felt that after some time within the same primary school, their specific learning needs or other SEND were established and known, even if they were not deemed sufficient for a formal statement. On moving to secondary school this knowledge and insight was lost. Both individuals thus blame transition as a substantial contributing factor in their future difficulties in education. Indeed, Charlie reiterates this.



LWE: *What are the things that you think ... could have been done differently .... Like where you look back and you think that would have helped me or that should not have happened?*

CHARLIE: *Well I think .... It's probably ....If I go back like from year like 5 into 6, if they got me tested then .....I think my life would have been different from til now .... Coz where they've only tested at the end of year 11 .... now I've hit college there aint got the proof, they don't know if I've been tested ... like I don't even know if I've got ...been tested coz they said to me "you need to get proof that you're dyslexic".... And err .... They only found out like in year 11 and I think that my mums got the papers somewhere but....if they test me before I think that would've changed everything.*

LWE: *Yeah OK and so ...*

CHARLIE: *Coz like they would have given me more help and everything yeah ....*

Here he overtly blames the lack of an early diagnosis of his dyslexia for his later educational trajectory. He thinks that had he been tested in primary 'my life would have been different'. He reasserts this strength of feeling later also with the phrase 'I think that would've changed everything'. It is the additional help, which he never received at secondary school, which he believes could have made the difference. He does not mention transition explicitly in this fragment but coupled with his remarks from the previous extract, it is evident that such an early identification might well have fed into more help later, if this knowledge was not lost at transition. There is a case to be made from Charlie's story also then for an early diagnosis which stays recognised across transition, so again perhaps a formal statement of SEND would have helped with this.

There is one final extract in which Charlie does talk about transition and the decision as to which secondary school to go to.

LWE: *So you arrived in Year 7. Did you .... Were there lots of people from your Primary here or ... did you have any friends here?*

CHARLIE: *Yeah that's why. I was gonna go Meadowcroft ... And I had it arranged from May and ....they was like ahhh 50 people was going Welford High ... and me and one other so....*

LWE: *You think 50 people from your year came?*

CHARLIE: *Yeah more than 50 came coz they said ... they had like a little ruler thing.... it was like so far 50 peoples going to Welford High, 20s going this one, 10.... Monkston was the only like 3 or 4 was ....*

LWE: *So you changed because more people were coming here?*

CHARLIE: *Yeah and.... I think I did the wrong idea.*

LWE: *Really?*

CHARLIE: *To be fair yeah.*

He in fact changed his mind as to which school to go to and he sees his choice of secondary school in the end, as a mistake. The point of transition could hardly be blamed more clearly, than by being labelled as a mistake, in his words 'I did the wrong idea'. This reaffirms that for him transition may be partly blamed for his subsequent travails.

There are several of Charlie's comments, which also indicate that he never felt understood, known and supported at Secondary school:

CHARLIE: *School .... School didn't help one bit, I've gotta admit.*

CHARLIE: *They didn't know so ....they just thought I was just a normal ... that I knew how to spell and everything.*

CHARLIE: *I just drifted away like.....coz where English ....that just went out of the window ....I was getting no help.*

CHARLIE: *... like I didn't really get no help and then I went down and down.*

Faye and Charlie then, intuitively connect the issue of their own needs and the issue of transitioning from primary school to secondary school, seeing the root of their subsequent difficulties within the education system as stemming from this point of transition. They identify transition as a moment of discontinuity, from which point on, they were no longer known and understood. Explicitly, they blame the disjointedness of transition for the loss of being known.

## Situating the findings with current research thinking

The process, which emerged from the data - blaming the disjointedness of transition for the loss of being known - will be situated within present academic thinking by considering here what the salient literature has to say, showing where there is general agreement, where there is greater tension and where there may be an illuminating instance or fresh perspective. The potential negative effects of transition will be pertinent, including anything the literature has to say as to whether or not some students are more likely than others to experience a negative transition and what can be done to counter this. The notion of prolonged negative effects and any discussion of blame will also be germane.

Moving on from primary school to secondary school has long been acknowledged as a potentially harrowing time, fraught with apprehension and stress, for many students (Evangelou et al 2008, Zeedyk et al, 2003). Measor and Woods acknowledge that one source of strain associated with transition is that with so much change, students mourn the loss of the familiar (Measor and Woods 1984). Lucey and Reay (2000) argue that

this need not be intrinsically negative, noting that these difficulties – anxieties and loss – are in fact an integral part of accessing greater autonomy and growing up. Thus, they see a positive side to moderate anxiety at transition, in spurring on coping mechanism, while nevertheless acknowledging the potential negative side that too much worry could be overwhelming and hinder progress. Negative side effects of transition – whether they are feelings of apprehension or a drop in self-esteem, enjoyment and positivity – will be felt by nearly all students to some extent, but thankfully:

‘for most students these decreases are fairly small and short-lived’ (Anderson et al 2000, p326).

It is particularly pertinent here, that transition is also well documented as a disjuncture that some students are less able to navigate its demands successfully, and for whom the negative effects of transition may not only be more acute, but may also be more likely to linger.

‘They do, in fact, feel marginalized – neither welcomed, respected, nor valued by others. There are few rewards in the system for them. They do experience a sense of rejection by the mainstream community’ (Anderson et al 2000, p329).

Transition then, for some students, can aggravate a negative attitude towards school or perhaps for some even trigger it. This resonates with the findings of this research, where negative effects of transition not only linger but also are blamed as causative of future educational problems.

The literature recognises that, as with so many aspects of school, the students who are at greatest risk of finding transition challenging with perhaps more sustained negative effects also, include particular minority ethnic groups, speakers of other languages, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, lower attainers and students with additional needs of a learning or behavioural nature (Anderson et al. 2000; Evangelou et al. 2008; West, Sweeting and Young 2010). Here again then, there is some relevant interplay with the current findings, with both students self-identifying as having SEND. Additionally, one of the two individuals is from a lower socioeconomic background.

The literature also notes two additional ways in which students from these already at risk groups, may be identified as even more likely to falter and suffer at transition, both of which relate to their family background. Firstly, for many students from these groups, their parents may also lack the necessary social and cultural capitals to take advantage of support and help smooth transition for their children (Rice 1997). Secondly, several researchers (Anderson et al 2000; Jindal-Snape & Foggie 2008; Measor and Woods 1984) discuss the fact that while at primary school there remains a somewhat familial atmosphere and relatively strong relationships are established between teachers and students. These connections and understanding can prove a vital source of additional social support for some, undoubtedly including those vulnerable students who struggle to find ample support from home. In the

move to the larger, more impersonal secondary school with many more teachers per student, it is probable that such strong teacher-student bonds will not be forthcoming. Here again then a source of social support is diminished for all, but is likely to affect those from fractured families more profoundly than other students, with stronger family support. For Charlie in the current research then, he may indeed be at a compounded greater risk of a difficult transition, as he arguably falls into both these ‘criteria’, coming from a ‘fractured family’, as well as having parents who arguably do not have the ‘right’ forms and volumes of capital.

In their research into transition, Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) offer a psycho-social interpretation of the current research findings. They discuss coping and resilience and link this to self-esteem, which for them is a two-pronged construct, comprising both self-competence and self-worth. While positive self-competence is likely to result from previous successes, self-worth is more an internal reflection of how others perceive you and is likely to result from sustained positive relationships. They see both these facets of self-esteem as essential for coping well with challenges, like transition. Those who are ‘low attainers’ or have ‘additional learning needs’ – such as both the individuals here – are more likely to have had less experience with success and suffer from a more negative sense of self-competence. Similarly, those who have a history with fewer supportive relationships, perhaps fractured family ties or challenging home environments, are more likely to have a lower sense of self-worth – again one of the two individuals, Charlie, in the current research that would fit this description also. This may go some way then, towards explaining why some groups of students, have all been noted to be more at risk of deeper and more lasting adverse effects from transition:

‘Whereas those with a healthy self-esteem may cope with the rigours of transition, and benefit in terms of academic and personal growth, those without may emerge from the process uncertain about their worth, less confident about their ability to cope with the challenges that lie ahead of them—and possibly with the seeds of disaffection already sown.’ (Jindal-Snape & Miller 2008, p226).

The significant body of research into the effects of formal transition initiatives, designed to smooth transition – from information booklets to talks, visits, open events and summer schools – consistently finds benefits for many students and thus paints a toned down picture of potential negative effects at transition (e.g. Galton, Morrison and Pell 2000; Evangelou et al 2008). Nevertheless the literature frequently bemoans the briefness of many measures, concluding that they are not nearly sufficient to address the needs of the more vulnerable students at this difficult time, advocating the need for much more extensive, comprehensive and tailored programs (Anderson et al 2000; Jindal-Snape & Foggie 2008; Zeedyk et al 2003).

The literature then concurs that transition may be

difficult, with negative effects that are deeper and longer lasting for some, even despite the many measures put in place to try to address this. In terms of situating the current research findings, namely blaming transition for the loss of being known, there is a further aspect to consider - what, if any, mention is made of the passing of information from primary to secondary school, and the effectiveness and appropriateness of these communications?

As part of their work on transition of students identified as at risk of struggling with the process, Jindal-Snape & Foggie (2008) found concerns over communication and the transfer of information at this crucial time.

'Lack of communication between primary and secondary was further highlighted by almost all the practitioners and parents. There was a view that although primary and secondary were passing and receiving information, it was not always complete or accurate,' (Jindal-Snape & Foggie 2008, p11).

Furthermore, secondary teachers expressed that this lack of detailed information hindered their ability to provide appropriate support to their new students and individual parents concurred, noting that the required support was not in place for their child (Jindal-Snape & Foggie 2008). This resonates strongly with Faye and Charlie's accounts.

Jindal-Snape & Miller recognise that a more detailed picture of a student needs to be conveyed from one institution to the next, taken seriously and made use of when considering not only academic practises but also pastoral support systems. Furthermore, they recognise that this may be most crucial:

'in order to alert secondary schools to individuals who may, for a variety of reasons, be more vulnerable when they move on' (Jindal-Snape & Miller 2008, p229).

Anderson et al (2000) discuss how to help students to make a successful transition, through in part ensuring that the right support is in place to target particular deficiencies. For such appropriate support to be set up, the communication between the primary and secondary school would have to be effective, as well as consisting of accurate and detailed information (Anderson et al 2000). Evangelou et al (2008) noted that the precise nature of the information that was passed on was rather ad hoc. While in examples of good practise, considerable information was made available - incorporating anything from attainment across all areas, through attendance figures, or SEND and EAL (English as an additional language) information, to social skills - still all too frequently, all that was offered was the much more minimal attainment data (Evangelou et al 2008).

This fits again with the concerns expressed by Charlie and Faye who both feel that they were damaged by a lack of knowledge transfer about them as individuals at transition, so much so that they retrospectively blame transition for many of the ills that befell them in their

subsequent educational pathways. This idea of loss of information certainly seems well supported by literature then. It is nevertheless important to consider whether or not there is anything additional within the literature, that pertains to being unknown by secondary school staff, as they both maintain that they were never subsequently fully understood or known after transition.

Chedzoy & Burden (2005) found that in terms of relationships with teachers, although most students found the teachers friendly and enjoyed having a variety of teachers, they observed that a term after transitioning:

'it was notable that a significant number of students did not feel that many of their teachers knew them properly,' (Chedzoy & Burden 2005, p 15).

Tobell (2003), who also looked at student's perceptions before and after transition, stressed the importance of relationships for a productive learning environment and that feeling known and understood by teachers is a critical part of this. Tobell also noted that transitioning from primary to secondary school meant an increased number of teachers and so less chance of forming these productive strong relationships with staff. The literature then leaves room for individual students indeed remaining unknown in their secondary school, as this paper suggests.

Finally, is it significant that these students, Faye and Charlie, are looking back, when they blame transition for some of their subsequent ills? The accounts I draw on in my research are retrospective, consisting of reflections on a transition process several years before. Is this a story they have constructed for themselves on reflection? Does the literature on transition have anything to illuminate this matter?

Even in more timely work on transition, when data may be collected in the first few weeks of the secondary school, after one term or at the end of the first full year, some researchers suggest that accounts obtained later in the transition process may be more revealing in some regards, than the earlier post-transfer accounts - for example in terms of the effects of transition on the process of identity formation (Measor and Woods 1984; Tobbell 2003). Indeed, Measor and Woods, in their study, argue that some concerns, of a more personal nature, such as friendships and fitting in, do not start to be articulated until a year on (Measor and Woods 1984).

West et al (2010) in their large and detailed longitudinal study, have more to say on the shorter and longer-term effects of transition. While they found that self-esteem issues generally dissipated after the first year or so in secondary school, longer-term transition effects could remain for a small minority, most notably, later instances of depression. They also found later anti-social behaviour and educational under-attainment, finding that adverse effects stem from having a difficult transition in terms of the formal, academic aspects. Their work offers much to shed light on the stories from Faye and Charlie, in that they suggest that it is likely that

transition could and indeed should be, in part, to blame for problems several years later at school. They sum up:

‘the impact of the primary–secondary transition goes beyond immediate post-transfer anxieties to have a much more significant, longer-term effect on pupil well-being and learning,’ (West, Sweeting and Young 2010, p46).

So there is some indication from the literature then, that there may be, for some individuals, genuine sustained educational concerns that have their roots at least in part in a difficult transition.

## Conclusions

Broadly, the findings from this paper sit neatly within the existing academic literature in several aspects.

Firstly there is agreement that transition can be a challenging time, cause anxiety and have negative effects, certainly in the short term.

Secondly the literature notes that students with ‘SEND’ and ‘lower attainers’ may be at greater risk of experiencing a negative transition and this fits with both Faye and Charlie who both self-identify as having SEND and describe their own attainment as low. To compound this, for one of these individuals, coming from a ‘lower socioeconomic background’, and a ‘fractured family’, there may be additional compounding factors which could make a negative transition more likely – parental lack of the ‘correct’ types and volumes of capitals; the change from a familial to a more distant formal environment.

Lastly the literature alludes to possible enduring negative effects from transition for a minority of students, even noting that transition may trigger a negative attitude to school. Once again this fits neatly alongside the findings from my research.

However, the literature on transition draws, in the vast majority of cases, on data collated from students in Year 6, just leading up to transition and in Year 7 just afterwards. In a few instances, the effects are further monitored into Year 8 – and indeed it is from accounts from students at the end of Year 7, or in exceptional cases in Year 8, that so-called persistent negative effects have been noted. The exception to this is the longitudinal study by West et al (2010), which draws from data from 11-16 year olds and indeed indicates that negative effects from transition can endure. This is a substantial piece of research but stemming as it does, primarily from data in the form of questionnaires, it draws generalised conclusions, eschewing the illuminating instances that the current research has to offer (West, Sweeting and Young 2010).

The role of this paper then is to provide two examples of the legacy of a negative transition, which are much more sustained, elicited from two students reflecting on their experiences at the end of their compulsory schooling years. Furthermore, these enduring negative effects from transition loom large for the individuals, so

much so as to be blamed as the root of their subsequent difficulties within the education system. They identify transition as a moment of disjointedness, from which point on, they were no longer known and understood. Explicitly, they blame the disjointedness of transition for the loss of being known.

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# Blogs and commentaries

## Migrants and expatriates



Jane Nebe

*Jane Nebe is a Commonwealth Scholar & Doctoral Researcher at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol. For her PhD Research, she is investigating Failure in Nigeria's Secondary School Examinations through the lens of senior secondary school students' experiences of and causal attributions for failure*

They say I am a student migrant, an African student migrant. What image of an 'African student migrant' comes to your mind? I 'migrated' from Nigeria in September 2015 to begin PhD studies at the University of Bristol, UK. This is the second time I am embarking on a similar venture, having 'migrated' from Nigeria to the UK two years ago to complete a Masters at the UCL Institute of Education, London. My 'migration' experiences so far have been fulfilling considering that I was and I am enjoying these experiences under a fully funded Scholarship. Yeah. Does that bolster the image of the 'African student migrant' you have? Before that image is imprinted permanently in your mind, remember that I am just one of the few (with Scholarships) among many (African student migrants).

When I conclude my PhD studies successfully and perhaps, start working in the UK, would that convert my status to an 'expatriate'? I don't think so. You know why? It is because it appears that I am not 'qualified' to be called an expatriate in the UK for reasons that remain unknown to me, although the online Oxford Dictionaries define an expatriate as "a person who lives outside their native country"<sup>8</sup>. Need I remind you that the Britons in other countries and in Nigeria are referred to as 'expatriates'? Actually, I am not sure of what Britons are called in other countries but they are definitely referred to as 'expatriates' in Nigeria. However, I may not be entirely inaccurate to make the claim about what Britons are called in other countries, when you consider

that the first example to illustrate the definition of the word 'expatriate', as an adjective, in the online Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary was "expatriate Britons in Spain"<sup>9</sup>.

Someone said this discrimination between who gets to be called an expatriate and who gets to be called a migrant has something to do with my skin 'colour'. I think that is too simplistic an answer considering that a Spanish person is also likely to be referred to as a 'migrant' in the UK, and it is possible that Britons are actually called 'migrants' in some other countries. Fortunately, the terms of my Scholarship award demand that I return to develop my 'developing country' after my PhD studies. That is exactly what I am going to do, because, in Nigeria I am neither a migrant nor an expatriate. I am a CITIZEN and that is good enough for me.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/expatriate>  
Definition was accessed on 23rd October 2015

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/learner/expatriate>  
Example was accessed on 23rd October 2015

# Prioritisation of disabled Syrian migrants: A progressive move or reinforcement of a toxic hierarchy of entitlement?



Rebecca Yeo

*Rebecca Yeo is a PhD student in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Bath. Her research explores conceptions of worth and entitlement, focussing particularly on the lived experiences of disabled asylum seekers in the UK.*

It is a historic moment. The needs of disabled people are to be prioritised by the UK government's Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme for Syrian nationals<sup>10</sup>. Local council officials are preparing to ensure that when these selected Syrian migrants arrive from refugee camps, their needs are fully catered for. A district council official explained, 'the last thing we want is for traumatised people to arrive in this country and face new trauma' (personal communication October 2015). At the same time, communities around the UK are organising to welcome these Syrians brought to the UK<sup>11</sup>. This appears to be a sharp break from wider approaches towards asylum seekers and to disabled people. However, before applauding too vehemently, it is necessary to question whether the welcoming of this specific group of people, actually exacerbates a toxic hierarchy of entitlement to human rights.

At the same time as the needs of the most vulnerable refugees from Syria are being prioritised, asylum seekers and other forced migrants in the UK are subject to an increasingly punishing immigration system. The Migrant Rights Network outlines how the Immigration

Bill 2015, currently going through parliament, creates 'a subclass of people' made increasingly vulnerable through the denial of basic rights<sup>12</sup>. Such legislation is deliberately designed to 'reduce the pull factors' which, it is claimed, draw migrants to the UK<sup>13</sup>.

Disabled asylum seekers in the UK experience particularly extreme deprivation from some of the most basic human needs, including food, shelter, social contact and sense of safety<sup>14</sup>. Any acknowledgement of additional costs incurred by asylum seekers as a result of having an impairment was removed from asylum seekers in 1999<sup>15</sup>. More, recently similar reduction of rights is being brought to the wider population of disabled people. The disproportionate impact of the UK government's austerity programme on disabled people is currently under UN investigation<sup>16</sup>.

The markedly different response towards the 'vulnerable' Syrians to be selected from refugee camps should be considered in relation to wider immigration discourse. When Theresa May MP addressed the Conservative Party conference on 6th October 2015 she made a clear distinction between the entitlements of Syrians deemed deserving by their vulnerability, and the entitlements of those who are 'fit enough' to get to Britain. She called for a new approach 'to offer asylum and refuge to people in parts of the world affected by conflict and oppression, rather than to those who have made it to Britain'<sup>17</sup>.

However well-meaning the intention, attempts to welcome Syrian migrants in isolation from wider consideration of immigration policy, reinforces May's distinctions between the deserving and undeserving. The apparent clarity of the goal of helping vulnerable people enables a sense of purpose around which people can unify. To question the system is less tangible and does not offer the same capacity for community pride. Yet, unless we do so, we uphold distinctions in human worth which are destructive to a sense of common humanity. We should not allow our consciences to be appeased while ignoring the plight of those labelled as undeserving.

<sup>12</sup> Migrant Rights Network briefing for second reading of Immigration Bill. October 2015

[http://www.migrantsrights.org.uk/files/publications/MRN\\_Immigration\\_Bill\\_Briefing\\_2015-v2.pdf](http://www.migrantsrights.org.uk/files/publications/MRN_Immigration_Bill_Briefing_2015-v2.pdf)

<sup>13</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/249251/Overview\\_Immigration\\_Bill\\_Factsheet.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249251/Overview_Immigration_Bill_Factsheet.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Harris and Roberts 2001 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/disabled-people-refugee-and-asylum-seeking-communities-britain> Ward et al 2008 <https://www.metropolitan.org.uk/images/Disability-Report.pdf> Yeo 2015

<https://disabilityglobalsouth.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/dgs-02-01-07.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/confirmed-un-is-investigating-uks-grave-violations-of-disabled-peoples-rights/> <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/oct/29/un-investigate-impact-welfare-cuts-vulnerable-uk-groups>

<sup>17</sup> Theresa May speech to the Conservative Party Conference. 6th October 2015 Full speech available from:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-speech-to-the-conservative-party-conference-in-full-a6681901.html> The Independent.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme-for-syrian-nationals> <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06805>

<sup>11</sup> Citizens UK. 2015. #RefugeesWelcome Vigil Calling on the Prime Minister to Resettle 1000 refugees before Christmas. Available from: <http://www.citizensuk.org>. 19th October, 2015

# Meet the researcher



**Ben Bowman**

*Ben Bowman is a Teaching Fellow in Comparative Politics at the University of Bath. He began his doctoral studies in 2011, and was part of the first SWDTC cohort of students. Among the array of events he's been involved in throughout his PhD there is one that stands out for us, the editors at TOR. TOR was Ben's brainchild. He worked hard to set up the journal and was the lead editor for the first issue. In keeping with the spirit of the journal, Ben has now stepped away from the editorial group for others to take his place. Always willing to have a friendly chat, we could think of nobody better for our first interview of 'meet the researcher'*

## **Could you give us an overview of your research?**

I am writing up my thesis now. It's on how young people fit into the weird, challenging and politically contested 'in betweeny' (liminal) space that we provide for them in UK society.

## **Why did you start TOR, the open access postgraduate journal for students by students?**

I enjoyed working on it! It is really difficult to get publications as a student, and it is also an opaque and unfriendly process, so we wanted to make it friendly, somehow.

## **You were part of the first SWDTC student cohort. What has changed since you began?**

I'm glad the conference has kept going and it's been great to see the student community at the SWDTC gradually – slowly, but gradually – become a coherent, collegiate body.

## **You have always been involved in projects beyond your research, such as conference organisation and TOR. How have you balanced working on these and your research workload?**

Sometimes very poorly. But in the end the best things to do is mark out a calendar on Excel and then colour in cells for particular tasks. That way you can also make sure you work a working day – 9 to 5? Like Dolly Parton? – and at the of the day, put it all away.

## **You are currently writing up your dissertation and working as a Teaching Fellow. What advice do you have for your fellow PhD students?**

I wish I had been more confident in just writing things early and getting them done. My advice is write – and have a fun project while (or if) you have the spare time.

## **Where would you like to see us take the journal in the future?**

It's great to be able to share in a community of students, because we can inform each other, support each other and, in the end, a lot of truly great research is getting done here at the SWDTC. So I would like to see gradual growth – new articles, including new students, making sure interdisciplinary students get a word in too. Maybe, one day, a TOR prize for great research? Especially if there's a party after to celebrate.

You can follow Ben on Twitter: [@bennosaurus](https://twitter.com/bennosaurus)