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Towards a Psychosocial Pedagogy: The 'student journey', intersubjectivity, and the development of agency

Susanne Langer, Geoff Bunn and Nina Fellows

Abstract

We report preliminary results from a CELT Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research grant. Informed by psychosocial psychology and Lacanian discourse analysis, the project studied students' transformations into autonomous and effective agents. Repeat interviews (n=15) with final year students were informed by the psychosocial themes of power, affect, intersubjectivity and agency. The analysis was guided by Lacan's theory of the 'four discourses' (Lacan, 2007; Neil, 2013) and T. R. Johnson's (2014) application of Lacan in a higher education context. We found that students can move backwards and forwards between discourses depending on their desires and ambitions: the Lacanian *objet a*. We conclude that the pervasive metaphor of the 'student journey' is an inadequate representation of the student experience. Our critique addresses the implications for learning and teaching and for the university's mission to develop its students.

Keywords: Lacanian discourse analysis, the four discourses, agency, the 'student journey', *objet a*.

Introduction

Universities endeavour to nurture their students' ambitions and skills. Manchester Metropolitan for instance has committed

"to develop [students'] intellectual powers, creativity, independent judgement, critical self-awareness, imagination, and personal skills that will clearly identify them as global learners, MMU graduates and as world class professionals."
(MMU SLTA 2.3)¹

This aspiration informs and underpins learning and teaching principles across the institution. Nevertheless, conventional Higher Education (HE) teaching practices, including those at Manchester Metropolitan are frequently at odds with these lofty pedagogical

¹ <http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/ltstrategy/standards2.php>. Accessed 12.07.18.

aspirations. Many conventional teaching methods arguably militate against the development of agency: the traditional 'top-down' transmission lecture format that enrols its audience into passivity and indifference (Folley, 2010; Maphosa & Chimbala Kalenga, 2012); tedious 'death-by-PowerPoint' presentation styles that command rote learning (Mann & Robinson, 2009; Clark, 2010; Hill, Arford, Lubitow & Smollin 2012); the pragmatic prioritising of learning outcomes over learning processes (Bennett & Brady, 2014; Lassnigg, 2012; Stoller, 2015); risk-averse and intellectually-limited assessment regimes such as the Multiple Choice Test that ferment student anxiety, instrumentalism and counter-productive second-guessing of the tutor's wishes (Mann, 2008; Paxton, 2000; Groothuis, 2018); the imposing presence of the lecturer whose expertise is considered sacrosanct and whose authority – from the vantage point of the student – is difficult to challenge (Alshahrani & Ward, 2013; Su & Wood, 2012; Johnson 2014) . Although many of these conventional practices have undoubtedly been subjected to extensive criticism, recent HE sector market reforms, we argue, will not inevitably promote their replacement by more progressive pedagogies. Indeed, the introduction of new technologies (e.g. Edwards & Clinton, 2018), the harvesting of big data to enact 'learning analytics' (Munro, 2018; Williamson, 2018), the recruitment of very large student cohorts (Arvanitakis, 2014), and the promotion of the 'student-as-consumer' model (Nixon, Scullion, & Hearn, 2018) may foment a perfect storm of regressive pedagogical practices. Students are unlikely to develop efficacious agency whilst subjected to a barrage of such restrictive interventions. And universities are unlikely to nurture critical and creative 'world-class professionals' as a result. Investigating new ways to generate and foster agency is therefore of fundamental importance to all stakeholders in the university, from administrators to academics and, of course, to students themselves.

Towards a Psychosocial Pedagogy

This study contributes to the introduction of a *psychosocial* approach to pedagogical research (Clarke, 2002, 2006). Psychosocial studies examine the ways in which subjective experiences are entangled with the social, cultural and political. This approach aims to resist the objectification and reification of the human subject (Frosh, 2003). It is characterised by the development of non-positivistic epistemologies and non-reductionist ontologies, and an orientation towards progressive social and personal change.² Drawing inspiration from

2 "What is psychosocial studies?" The Association for Psychosocial Studies, <http://www.psychosocial-studies-association.org/about/> accessed 12.07.18.

a variety of approaches including sociology, psychoanalysis, critical theory and post-structuralism, psychosocial research is emphatically interdisciplinary (Parker, 2010).

Having an explicitly critical orientation, psychosocial research examines the conditions of possibility for the exercise of agency within relations of power (Hollway and Jefferson, 2005; Dean, 2010). Student engagement, progression and achievement are undoubtedly psychosocial matters insofar as psychological and intellectual development occurs within an intersubjective network (Frosh, 2016). The analysis of agency therefore proceeds by examining a constellation of factors that include power, knowledge, affect and intersubjectivity.

Lacan's theory of the four discourses has been productively applied by T.R. Johnson to Higher Education (Johnson, 2014, 2017; Lacan, 2007). We use Johnson's pioneering work on the development of the student writer as a stepping stone to explore the development of student agency. Building on Johnson's innovations, our research:

- i) assessed how final year undergraduate students experienced different psychosocial frameworks, operationalised as Lacan's 'four discourses';
- ii) examined the extent to which those discourses nurtured or thwarted the development of agency.

The Four Discourses

Lacan's (2007) theory of the four discourses is an attempt to account for how certain forms of social relations can construct and transform the social order (Bracher:1994, p.107). Lacan's notion of discourse refers to an intersubjective matrix, a social bond that includes speaking, writing and the organisation of space to generate systems of meaning "*that define things for people and define people for other people*" (Parker:2010, p.29).

Each of the four discourses contain the same four *signifiers* arranged in four different *positions* relative to each other. The four signifiers are: the Master signifier (S1), the chain of knowledge (S2), the split subject (\$) and the *objet a* (a). In terms of pedagogy, three of these four signifiers are relatively straightforward to understand. For example, whereas the 'Master signifier' could represent the *lecturer*, and the 'chain of knowledge' could stand in for the university's *assessment regulations*, the 'split subject' could symbolise a

student's conflicted identity as both *scholar* and *consumer*. We will discuss Lacan's fourth signifier, the '*objet a*', separately.

The four *signifiers* can occupy any one of four *positions*, (although they follow an invariant ordering relative to each other, i.e. $S1 \rightarrow S2 \rightarrow \$ \rightarrow a \rightarrow S1$).³ The four positions that each signifier can function as are: *agent*, *other*, *product* and *truth* (Table 1).⁴ The circulation of the four signifiers through the four positions creates the discourses: Master, University, Hysteric, and Analyst (Bracher, 1994, 2006).⁵ This means that the arrangement of Lacan's signifiers takes account of transformation and change – a germane characteristic in this study with its focus on student development and agency.

Although Lacan's system is highly abstract, it can be empirically tested. Two of the four discourses ('the Master's' and 'the University') produce impoverished pedagogical outcomes, despite being the most prevalent modes of provision in Higher Education. The Master addresses the other as an apprentice, at best, or a slave at worst. University discourse is a matter of bureaucratic codes: deadlines, attendance monitoring, assessment regimes, matriculation rules and so on. University discourse only allows for agency within these narrow parameters. Through no fault of their own, students who remain within University discourse fall short of the university's stated ambitions for them. Although the remaining discourses ('the Hysteric' and 'the Analyst') have the greatest potential for the development of agency, we would argue that they are marginalised in Higher

3 To cut a long story short, as this sequence of signifiers implies, ideally a student would start out as an apprentice (S2) to the master (S1) but would progress towards achieving mastery themselves.

4 Lacan's four discourses may be understood with the help of an analogy with a toolbox. Imagine the top layer of a toolbox containing four shallow trays for storing hardware; red, yellow, green and blue, arranged in a 2 x 2 grid. The trays represent Lacan's fixed *positions* and their hardware contents represent Lacan's *signifiers* (which have no fixed meaning precisely because they are signifiers). So the red tray might, on one occasion, contain assorted nails, the green tray various screws, the yellow tray nuts and the blue tray bolts. The hardware can be stored in any of the trays, just as any signifier can occupy any position. Different signifiers in different positions result in the different discourses. Because Lacan maintains that the signifiers circulate through the positions in an invariant order, namely: S1 ('nails') à S2 ('screws') à \$ ('nuts') à a ('bolts') à S1 ('nails') etc., the result is four basic discourses. (This analogy recalls the apocryphal American tabloid newspaper headline that allegedly reported on how an inmate at a maximum security psychiatric hospital assaulted guards before making his escape: 'Nut Nails Screws, Bolts'.)

5 The signifier that occupies the agent's position gives the discourse its name. For example, what Lacan calls the 'Master's discourse' occurs when the Master Signifier (S1) is in the *agent's* position and the chain of knowledge (S2) in the position of the *other*, the split subject (\$) is in the position of *truth* and the *objet a* is the *product*.

Education. They are insufficiently fostered, we claim, because they are non-normative, if not potentially disruptive, in the neo-liberal university.

Four Forms of Agency

In the context of Higher Education marketisation, agency has been afforded a privileged status within the rhetoric of the 'student journey'. Student satisfaction, engagement and retention, together with discourses around employability and 'lifelong learning' have encouraged a renewed focus on agency as a key component of student success. However, as Zepke (2018) has written, student agency has (paradoxically) become a target of knowledge to be operationalised, nurtured and developed by mechanisms of power aligned with neo-liberal ideas about what should be the business of education. This, we would argue, imprints agency with an ideologically shaped and restrictive meaning (Hethrington, 2015).

Ransome (2011) has argued that a dominant 'performative rationale' has come to influence every aspect of university life, including teaching and learning where it comes into conflict with an academic-qualitative rationale. Crucially both rationales generate different kinds of actors: scholars and service-providers. Students are positioned as job-oriented consumer stakeholders at the same time as they aspire to becoming disinterested scholars and engaged citizens. In Lacan's terms, students are 'split subjects' (\$), conflicted by the antagonistic demand to be both producers and consumers of knowledge.

Table 1: A four factor model of agency

	SUBSERVIENT AGENCY	SUBSISTENCE AGENCY	SUBLIMINAL AGENCY	SUBLIME AGENCY
Lacanian Discourse	Master	University	Hysteric	Analyst
Lacanian Matheme	$S1 \rightarrow S2$ $\$ \times a$	$S2 \rightarrow a$ $S1 \times \$$	$\$ \rightarrow S1$ $a \times S2$	$a \rightarrow \$$ $S2 \times S1$
Fate of the student's <i>objet a</i>	The Master steals the student's <i>objet a</i> .	The University defines a proxy <i>objet a</i> for the student.	The student is motivated by but is unaware of their <i>objet a</i> .	The student embodies their <i>objet a</i> .

From the vantage point of the student's positioning, Master's discourse produces Subservient Agency whereas University discourse produces Subsistence Agency (Table 1). Both are aspects of what Nick Zepke (2018) calls "*mainstream student engagement*".

Zepke argues that student agency can be understood not only in terms of conventional values of knowledge and skills on the one hand, but also critically, in relation to the quest for meaning, ethical purpose and citizenship on the other. Building on this distinction, we predict that critical forms of agency are nurtured by two discourses marginalised by Higher Education: the discourse of the Hysteric (\$), and the discourse of the Analyst (a). A critical model of student engagement, we argue, would have to include their agency analogues, namely, Subliminal Agency and Sublime Agency respectively. Although Sublime Agency is the most effective and desirable form, it is also the most precarious (and indeed risky) in the current political climate.

The discourses framing student agency have implications for student learning. Mann (2001) argued that many student learners adopt either a *surface approach* to their studies (rote learning, unreflective reproduction of material, task-focussed orientation), or a *strategic approach* (a focus on meeting assessment requirements and lecturer expectations and securing high grades). Both approaches rely on impoverished opportunities for the exercise of agency precisely because they locate the responsibility for success in the perceived demands of others. In Lacanian terms, surface learning occurs when the student is addressed by the lecturer speaking from the Master's position of authority (S1). The student works for the lecturer, perversely, like the slave works for the master. The student's agency is defined by the lecturer/master who secretly enjoys the student's creativity (*objet a*) (Mann, 2001). Strategic learning arises when the student is trapped by the bureaucratic demands of University discourse (S2), where there is an emphasis

"on performativity and functionality; a greater focus on efficiency and effectiveness at the expense of complexity and ambiguity...and especially the educational life course, as institutionalised, following normatively and inexorably the same 'prescribed' path." (Mann, 2001)

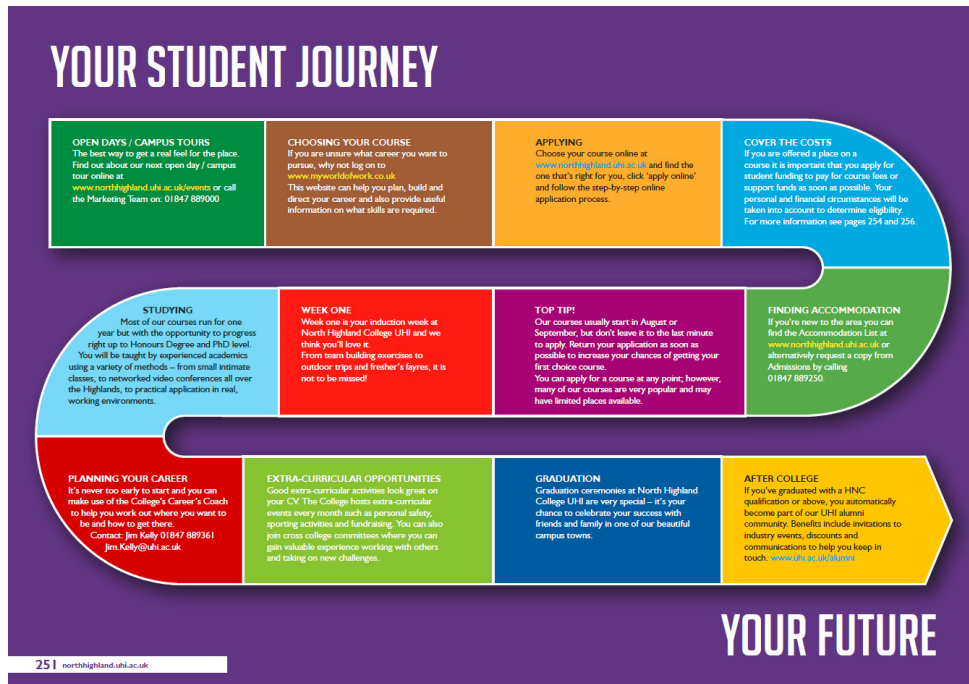
University discourse not only has consequences for students' approach to learning but also effects affect. Lacan's model predicts that the bureaucratic obligations of University discourse can hystericize students, resulting in fear, anxiety and insecurity. This can lead to acts of self-sabotage such as deliberately producing sub-optimal work, avoiding challenging or ambiguous assessments, failing to assimilate feedback and engaging in plagiarism (Mann, 2008). The tragedy of University discourse is that it does not give the

hystericized student an opportunity to develop the self-efficacy afforded by the Analyst's position.

The Metaphor of the 'Student Journey'

Mann's (2001, 2008) critique of the 'prescribed path' for learning can also be directed against the metaphor of 'the student journey' (Figure 1). This metaphor generates normative aspirations of unproblematic belonging, validated and immediately useful achievements, and predictable and measurable outcomes (Zepke, 2018). Derived from consumer discourses, the student journey metaphor implies that attaining a degree is merely a matter of moving in a straight line from beginning to end, acquiring the right skills in the right order – and not inadvertently wandering down any unproductive dead ends. In this model, students start out as "empty vessels" (Freire, 1970) that are passively filled up with knowledge as they move along. The journey metaphor is limited precisely because there is no sense of struggle, no hazards to negotiate, no potential to fail. Nor does it consider students' individuality. Completing the student journey requires a conception of minimal agency because the student's desire (*objet a*) is either captured and enjoyed by the Master or defined in advance by the University. A more effective account of agency generates desire in ways that are personally meaningful to students themselves.

Figure 1: A Typical Representation of the Student Journey⁶



6 <https://www.northhighland.uhi.ac.uk/study-at-nhc/apply/Yourstudentjourney.png> Accessed 21.09.17

The *objet a*

Crucially, desire is absent from discussions surrounding the student journey in the two discourses most prominent in Higher Education today (the Master's, the University). Yet in Lacanian terms it is desire in the form of the *objet a* that must be generated and acknowledged for agency to thrive. In University discourse it is the university that defines what a student's *objet a* should be on behalf of the student. In Master's discourse, it is the Master who enjoys the student's *objet a*, not the student. For our purposes, Lacan's concept of the *objet a* can be translated as an outrageous amalgam of desire, motivation, perceived lack and purpose. The highest form of agency – Sublime Agency – emerges when a student's *objet a* mobilises their past in the service of their future.

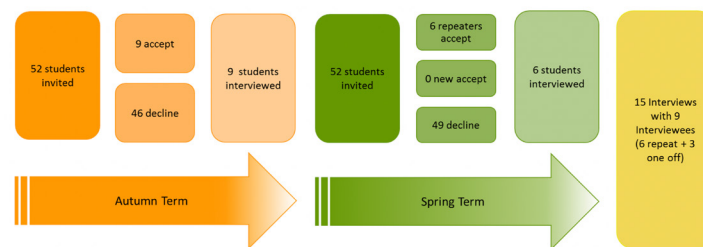
Lacan's *objet a* is a necessarily elusive and paradoxical concept that is related to the formation of the subject's identity and experience. The *objet a* is the "*lack of being that causes all desire*" according to Bracher (1994, p.114), the radical gap that is also the supplement to the subject's incompleteness. According to Richard Boothby, the *objet a* is a liminal thing, "*strangely suspended between the subject and the other, belonging to both and neither*" (Boothby, 2001, p.243). In terms of the development of student agency, the *objet a* is a relational category that encapsulates both the exhilaration of absolute possibility and the comfort of realistic contingency.

Methods: participants, ethics, methodology, analysis

Participants consisted of final year undergraduates (n=52) taking a critical psychology unit. This was a popular, interdisciplinary, and interactive unit that made explicit the concepts and paradigms framing the discipline.

Conducting research with university students is ethically challenging (Humphrey, 2013). The research adhered to the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics (BPS 2009; BPS 2018) and Ethics approval was granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee. As teachers and researchers, we were committed to ensuring that students did not feel pressured to participate so we removed ourselves from the interview process. The research project was introduced and advertised in class, but recruitment and data collection was conducted by the project's research assistant (NF).

Figure 2: The Recruitment Process



Students were invited to participate by email during the autumn and then again in spring (Figure 2). Recruitment resulted in nine initial interviews, with a further six follow-up interviews ($n=15$). Two of the nine participants were male. Participation was rewarded with the standard rate of psychology participation pool credits which can be redeemed by students for their own research.

Interviews were conducted using a flexible, semi-structured topic guide that explored instances of the four discourses in students' university lives. The data was then carefully transcribed and anonymised. In addition, students were introduced to Lacan's four discourses in class. The concept of the Master-Slave dyad particularly sparked discussion and influenced how some students came to think about their other units. To disrupt the discourses of the Master and the University, classroom interventions aimed to generate an atmosphere of discussion, trust and critique. In-class discussions also provided powerful opportunities for students to share personal experiences. A further pedagogical intervention was that NF acted as a trusted and effective in-class mediator, role model and supplementary teacher.

Lacanian Discourse Analysis

Our analysis of the transcripts was guided by Neill's (2013) account of Lacanian discourse analysis. We initially read each transcript without making any analytic interpretations. A second individual reading then engaged with the text more abstractly, noting not only subject positions, master signifiers and moments of transition, but also rhetorical features such as metaphor, storytelling and patterns of diction. The principal researchers (SL and GB) subsequently discussed each transcript extensively. Collaborative analysis challenged individual interpretations and added new layers of insight and meaning. Disagreements were resolved through dialogue. We also kept a continuously updated meta-analysis log, to record further

observations and theory-building ideas. Discussions with NF further helped to triangulate and consolidate our interpretations. A series of vignettes of all six repeat interviewees momentarily concluded this stage of the research process.

Results: Four vignettes

We have used extracts from four of these vignettes to evidence the contingencies of the 'student journey'. We also highlight the transitions between the different discourses and the associated forms of agency. We focus on two salient aspects: the dissertation and the object cause of desire, the *objet a*. The dissertation was a large piece of independent research that constituted a quarter of the students' final year mark. It is an essential precondition for achieving professional recognition (BPS Graduate Basis Chartership). The best dissertations are eligible for publication in the Department's e-space and can count as a first publication. The dissertation was sometimes aligned with a student's *objet a* but not always. While both offered opportunities, they were also full of risks.

Jack

Jack was a methodical, well-prepared student who largely managed to avoid what he called the "*madness*" of the third year. Law-abiding and highly organised, he felt most at home within University discourse. Exams were his preferred form of assessment. He appreciated Multiple Choice Tests for their predictability and sense of order. As a large piece of independent research, the uncharted territory of the dissertation was initially a matter of stress and worry for him. He felt insufficiently prepared for it and in November described himself as "*still floating in the water*" [J1 362]. His unease was further exacerbated by an unresponsive supervisor:

"I've been the most stressed, like because when you're asking a question and – I think I've emailed [my supervisor] probably about thirty times altogether, and she's probably replied about seven." [J2 169-173]

Realising the supervisor's unreliability was more stressful than doing the dissertation on his own, Jack "*lost faith*" and decided to "*try it off his back*" [J2 203, 206]. By the time of the second interview, this strategy had enabled him to conquer any rising panic and settle back into his comfort zone of University discourse. The imposition of order came at the expense of forsaking the pleasure inherent in the pursuit of the *objet a* as part of the dissertation. Instead of affording an opportunity for self-directed learning, the dissertation became a

chore. This was a price Jack was willing to pay, as his *objet a* was resolutely located outside his degree. His plan was to stay on in Manchester, find a steady retail job, and learn a foreign language before going travelling with his new girlfriend. Together with the prospect of earning decent money and taking up rugby again, these plans propelled him through the ordeal of his final year. By the end of the interview, Jack considered himself "*done with education*" and was looking forward to the pleasures of "*real life*" [J2 333-334].

Caitlin

While Jack retreated into the security University discourse offered, Caitlin felt pushed back into it. A mature student who had taken the risk of embarking on a degree to escape a dead-end job and to prove to herself what she was capable of, Caitlin had started at university with high expectations. In the first interview, she was emerging as an original if tentative critical thinker who could challenge orthodoxies:

"So like, you know, the university is the master and we're all the slaves, sort of...and I kind of disagree in a way, because I, a little bit, and maybe that's because of me working, I've worked for customers my whole - like for a long time, so in my eyes, a little bit, we're the customer and like you've got to ensure that we're happy." [C1, 260-269]

Caitlin's dissertation topic offered her an opportunity to explore important aspects of her own sexual identity. She was excited by the prospect of her research and in her first interview eloquently explained her motivation. By the time of the second interview a bout of illness and the early stages of a not unexpected pregnancy had turned the dissertation into something she was "*clawing [her] way through*". Her exhaustion exacerbated her feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt. This was a much wished-for pregnancy, yet it left Caitlin deep in limbo:

"I feel like everything's just a waiting game at the minute, I know there's not much I can do about anything in particular apart from waiting to hear if the pregnancy's okay and then I know I do need to just try – as hard as it is – just try and focus on the last few assessments and dissertation stuff that I have." [C2, 103-110]

Initially, Caitlin's *objet a* had been "*to have that line on my CV that says 'degree in psychology'*" [C1 297] because it would open up new opportunities. She had felt confident that her commitment and

discipline would allow her to realise it. Now these individualist and intrasubjective desires had been replaced by the relationality and intersubjectivity of pregnancy. She felt compelled to settle for less than she knew she was capable of. Instead of embedding herself into the Analyst discourse, Caitlin reluctantly retreated to the predictability and low-risk demands of University discourse.

Mae

Mae was also a mature student who had left a well-paid public service job to go to university. Outspoken, creative and unconventional, she was not afraid of controversy or to speak out in class. Mae could embrace University discourse confidently and strategically, whilst being firmly rooted in the Analyst position. A lower than expected mark in one of her units led her to critique her performance but, nevertheless, emerge with her head held high:

"I think the [other unit's essay] I tried to make a bit more something I'd be interested in and then it backfired on me. [So] basically they were like 'You weren't critical enough.' It's like, 'Well I was, I just wasn't critical of [what you wanted]!'"
[M2, 153-165]

In contrast to the other unit's restrictive assessment, Mae's dissertation played a crucial role in encouraging her to develop her *objet a*. The sustained validation Mae received from her supervisor boosted her confidence and enabled her to master the challenges of independent research. Her unusual topic allowed her to assimilate her existing interests, skills and experiences with nascent ones. It thereby bridged past, present and future identities. She conceived an ambitious *objet a* that built on her undergraduate degree:

"I want someone to be like, 'Dr [Smith] saved my kid's life!' Like, do you know what I mean? I don't want someone to be like, hmm, 'She came up with this theory'. It's like – that's not what I want, I want to actually help people who are there in front of me, so." [M2, 324-336]

Unlike Jack, Mae's university degree was directly relevant to her imagined future. She had already received a conditional offer from a prestigious university to do a Master's degree. Excited by these prospects, Mae was making plans to move to the new city before the term was over.

Zach

While Mae was gaining momentum, Zach was going around in circles. Like Caitlin and Mae, Zach was not a conventional student, but unlike them, he was unable to make this difference work for him. Zach's accounts were full of contradictions, hyperbole, and obscure allusions. He was simultaneously rude yet strangely coy. He showed some affinity with all four discourses, yet was committed to none of them.

By the time of the second interview, Zach's already strained relationship with his dissertation supervisor had broken down due to the supervisor going on leave for an extended period. Zach interpreted this as a hurtful act of profound indifference:

"He's going to leave for a month, I thought 'Who the fuck authorised that? I'm handing in my dissertation thingy and you're just getting off for a month?' And he goes 'By that point [when I get back] I won't really be able to help you,' and I thought, 'Yeah I know you won't!'" [Z2 77-81]

Zach's initial sense of abandonment quickly turned into anger. He forcefully denied that his supervisor had ever been able to offer expertise and guidance:

"Even while he was here, he did fuck all anyway! So it's not like I'm missing anything, it's not like he was the greatest guy ever." [Z2 81-82]

Facing an analogous situation, Jack had retreated into the security of University discourse, but Zach was unable to attach himself in this way. His accounts were full of references to his childhood, and he remained remarkably vague about the future. That future was not characterised by enticing possibilities, but by anxiously anticipated closures, absences and defeat. He thought about it, darkly, in terms of *"picking your own grave"* [Z2 273]. If he had an *objet a* at all, it was *"going to go to wherever the wind takes me"* [Z2 269]. This was a deviant, normatively unacceptable goal that his high school teacher had publicly reprimanded him for. It was also an *objet a* that disavowed the essential importance of individual agency. As Mae's experience showed, the formation and pursuit of the *objet a* is relational and intersubjective. However, Zach's previous experience with his high school teacher and then again with his supervisor had made it clear to him that attachment only made him vulnerable to humiliation and abandonment. In the end he was unwilling to take that risk.

Conclusion

All our participants made different journeys through the four discourses; that is, their desire or *objet a* was mobilised in different ways. Whereas Jack's had perhaps always been located beyond the university, focused as it was on moving from the village to the city and from there into the world, Mae's sustained her academic achievements during her undergraduate degree and looked set to be effective beyond it. Caitlin's *objet a* started out as pure academic ambition, but altered course when she became pregnant. Zach constantly floated between discourses, never finding security in any of them, unable or reluctant to articulate his *objet a* at this point.

Our analysis shows that in contrast to dominant Higher Education rhetoric, the 'student journey' is perilous and not unidirectional. Such risks are necessary, in fact, because the 'journey' is about daring to make transitions that incur shifts in identity. Therefore, we argue that pedagogy should not aim to create predictably navigable spaces as such, but instead indeterminate ones that encourage students to embrace the liminality of their desire (Stenner, 2017).

Harris, Brown and Dargusch (2018) remind educators of their responsibility to design educational opportunities that encourage students to strive towards mastery and growth. Our research has shown that of the four discourses, two are privileged but limited. The other two are marginalised but expansive. There are many opportunities for students to be 'filled up' with knowledge (as in the Master's discourse), or to comply with rules and regulations (as in the University discourse). But there appear to be few opportunities across the curriculum for nurturing the *objet a*. We argue that Higher Education establishments need to abandon the metaphor of the 'student journey'. Instead they need to embrace alternative approaches that accommodate the complexities of students' psychosocial development.

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