

0501

Re/presenting intellectual subjectivity: A feminist analysis of constructions of students and academics

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Background

The realm of the intellect has traditionally been constructed as the preserve of elite white men, with, e.g., women excluded from higher education for centuries on the basis of a presumed lack of intellectual capability. As Dyhouse notes, 'Women's identity as inferior scholars, incapable of reason, abstraction and disembodied, cerebral endeavours, haunts the literature on women's history of higher education' (Dyhouse 1995). Yet intellectual subjectivity has not only been gendered: classed and racialised notions of intellectual superiority/inferiority have long permeated western culture. In relation to the field HE, these are codified in constructions of the 'non-traditional' student; the academic/vocational divide; 'good' universities; moral panics about standards, 'dumbing down' and 'feminisation'; and 'elite' versus 'mass'.

The higher education student constituency, however, is now more diverse than ever before with women and students from many minority ethnic groups well represented in the participation data. We might therefore expect that this would have resulted in rather different constructions of intellectual subjectivity. There is evidence, though, that girls and women (as well as working class, minority ethnic and disabled subjects) have continued to be subjected to exclusion, ridicule or disbelief when they make a claim to an academic identity (Leathwood and Read 2009) and that girls'/women's academic successes still tend to be explained in terms of their hard work rather than their intellect (Skelton and Francis 2002).

In this paper, I draw on previous analyses of gendered constructions of students and academics in government videos and visual images from the Times Higher Education (Author 2009), and an ongoing study (see below), to examine contemporary constructions of students and academics.

Research Questions

The research questions that this paper aims to address are:

- How is intellectual subjectivity, specifically the student/scholar/academic/intellectual, discursively constructed in a selection of visual and textual representations in higher education policy and media texts?
- In what ways are these constructions gendered, classed and racialised?
- How can we theorise the work that these textual and visual representations do? What effects/affects do they produce?

Methods

A study is currently being undertaken to explore the ways in which the subject of higher education - the student/scholar/academic/intellectual - is discursively constructed in a selection of policy and media texts published from January-June 2010.

Data collection is in two stages:

1. Throughout this time period, the Times Higher Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills website are being scanned on a weekly basis to identify content specifically related to 'students' and 'academics'.
2. Where the above identifies key events/incidents that spark wider media debates, these are followed across a broader range of media, through web searches of national newspaper sites, HE bodies such as Universities UK, NUS, etc.

The collected material, including written/spoken texts and visual images, will then be sorted, grouped and analysed.

A Foucauldian discourse analytical approach will be utilised. This is particularly helpful in identifying the ways in which subjectivity is constructed and it is therefore appropriate for this research task. In addition, work on the discursive analysis of textual and visual signifiers in representational practices (such as Wilton 1992; Rose 2001; Leathwood and Read 2009) and in critical policy analysis (Taylor et al. 1997) informs the methodology.

Frame

The theoretical framing for this research is feminist and poststructuralist. It is informed by:

Feminist sociological and philosophical work on the gendering of the autonomous rational individual, and particularly on the exclusion of women and Others from the realm of Reason (see, e.g. Lloyd 1984; Pateman 1988; Walkerdine 1994) which offers an important basis for theorising intellectual subjectivity. Related to this, feminist theory which has highlighted the rational/emotion, mind/body binary, and in particular that which has examined this in the higher education context, is also pertinent (e.g. Hey and Leathwood 2009).

Feminist and post-structuralist theory on the construction of identity through discourse (e.g. Walkerdine 2003) informs this work, as does research on the Othering of working class and Black and minority ethnic groups, in particular that which examines the ways in which claims to an academic identity are denied for some (e.g. Reay 2000; Maylor 2009). Related to this is work that has problematised essentialised constructions of 'ability' (see Ranciere 1991; Gillborn and Youdell 2000).

Research findings

The research on which this paper is based is still being conducted although the findings will be available for the conference presentation. The paper aims to contribute to theoretical understandings of the construction of intellectual subjectivity and to consider the effects/affects that such constructions produce. It will, therefore, conclude with a consideration of the implications for higher education policy and practice. In particular, it is relevant to debates about the extent to which (potential) students may see the academy as a place for them.

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