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University students’ identity work in the context of making most of their study time

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Abstract

The university students’ everyday lives are ridden with different kinds of and often conflicting expectations that emanate from contemporary culture but also from higher education policies. This study focuses on expectations related to study time and employability that highlight making most of one’s studies.

The study investigates how Finnish students respond to societal expectations related to managing and making effective use of their time. We are interested in the legitimation and identity work students do as they account for their everyday activities, including study, work and leisure activities.

The data consists of 28 thematic week calendar interviews with 3rd year university students, where they were invited to talk about their activities during an ordinary study week. The analysis will provide important insight into how students negotiate their day-to-day lives in relations to various societal and cultural pressures.

Keywords: university students, everyday life, time management, identity work
Relation to the conference theme

Understanding students’ everyday concerns, identity work and agency are crucial as regards improving study and career guidance practice - and opening up spaces for re-negotiating identities, because identities, with their associated sense of agency, have also real consequences for seeing or failing to see possibilities for action and change.

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

While themes of progress and duration of studies have been regularly on the Finnish higher education policy agenda, the discussion has recently picked up in the broader context of prolonging working careers in order to remain competitive internationally and ’save’ the welfare state. Additionally, the current policy discourse places emphasis on the quality of employment and on graduate employability. The focus on employability has only quite recently become a key priority in Finnish higher education, in comparison to many other countries (see e.g. Puhakka, Rautopuro & Tuominen 2010; Siivonen & Isopahkala-Bouret 2016). Together, these policy themes - with associated measures of limiting duration and motivating swift completion of studies - highlight the significance of utilizing study time effectively and appropriately. This poses challenges for curricula, teaching, study guidance and careers practice, but most immediately challenges are experienced by students. Similarly to often conflicting policy goals and ideals, students’ everyday realities are ridden with conflicting expectations, for instance, of taking care of study progress on the one hand and enhancing employability via work or extra-curricular activities on the other hand (e.g. Tomlinson 2008). These expectations emanate partly from education policy but also from broader societal and cultural ideals.

Our on-going study investigates how Finnish university students respond to various expectations related to managing and making effective use of their time, that are present in their day-to-day student lives. More specifically, we are interested in the legitimation and identity work students do as they account for their everyday activities, including study, extra-curricular, work and leisure activities in the context of an interview. The study is related to well-established discussions on academic student identities, engagement, and investment of time and effort into studies and other career related activities (see e.g. Lairio, Puukari & Kouvo 2013). Its novel contribution is to take a close-up approach to everyday student lives and investigate how they are constructed in relation to normative expectations and moral orders and discourses of the society.

The theoretical and methodological framework of the study is based on a narrative and discursive approach to identities and agency. We approach identities as situated social constructions that draw upon culturally available discursive resources. Drawing on Bamberg (2014), narrative and discursive construction of identities has temporal, positional and agential
dimensions. Identities are marked by relative continuity, but can also be constructed through narratives of change, e.g. taking distance from one’s ‘past self’. They are constructed by taking up and emphasizing similarity with, or taking distance from and emphasizing difference to various categories of people or identity positions. Finally, the construction of identities often involves attributions of agency: for instance, whether one portrays oneself as having control over one’s studies and everyday life, or as being victim of circumstances in failing to meet the expectations. Attributions of agency, in particular, are related to moral orders, because they entail ideas of taking or failing to take responsibility, engaging in ‘proper’ or ‘improper’ conduct, and being praise- or blameworthy for one’s actions.

The study also includes an analysis of how students’ different resources circumscribe their access to culturally legitimate, ‘proper’ identities (cf. Skeggs 2004). These are not equally accessible for all, and divisions between individuals emerge along various lines of difference. In this study, we adopt an ethnomethodological, exploratory approach into what kinds of issues and categories of difference bear significance in claiming to be a ‘right kind of a student’ who has control over her/his use of time in the current societal context.

Methods

The data of the study consists of 28 interviews with 3rd year (undergraduate) students (15 women and 13 men) from different ‘generalist’ fields of study, including cultural and social studies (with majority of women), and computer science and information systems studies (with majority of men). We chose to include different disciplinary cultures into the data in order to capture some of the heterogeneity of academic studies. Furthermore, while chosen fields are also highly gendered, this study does not adopt an explicit approach to gender. Instead, gender is discussed to the extent it emerges as an important category in the students’ identity work.

The conducted interviews can be described as retrospective, thematic week calendar interviews. Students were invited, first, to talk about the activities they engaged in during the previous week in study, work and leisure contexts. The interviewees were invited to fill in a week calendar sheet which helped them to be comprehensive in their accounts. Second, we probed particular themes of planning their use of time and social encounters during the week and within a longer time frame, as well as their ideas about their future careers and how their career considerations are present and inform their day-to-day activities.

The analysis here focuses on how students account for and explain their reasons for engaging in various activities in the interactive context of the interview. The interview is seen as an interactive site for the construction and performance of identities. It provides access to, or a windows into, on-going identity work that individuals are engaged with in various contexts of their lives (Nikander 2012). As the interviewees tell about how they manage their time, they
simultaneously portray themselves as particular kinds of people and adopt identity positions culturally available for them.

Expected results

The analysis of the data will be conducted during the early spring 2019. The preliminary reading of the data reveals some interesting emphases. Three categories emerge at this point:

First category of students consists of ‘overachievers’ who do not make clear distinction between study, leisure and work activities. In some accounts, even relationships with friends are described in terms of building useful networks. Strikingly instrumental approach to everyday activities characterizes these accounts. They seek to portray themselves as efficient, dynamic and networked agents. Second category of students describes studies more ‘traditionally’ as a separate part of life, as ’going to school’. They portray themselves as successful by emphasizing their diligence and hard work. The third category consists of narratives of failure in managing one’s everyday life and meeting the normative expectations as regards study progress. Failure is legitimated by drawing upon a psychopathological discourse which also features as a central component of identity. The data hints that along the lines of neoliberal ethos, both success and failure in managing everyday student life is legitimated by individualizing discourses.

The analysis will provide important insight into how students negotiate their day-to-day lives in relations to various societal and cultural pressures.

References


