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Nomads in Diaspora Space: exploring how first in family university students articulate their identities within the university landscape

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Abstract
How individuals position themselves as ‘students’ within the university landscape can provide insight into the personal and actual experience of entering this environment. This article will explore how one group of female students narrated their identity work as they moved through the first year of study in an Australian university. These students were all first in the family to attend university and some had had a significant gap between educational experiences. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals as they commenced university study and these were repeated at four points during the year. Conversations captured the particular nuances of identity formation for this group. Interviews generated rich, description that revealed how students chose to articulate the growth and development of their identities, the contradictions this process engendered, as well as the ways in which existing and new identities were blended. The article draws on the concept of diaspora space (Brah, 1996) to contextualise these narratives and explore wider socio-cultural significance.

Key words: First in Family, first-generation students, mature-age students, identity formation, first year.

Introduction
Identity is both dynamic and complex as well as being sometimes contradictory in nature; identities contain a number of related and connected aspects. Identity formation is a shifting process, always in production and never complete or finalised. However, there is not a limitless choice in relation to identities only unlimited selves; individuals are restricted by the need to define and present a self that correlates with existing accepted identities. Those identities available within a particular context may not fit existing selves and in some cases, may contradict the established self. This can be the case for students who initially enter the higher education context; their particular learner identities may not match the identity positions available leading to a loss of ‘taken-for-granted realities and associated identities’ (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007, p.224).

This article will explore how one group of ‘first in family’ or first-generation students articulated processes around the formation of identities that were congruent or simply sustainable within the university landscape. For the purposes of this study, first-generation status was defined as no-one in the immediate family having previously attended university, including spouses or partners, children, parents.
and immediate siblings. While the main thrust of this research was to explore how these individuals position and articulate their relationships with higher education in order to provide insight into why some students choose to persist whilst others decide to leave university; the conversations with participants also revealed the processes around ‘becoming’ a university student. The diversity of the student population means that levels of engagement with this environment will differ dramatically; not all students seek a strong student identity nor expect close affiliation with the institution. Exploring how individuals articulate their sense of self as they move through their first year of university study provides a deeper understanding of the complexity of this identity work. As Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) argue ‘the actual experiences of students entering university have somehow failed to attract the level of academic scrutiny that is necessary to appreciate this transition’ (p.38). The current Australian study provides close scrutiny of how one group of women subjectively experience university, examining the hurdles encountered, the strategies employed to succeed and also the change, both public and personal, that this experience engendered. By returning to each student repeatedly as they moved through the year, rich detailed data was captured. This article will focus on the themes that emerged around ‘identity’ highlighting what ‘becoming a student’ actually means for those involved.

Theoretical Framework
The study outlined in this article draws on the theoretical work of Bourdieu (1986) and explores the ways in which the social theories articulated by this theorist can be applied to the higher education environment. Bourdieu is probably most recognized for his work on the school system and how this reproduces social inequality by exalting certain cultural practices usually associated with the dominant classes. These forms of cultural capital are imbued within the taken-for-granted nature of certain knowledge forms and practices. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three states: objectified in tangible goods such as books and pictures, institutionalised as academic credentials or awards and embodied form which is characterised by ‘long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body’ (p.243) which Bourdieu terms as ‘habitus’.

In educational terms, habitus impacts a student’s ability to ‘decode the implicit “rules of the game”’. (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997, p.573). As such, there is recognition that students do not necessarily arrive in educational environments with lack of knowledge but rather that the knowledge or cultural capital that is favoured within their own social situation may not be valued within the higher education environment they find themselves in. This is particularly the case for those students who have no tradition of institutionalised cultural capital, in particular those students who are the first in their family to attend university.
Habitus and diaspora

Bourdieu (1986) proposes the concept of habitus to refer to the ways in which individuals are disposed to behave and react based on cultural affiliations and understandings. This seems to be suggestive of a lack of individual agency perhaps limiting the possibility for change and transformation. Instead, habitus is better defined as a 'portfolio of dispositions' such as 'individual beliefs, values speech, dress which strongly influence actions in any situation' (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000, p.589). Such dispositions are largely perceived as both spontaneous and natural but Bourdieu regards these as being informed and framed by structural factors such as class, gender and ethnicity. However, the multiplicity of the modern world means that the structural factors are more fluid and hence, I have extended Bourdieu’s habitus by referencing the concept of diaspora and in particular, Brah’s (1996) articulation of diaspora space.

Diaspora or ‘dispersion’ offers the possibility of multiplicity rather than homogeneity, a journey that moves people from one cultural context to another (Brah, 1996). As a concept, diaspora recognises the ability for individuals to be located simultaneously across a multiplicity of ‘geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries’ (Brah, 1996, p.194). This challenges the idea of a homogenous, stable or fixed identity or even the primacy of one identity over another and highlights the pluralistic nature of identity. When the term diaspora is considered it is suggestive of upheaval or distress brought about by movement or dislocation but diaspora also offers the possibility of ‘hope and new beginnings’ (Brah, 1996, p.193). In diaspora space both ‘native’ and ‘newcomer’ are still differentiated but are positioned equally, with the freedom to move across and between borders. Such cross border movement surpasses the geographic or cultural specificity suggested by Bourdieu’s habitus and instead can be recognised as the ‘point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of us and them are contested’ (Brah, 1996, p.209). Diaspora as a conceptual category allows us to reconsider some taken-for-granted notions around difference, universality, ethnicity and identity. This article explores how Brah’s (1996) concept of ‘diaspora space’ facilitates alternative conceptualisations of notions around university student identity and what being a student in a mass system of education means for those involved.

Diaspora Space and Identity

Diaspora and diaspora space, as concepts, move away from an essentialist ‘either/or’ framework and instead recognise the fluidity of identity work better described as ‘both/and’ (Hughes, 2002). As Hughes describes, ‘both/and’ means, ‘an acceptance of multiple, competing, contradictory positions that are both simultaneously and separately invoked within the subject’ (p.413). Thus, the university as diaspora space can be conceived as a contested space inhabited by different groups, each of whom share and experience the space differently. University discourse continues to name and categorise students but it is no longer explicit who, if anyone, can be considered native or non-native or in university speak, who is traditional
or non-traditional. Diaspora then provides, ‘conceptual mapping which defies the search for original absolutes, or genuine and authentic manifestations of a stable, pre-given, unchanging identity’ (Brah, 1996, p.196).

In the current study, the word identity is used to ‘signify the plurality, fluidity and complexity’ in relation to how people perceive their sense of self (Ivanic, 1998, p.11). Put simply, identity refers to the characteristics and attributes an individual equates to the self. These emerge via social interaction with groups and significant others, identity construction is a socially situated activity: it is from social relationships that the self emerges (Stryker, 1968). However, the very social nature of identity construction means that it is open to transformation and renegotiation, or as Luttrell (1997) describes, ‘the practical politics of identity are grounded in, and compelled by, specific and situational contexts, not in some set of essential traits and attitudes’ (p.118). This complexity is particularly the case in the modern university environment where adopting a student identity is a complex and multifaceted process; it does not simply involve a spontaneous transformation as students walk through the university gates. Identity work is largely invisible, often assumed as taken-for-granted within the university environment. Exposing the inherent contradictions and difficulties of the process of identity formation within the university context is important work because such analysis helps to assist understanding of the nuances of this transition to university.

Where previously the act of ‘becoming a student’ was developed and negotiated at university, the varied nature of the student population translates into ‘competing mechanisms of socialisation’ (Lahtenoja & Pirrttila-Backman, 2005, p.645). In particular, older students may arrive at the institution with very established identities and may struggle to relate existing with future selves, particularly in an environment that is characterised by multiplicity in both cultural practices and situational interactions (Scanlon et al, 2007). The concept of diaspora recognises the fluid and multifaceted journeys that people take creating a ‘text of many distinctive and perhaps even disparate narratives’ further highlighting how identity is not simply defined by age or social background, but is instead constituted by the ‘materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively’ (Brah, 1996, p.183). While not speaking of university student identity, Braidotti’s (1994) metaphor of nomad is a useful construct to imagine how people move through the various subjectivities of one’s identity, none of which is fixed or permanent. While moving into the university landscape may engender a sense of dislocation for some students, it also has the potential for powerful transformations of identity. The theme of movement into the university landscape, along with others, will provide a focus for the later data analysis sections of this article.
Similar to Davis and Lutz (2000) my desire to study this area is related to my interest in exploring the ‘resourcefulness and courage with which people negotiate the hurdles of their lives under often inhospitable and usually difficult situations’ (p.368). Arriving at university can initiate difficult decisions for students for whom higher education is not the norm. Rendon (1998) argues that first in family students may actually perceive attending university in terms of loss, as they find it necessary to redefine their identity whilst relocating to the new university environment. This sense of dislocation is echoed by London (1989) who suggested that arriving at university can lead to increases in distance, both geographical and social, between individuals and community or familial connections. The resulting transformations in relationships with family, peers and self can result in students having to straddle between two distinctive and largely separate worlds, never completely fitting into either environment. Thomas (2002) supports this observation suggesting that the anxiety about ‘not fitting in and not being able to cope may be reinforced in families and communities where HE [Higher Education] is not the norm’ (p.8). This article will focus on how one group of female, first in family students, narrated their identity work as they moved through the first year of study in an Australian university, examining their arrival at university as well as how they reflected upon the year as a whole.

**Methodology**

The study is Interpretivist in nature and so as researcher, I took on the role or positioning of the subject, immersing myself in the actors’ social realities. I also approached the study as a female researcher as one of the main objectives was to define how women, ‘are understood as competent subjects getting by, creating and surviving within hostile and limiting environments’ (Alway, 1995, p.222). Hence, while methodologically placed within an interpretivist framework, this study is also sensitised by both my positioning as a woman and also, personal subjectivity.

This study draws on Peirce’s (1979) ‘abductive reasoning’ which falls between the polarity suggested by inductive and deductive logic. Abductive reasoning is premised on the act of identifying specific phenomenon and then relating or locating this within alternative conceptual frameworks. In this way, the particular event or aspect of the research is interpretatively engaged with and defined in an imaginative and creative way. Moving beyond the discipline in which you are working also opens up possibilities for further analysis and exploration. Applying different conceptual frameworks to data can break through the 'ordinariness of routine event' (Charmaz, 2006. p.53).
**Context and Participants**

*Context*

The study occurred at a small regional Australian campus affiliated with a larger institution located some eighty kilometres distant. This regional location has been recognised as being both economically and socially disadvantaged with higher than state average levels of: unemployment, families in receipt of pensions or benefits and low income earners as well as lower rates of educational attainment when compared nationally (please see Table (1) for more information).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of pop.</th>
<th>University attendance rates</th>
<th>Individuals with university degree</th>
<th>Completed H. School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationally</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
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The university has also one of the highest national rates of students who are derived from low socio-economic backgrounds, as defined by postcode. Most of the students enrolled at the campus live in the local community so once lectures are finished students generally depart, meaning that little ‘student life’ exists on-campus. This non-residential nature equates to a qualitatively different experience to that of a larger institution with a residential student population. This difference is also noted in relation to the large percentage of mature-aged students at the campus, mature-aged is defined as age 21 or over at the time of admission to university. In 2006, when the current study took place, only 14% of the university population was aged between seventeen and nineteen years whilst approximately 60% of the student population were classed as mature-aged, the highest proportions of these being between 21 and 24 years.

*Participants*

Participants were recruited indirectly via both university-wide channels of communication such as student publications, notice boards and via invitations distributed by student mentors during Orientation Week in Semester One, 2006. Seventeen students agreed to be involved in the study and their ages ranged from 18 to 47 years, with a mean age of 32.3 years. The intent of the study was not necessarily to focus on mature-age students, but given the demographics of the campus it is not surprising that the majority were older. Of the fourteen mature-age students, thirteen of these are mothers, nine initially resided with their partners (one later separated) and five were single parents. The two younger students were both living at home with their parents when this study was conducted.

Since the campus caters to a diverse scope of students from a range of educational backgrounds, many of the students have accessed tertiary education from non-traditional forms of access. In this study, none of the respondents had ever previously enrolled in a degree but ten had completed some studies after High School. Four students had attended Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Colleges whilst the
remaining six had enrolled in a university access course designed to prepare students for university study and also provide an University Admissions Index (UAI) to enable application to an undergraduate program. The other participants in the study either entered university as a result of High School Certificates or by sitting for the STAT test, a two-hour state examination, which also provides students with the requisite entry. Table 2 provides further details of the students. Participants’ pseudonyms are arranged alphabetically for ease of reference.