

Protecting Social Identifies: Institutional Self-Comparison by Undergraduates

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Abstract

Widening participation has led to a growth in university places across the Higher Education Sector. Alongside this, there is greater public scrutiny of the quality of both degrees and institutions. Additionally, students have a greater awareness of the potential quality of the institute they are attending via league tables and the annual NSS. While research has been undertaken exploring how students make choices there has been less focus on the experience of students at “lower status” universities. Three focus groups of N = 19 Psychology students from a North-West university were conducted to discuss issues of identity. Thematic Analysis was used to explore issues of Social comparisons and Identity processes. The main themes to emerge were transitional issues, threats to identity and identity protection as students developed narratives around their perceptions of status of student and institution. These findings are discussed in relation to enabling students to develop a stronger identity.

1. Introduction

The University system within the UK has seen rapid changes within the last few decades with a growth in the number of students attending [1][2][3] but also an expansion in the diversity of universities with degree awarding powers [3]. Additionally league tables, often published within national newspapers, allow for easy comparison by students of one institution to another. It is often the case that a city will have differing types of universities within a short distance of each other. Research has shown that students at traditional red-brick universities express a sense of privilege derived from the prestige of the institution [4][2]. Additionally graduation from higher status universities has been subsequently linked to increased earning power [4]. There has been a focus within the literature of the possible reasons behind the choices of type of university made by prospective students, for example race or social class [5][6]. However, there has been little

research undertaken which explores the experience of undergraduates at newer universities, i.e. institution that are perceived to be of lower status. This current paper will use the narratives of existing students at a new university identifying experiences and perceptions of their institutions and possible impact on student identity.

Festinger’s Social Comparison Theory [7] states that people are driven by the need to evaluate themselves in comparison to others around them. The theory additionally argues that comparisons are both upward and downward, that is they consider themselves to be superior or negative to others in comparison to their own opinions and abilities. While Festinger’s theory describes the individual’s need to maintain an accurate self-view further research has been undertaken which explores the individual within a group. Social Identity Theory [8] proposes that the individual derives their sense of self and identity from group membership [9]. Furthermore, unlike Social Comparison Theory, SIT is motivated by self-esteem protection via enhancing the status of the in-group (i.e. their social group) above that of out-groups. Importantly, enhancing the status of an in-group leads to higher self-esteem within individual members [10]. It is proposed by the current study that students from post-1992 universities and newer institutions will engage in upward social comparisons. As a result therefore students will display in-group enhancements in order to maintain a positive self-image and protect self-esteem.

Transitional periods throughout the school career result in identity change [11] and challenges to self-concept [12]. The move into Higher Education brings further challenges with research indicating high drop-out rates for those students who fail to integrate socially [13][14][15]. Furthermore, Krause and Coates [16] place the struggle to find ones-self and develop a new identity as central to the challenge of successful transition into Higher Education. The drive to integrate socially and develop a new self-concept can be understood within the theoretical frameworks of Social Comparison and Social Identity processes. Cinderella [17] proposed the concept of possible future social identities with individuals engaging in social cognition processes as

they stand on the edge of a new setting surveying a myriad of social groups. While it can be assumed that this process will occur at the start of university, the current study also explores transition at the other end of the undergraduate experience. As students prepare to graduate, reflecting on their university days and contemplate the future Social Comparison and Social Identity behavior will emerge.

2. Method

Focus groups discussions guided by questions of identity and categorization were analysed using thematic analysis. While some researchers consider that group dynamics reduce the purity of the data collected there are ways to deal with this at interview and analysis stage [18][19]. Indeed others argue that focus groups add to the quality of the data [20] by shared experiences [21]. Interview questions were loosely developed around an existing social identity questionnaire, which covered the cognitive and affective components of Social Identity. Importantly it allowed for measurement of different social groups closely aligned within a school setting, that is pupil identity and institution identity [22]. A typical question was “would you think it was accurate if you were described as a member of?” Participants were asked to consider questions from a student, institutional and subject perspective.

Thematic analysis has a degree of flexibility that means that not only can the data be used to reflect the reality on the surface of the data but also be used to dissect this surface [23] looking underneath at themes and patterns that emerge. The analysis will take both a deductive theoretical approach as well as inductive which will allow the data to be analysed within Social Identity and Social Categorisation Theories. This technique is supported by Hayes [24] in her paper on theory led thematic analysis. Additionally, template analysis as described by a number of researchers allows for a mixed inductive and deductive approach to thematic analysis [25][26]. This approach tests the theoretical basis of the research while also allowing for open coding and the text to speak for itself. As is normal with theoretical approaches the data will be coded at a semantic level, the interpretation of the phenomenological is introduced when previous research is discussed. As the interviews were focus groups, the data were explored for topics that were independent or had been prompted by more vocal group members and identified these on the transcripts, with the focus on direct answers. The initial round of coding is used to develop a code book.

Once the coding of the data is complete the next stage is to analyze across the full set of data, identifying codes and themes that emerged, drawing

out possible interconnections or those that are disjointed and different to that which was expected.

Finally, the codes are examined by reviewing the previous stages and includes a series of reiterations from text to codes and corroboration on existing themes and also to ensure that themes are fully represented within the coding table. Clustering is also a crucial part of this final stage with a final set of core themes emerged.

Participants were recruited via email with the first years receiving a course credit for attending. The groups ranged from 4-8 in number and were composed of first and third years who all were taking Psychology as either a single or joint honours. The institution studied was a previous teacher training college. The institution was granted degree awarding powers in 2012 and added University to its name 10 years ago.

4. Results and Discussion

Social Comparison, Identity and Categorisation processes emerged from the data in each of the focus group interviews. Additionally, self-esteem effects followed from inter and intra-group comparisons with an interaction based on their perceptions of high or low social identity status of these groups. Furthermore, the dynamic of student, subject and institutional identity indicated that participants were ambivalent about their student identity while generally positive about identification with the subject. However, institutional identity emerged as the domain, which was most at risk thereby leading to identity and enhancement protection narratives.

The analysis will be presented as three broad themes. These themes displayed each of the processes already identified (Social Comparison, Categorisation and Identity).

4.1. Challenges of transition

A number of participants reflected on the first few months at university and expressed how initially they had found it hard to leave behind their previous friendship group and develop a new identity. Added to this a few mentioned “pressure from work”, “fear of not fitting in” and “having felt uncomfortable” prior to the start of their degrees. Peel [27] proposed that students had naive images of university prior to the commencing degree study with the result of increased anxiety amongst prospective students [28]. A few students who did not live on campus or had returned home frequently felt that they had not yet integrated, this was especially true for Abigail:

“...like I wouldn't say I'd come here and - like I go home every weekend um, and I have done since I've been here 'cause I don't feel - it's not that I don't feel

comfortable, I just...would rather spend time with people at home than here yeah.”

However, this was not universal and while almost all had mentioned struggles, the majority had settled and were enjoying student life. For some students they felt that university had allowed them to find “their identity”. Past and Possible social identity struggles are seen in the quote below by Katy who struggled with balancing old friends and their new life but also mentioned that being independent had been important. She talks of her life prior to university as “you were yourself” and how at university “everything changed”

“no I think um I think just before um like you were conformable with the friends you had and you were them and like you were yourself kind of but before you came to uni like think everything changed and I was a more independent when I came here because I wasn’t relying on anybody”

As can be seen for Katy life was thrown into flux at the changes but for one student (Tom, quoted below) the contrast between his previous life and student life had been underpinned by having to reflect on life choices

“yeah especially when you're just before uni because that’s when you want to decide what you want to do for the rest of your life so it’s like when you’ve got to make a decision on who you are...that’s like when you make your decision”

Students had a narrative which spoke of the tension between past identities and the desire to immerse themselves into their new identity. This was further enhanced by the need and importance of undertaking degree study, as can be seen with Tom above. Once a cognitive decision had been made to study at degree level then it was important that you made a success of it and esteem enhancement of their student identity can be evidenced by not only comparison of “self” prior to university but also of peers who had chosen not to attend Higher Education. Mikel displayed cognitive dissonance with non-university friends and his own student identity. In the first quote Mikel highlights exposure to negative influences. However, it can also been later in the interview he strongly identified as being a student he and had internalized the negativity to show that it he fitted into the category student:

“**Mikel:** yeah, not so much from family but sometimes from friends back home who like went straight into work sometimes like y’know just like a bit like, give you a bit of stick for it sort of thing

Interviewer: in what way give you stick?

Mikel: like just saying like ‘our taxes are paying for you’ and all that sort of thing like”

“**Mikel:** er.. well some people say they’re like, lazy and you know that they should get a job and all that sort of thing

Mikel: I um, I’d probably say I fit the stereotype quite a lot like

Interviewer: in what way?

M: um just constantly like perhaps, I blew me money on something like stupid or and err just going out a lot that sort of thing”

Social Categorisation and Social Identity Theories allows for an understanding of the cognitive processes involved as Social Comparison occurs. The first stage of any categorisation is to develop an understanding of the social group, to do this it is necessary to establish cognitive images, as can be seen above students have images of being a student that they have internalised. The next stage is to decide how close they themselves compare to the group. Comparison of self to a group can occur by distancing themselves from the outgroup (non-students) while also engaging in deindividuation to establish they themselves are in fact a typical member for the social group in question. Deindividuation is a loss of self in order to merge with a larger group.

“**Susan:** yeah I get the same of um, my fiancée doesn’t like students

Interviewer: oh doesn’t like students?

Susan: yeah,

Interviewer: you do get that actually, can you explain that a bit more?

S: ‘cause they’re all like, they all go out and erm, they’re all like big groups of people and he thinks that he’s paying for them ‘cause he works and stuff

Interviewer: O.k

Susan: he’s jealous

Interviewer: he’s jealous?

Susan: yeah (laughs)

Interviewer: so you think people who stereotype students and are negative are jealous?

S: they were lazy in school and they just didn’t get to university”

While feeling ambivalent at times about the student status the participants, as seen above, engaged in esteem enhancements to protect the student identity label.

Students differed in their identifications according to transition period (first or third year). As it was proposed the early stage of movement into higher education is characterised by categorisation and comparison, however within the third years there was evidence of a more complex social identity.

By the final year a more intricate and nuanced view of student identity and comparisons were emerging. Not all aspects of student behaviour was seen as negative and Tom talked about a list of behaviours which he perceived fits the category “student” and how he compared himself against it.

Tom “...yeah. Well I, would say like you - you are a typical student ways because I have, a couple times I have sitting down going ‘yes this is studenty’. Yes, yeah by living in halls, living in campus and sort of there’s things you do, well I do come from the tiniest little place in the middle of nowhere which has absolutely nothing to do so even going to like a cafe and sitting down and reading books or doing sketches is being a study for me...and being quite different from how most people are back home”

The quote by Tom is an example, not only of social comparison in terms of self-categorisation with the group “student” but also social comparison with an out-group; the people back home in this case. Self-Categorisation was also evident in the words used by Alex who was a male third year student:

“I think um RMS is very important and um it’s uh you know it’s this idea, psychology’s domain um, you know promoting um like critical thinking and scepticism and you know the concept of hypothesis testing rather than just going with your feelings or something um these these values um because I assimilate these values because you know it’s part of psychology so I guess I am assimilating a typical psychology student because of this I I identify with these values”

Alex’s identity was a more complex identity than those of the first years and was focused in the quote above in the codes and behaviours he thought typical of a typical psychology student. In his own words he was “assimilating” what he saw as Psychological values, internalising them and then accepting this identity.

4.2. Threats to identity

An unexpected finding was how insecure the students were about their institutional identity. While the majority of students seemed to have had a positive progression a number of issues reduced their levels of identity, this occurred particularly with in domain of institution.

Two possible causes for this were identified; the first came from the external evaluation of the group. The students own evaluation of the group was correspondingly low and therefore they showed low attachment to the group. Social Identity Theory has established that members of the group derive emotional self-esteem from their belonging when high value evaluations are present. As will be seen from the quotes presented below the low value from external sources resulted in low attachment to the group. A number of students cited that being a small university in a city with larger universities and the impression that the institution was not as academic was spoken about on social events amongst other students. Robin had previously attended York University.

“yeah, so many like all my friends in York are like oh my God I can’t believe you go to (institution name) but like, your never do anything with your life...”

When asked if they would feel it was accurate if they were described as a typical (institution name) student distancing from the in-group was found. This is in contrast to that of general student identity as discussed in the transition section when students distanced the out-group. This distancing from their in-group indicates low attachment:

Matthew: “..um in some way yeah probably but in ways probably not ‘cause it tends to get looked down a bit from like the other two unis”

Anna showed the same distancing when asked if she would introduce herself as a (institution name) Student:

“...um yeah, I don’t think I’d really that I was a (intuition name) student unless asked and also if they say where do you study I would usually say in (city name) , not (institution name).”

It could be argued that a smaller university within a city that has two larger ones can be classified as a minority group. Distancing is not unusual amongst minority groups, who often report ambivalence about their status and identity [29].

Another threat to identification with the institution was that of some traditions within the University, particular those that centered on Christianity. Tom, who would identify as a student over that of institution, suggested this was due to the religious aspects. This was heightened when he felt there was a level of compulsion to take part, for example having “to stand up during grace”, he explains his reaction to this below:

“...made me incredibly angry so...um because of the religious part of it I find that quite annoying as being part of that type of uni I don’t want to be associated with being at a religious uni but as a general course type I think it’s really good.”

Not only did the religious aspect lower identification with the university as seen above for some it threatened the internalized image of what it was to be a student. This is further evidence that the student identity, even if sometimes negative, had been internalised.

Ruth “yeah, I went to like an all girls catholic school so it didn’t bother me like, as much, but I still thought it was like, really strange that it’s university like, everyone’s meant to be moving to becoming an adult and everything it was just really strange, it was kind of forced upon everyone.”

Tammy “yeah, that’s the thing it’s like when they’re act - they’re actually still you know, making you do that sort of thing at this point you’re meant to be adults, you’re meant to be able to make your own decisions about it and they would still sort of really really confront you”

The two students above actively engage in first categorising the Institutional behaviours and beliefs in order to develop an image of what being a member of this group identity entails. Secondly comparison of themselves and evaluating their desire to belong.

4.3. Identity Protection Engagement

It was interesting to note that there was one dynamic which buffered this interaction between self-esteem membership of the institution group. The art students who lived at a small campus known as the Creative Campus and located nearer to the large city centre universities. The students talked of the culture of “being different” amongst students from the other two universities in the city, that they “were known to party”. When asked if they would describe themselves as a typical (Institution Name) student Tom replied with a statement showing his self-categorisation of belonging to the in-group using “us” and “they” language.

“I think not as a (Institution Name) student, more as like the creative campus, I’m a lot more patriotic about being from the creative campus than anything else um, it seems that be more the way that I am defined, at least when you’re out and stuff, ‘cause the stereotypes I’ve heard about it, heard other peop- other students at other universities have about (Institution Name) is stereotypes of the creative campus not (Institution Name) because it, they don’t like us because we’re artsy and creative.”

Brewer [30] proposed that this dynamic between a minority group and larger groups “optimal distinctiveness” which postulates that individuals

need to attain a balances between how distinctive their group from others while not risking exclusion. It further states that minority groups, contrary to previous research, can be a source of well-being and high self-esteem resulting in greater satisfaction. Furthermore, a number of researchers have explored how members of minority groups show higher identification than majority group members [31][32]. The quote above is particular interesting as Tom later went onto say that he disliked his art subject as opposed to his psychology subject “disliking how they [arts theorists] think”, it can only be assumed that his high attachment was to the Creative Campus not the art subject. Additionally it is interesting to note that students were very attached to their subject identity (see quote by Anna on the previous page) while downplaying their institution label.

Hurtado and Carter [33] measured conditions that could increase a student's sense of belonging and identification, such as academic behaviours. This was confirmed by a number of students who discussed at the subject identity level that working in groups, being with other students and work that challenged them increased their identification with their subject. A few students expressed how group-work in particular increased their identity:

Matthew “I didn’t mind too much the poster side of things it was the start and you got to know people a bit more because of that.”

Anna: “I quite the first year it was a diff - getting into groups, talking over it like going over your own experiments that sat doing an essay, doing your own individual research and the fact that you were sharing with with other people and I met more new people in that group as well so I like that assignment with the poster.”

It was during these parts in all interviews that students showed a degree of pride about their chosen subject, especially with the image they felt it portrayed to out-group members. This was one of the few themes that was constant across the interviews and although not all students agreed there was a majority consensus. Anna (quoted previously) would willingly identify as a Psychology student but would distance herself from the institutional label. Research has indicated that minority groups can increase self-esteem by showing the strong attachment to one aspect of their social identities as discussed above. Crocker and Miller [34] propose the effects of comparison by a lower status group against those that they perceives as higher status is buffeted by members also identifying with successful groups in another arena. For example, a member of a minority ethnic group supporting a successful sporting team. While this research included ethnic groups, it is proposed that the participants (members of a perceived lower status institution) identified strongly

with their perceived high status subject group to buffer the effects of low status membership.

Internal self-evaluations of the subject re-confirmed their identity and this internalisation of the identity was apparent even in part of the course they disliked. Alex above had previously stated that he didn't like RMS but at the quote below shows his how it had encouraged his identification with Psychology:

"I think um RMS is very important um it's uh you know it's this idea, psychology's domain, um you know promoting um like critical thinking and scepticism an you know the concept of hypothesis testing rather than just going with your feelings or something um these values um because I assimilate these values you know know it's part of psychology, so I guess I am assimilating a typical psychology because of this, I identity with these values."

This can be explored on another level, that of the journey as a student. Cathy is a third year student and the quote is far more developed than quotes about identity with first year students. This was generally the case across all interviews with 3rd year students expressing a high level of identity with the subject, though this was mirrored by one student in the first year who explained she had grown into the subject from semester 1 to the end of semester 2. Anna:

"I'd say I acknowledge more that I'm a psychology student now at the of the year also at the beginning of the year as I going in and like introducing myself to everyone and finding my lectures, when in the middle I would maybe not acknowledge it as much"

Before moving on to summarise the research it is worth noting that additional to the strategies outlined above students also found that taking part in extra-curricular team based activities such as playing sports on behalf of the university or working with the SU also had a buffering effect. However, this was not as strong as some other aspects and is not widely engaged with by students. Nonetheless this has been well documented finding in school and university engagement [35]

5. Summary

The data indicated that while students had negative external influences about two of the possible social identity groups, that of student and institution, they had different effects on the students categorising and comparison behavior. With student identity they engaged in distancing themselves from the out-group (non-students), however from the social group of institution they actively distanced themselves from the in-group. This is made even more interesting when we consider that the

participants readily accepted the negative comments of the out-group about the student identity, acknowledging this typified them as students themselves. However, the institution label led to a distancing themselves from it and was less obviously internalized. Indeed students were found to hide behind their subject identity, enhancing that identity to overcome what could be seen as deficiencies in the broader institution.

A further possible explanation for the difference in acceptance of student or institutional identity is the external information regarding each of these social groups. For example, the cultural information for institutions is that of quantitative ratings as discussed in the introduction (i.e. NSS and league tables). However, student identity has a narrative, which talks about a rite of passage for young adults into adulthood. This narrative allows for the student behavior identified in this article such as drinking and laziness as a period of testing boundaries. The institutional identity is that of worth bound up in future objectives and expectations. Further research should consider whether differences in transitional groups could further explore the role of cultural norms attached to possible student identities.

Perceived low status institutions should acknowledge that students may be exposed to external negative evaluations. However, this study indicated that it is possible to overcome these by strong subject identities in which students were given opportunities to engage academically with each other. Furthermore it is possible for smaller sub-groups of students who felt that they had a unique identity to rebuff the external negative influences and comparisons of the larger institutions.

In order to fully understand the dynamics, further research is required, which explores the identity patterns of students attending traditional and large universities. Future research should also consider the impact of identity patterns on attainment levels.

6. References

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