
10-24-2016

Becoming and Being a Student: A Heideggerian Analysis of Physiotherapy Students' Experiences

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Recommended APA Citation

Hamshire, C., & Jack, K. (2016). Becoming and Being a Student: A Heideggerian Analysis of Physiotherapy Students' Experiences. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(10), 1904-1919. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2493>

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Abstract

This three-year, longitudinal, narrative study sought to explore physiotherapy students' stories of their undergraduate experiences to gain an insight into the process of being a student, with an interpretation of the philosophy of Heidegger as a possible horizon for understanding. The central aim was to listen to students' stories told in their own words over a series of narrative interviews throughout their degree programme. The first author [CH] interviewed six students a minimum of five occasions and at each interview they were encouraged with a narrative prompt to tell the stories of their experiences as a series of episodes beginning and finishing wherever and however they felt was most appropriate. Framework analysis of the stories revealed that each individual's experience of university life was multi-layered, and the use of Heideggerian philosophical tenets to inform our interpretation allowed a more insightful exploration of the students' experiences; providing a greater understanding of what being a student meant for these particular students. This study underlines the importance of listening to students to understand their being so that we might understand individual needs and tailor support accordingly.

Keywords

Student Experience, Becoming, Being, Student Engagement, Narrative, Heidegger, Learning, Physiotherapy, Framework Analysis

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Becoming and Being a Student: A Heideggerian Analysis of Physiotherapy Students' Experiences

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This three-year, longitudinal, narrative study sought to explore physiotherapy students' stories of their undergraduate experiences to gain an insight into the process of being a student, with an interpretation of the philosophy of Heidegger as a possible horizon for understanding. The central aim was to listen to students' stories told in their own words over a series of narrative interviews throughout their degree programme. The first author [CH] interviewed six students a minimum of five occasions and at each interview they were encouraged with a narrative prompt to tell the stories of their experiences as a series of episodes beginning and finishing wherever and however they felt was most appropriate. Framework analysis of the stories revealed that each individual's experience of university life was multi-layered, and the use of Heideggerian philosophical tenets to inform our interpretation allowed a more insightful exploration of the students' experiences; providing a greater understanding of what being a student meant for these particular students. This study underlines the importance of listening to students to understand their being so that we might understand individual needs and tailor support accordingly. Keywords: Student Experience, Becoming, Being, Student Engagement, Narrative, Heidegger, Learning, Physiotherapy, Framework Analysis

The recent higher education institutional language that describes the “student life cycle” is used to explain the annual cycle of the institutional processes from recruitment through to graduation. However, this is essentially a managerial and institutional view of students' experiences, appropriate for managers and academic teams, but not for individual students. Students do not have a student life cycle, for them being a student is part of a personal life journey. As such, their individual experiences of being a student are personal, and individual.

Indeed, although much of the recent discussion and debate about students' engagement (Solomondies et al., 2012) has focused on ensuring that we give attention to the student voice, (Kidd & Czerniawski, 2011), the concept has become an enigma, interpreted and applied in diverse ways and the everyday reality of being a student is thus overshadowed by broad factors that are being used to describe students *en masse* (Barnett, 2007). There is a focus on performance indicators that have become essential to institutional quality processes (Buckley, 2012) and little acknowledgement is given to how individual experiences are nuanced and complex, with powerful academic discourses that are certain and authoritative presented and disseminated. As stated by Barnett “Of the individual student with his or her own challenges and struggles, we gain little sense” (2007, p. 8).

Whilst studying in higher education, students undergo a continuous process of becoming, and, according to Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens (2009), becoming part of a learning community is a gradual process that begins during the initial period of induction and encompasses many kinds of change. It can be understood as part of the continuous process of identity construction and involves both a personal and social transformation (Britton & Baxter, 1999) as students make meaningful connections (Palmer et al., 2009). This process of

becoming and transition into the higher education environment has been repeatedly identified as problematic for some students as there is a loss of continuity (see Palmer et al., 2009; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007; Thomas, 2002; Yorke, 1999; and previous literature has identified that a wide variety of personal, social and academic factors can impact on students' learning experiences, probability of academic success and ultimately on attrition (see Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1999; Yorke, 1999). Being and becoming a student has both a social and personal dimension and some students can struggle with both social and academic integration during their on-going learning transition (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006).

Thus the issue of first year student engagement has always been critically significant and has recently become a focus for international discussion (Nelson, Kift, & Clarke, 2012).

Temporality influences students' experiences and thus their being throughout their studies and drawing on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1926/62) we examined the different dimensions of six physiotherapy students' experiences of being and becoming a student; with the goal of gaining an in-depth understanding into the factors that influenced their learning journeys. We wanted to investigate how individual students' perceptions changed over the course of their three-year undergraduate studies during their on-going process of becoming to extend understanding of how individual students' situations and experiences were influenced by their past experiences and how the present moment influenced their futures. The work of Heidegger offered a different perspective, that considered the way the student is in the world and their sense of self with an exploration of what is the nature of being (Barnett, 2007). Thus, the aim was to explore the meaning of being a student using the philosophy of Heidegger (Heidegger, 1926/62) to facilitate a more insightful understanding of the phenomenon and add layers of understanding. To add to the literature on physiotherapy students' experiences, present a richer picture of these students' experiences and offer a fuller understanding of being a student for educationalists, education developers and managers.

Background

Student success is described by Nelson et al. (2012) as being determined by their first year experiences with multiple factors influencing students' on-going development and transformation during their transition to higher education (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005). For some students, managing both academic and social transformation during a time of considerable personal and social adjustment can be an emotional journey (Case, Marshall, & Linder, 2010; Yorke & Thomas, 2000). As such, some individuals can become *stuck* in the liminal phase of the transition, which results in an *in-between-ness* or betwixt space, and lack a sense of belonging to the institution (Palmer et al., 2009). The first term can be a time of both high expectation and anxiety during the process of becoming a student (Gutteridge, 2001). In addition, according to Lowe and Cook (2003), a difficult transition during this time with personal or social difficulties could subsequently have a lasting impact leading, on occasion, to attrition and under-achievement. Part of this transition process essentially involves learning the cultural rules (Holland, 2001) or adapting to the institutional habitus (Thomas, 2002). Evidence from United Kingdom nursing students suggested that failure to integrate during the first few weeks of their course is an important factor in discontinuation (Trotter & Cove, 2005), and whether or not initial personal expectations were met or exceeded or disappointed, could have an enormous impact upon future experiences. Palmer et al. (2009) identify a turning point where circumstances can combine to result in students developing a sense of belonging, and Barnett (2007) suggests that the moment a student's will to learn and enjoyment decrease, the likelihood of successful completion reduces.

By maximising positive experiences and managing student transition sympathetically, higher education institutions can build positive relationships with students which Yorke and Longden (2000) consider “bends the odds” towards student success and academic engagement. A programme built around information transfer and not relationship building can confuse and dishearten students and exacerbate their predisposal to withdraw (Edward, 2003). In effect, if an individual student fails to develop a sense of belonging and has a subsequent loss of academic engagement they have a reduced likelihood of successful completion (Barnett, 2007). As such, students’ feelings of connectedness to the university and hence their identity of being a student have a potential to impact on both their development as learners and ultimately their commitment to studying (Scanlon et al., 2007). Active engagement underpins student learning in terms of both retention and persistence (Nelson et al., 2012) and student success and attrition are perceived as a worldwide concern (see Torenbeek, Jansen, & Hofman, 2010).

The Philosophy of Heidegger

The philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1926/62) explores concepts of both being and time in an effort to understand what it is to be in the world. With an investigation of being as it is encountered and made meaningful in practical everyday life (Collins & Selina, 1998, p. 45), a discussion of the temporality of the human being (Dreyfus, 1994), and of understanding experience within the context of everyday lives (Draucker, 1999), Heideggerian philosophy (1926/62) offers a different perspective that considers the way the student is in the world and their sense of self with an exploration of what is the nature of being (Barnett, 2007). Heidegger’s work is considered to deepen our understanding of what it is to be and to show how this understanding is ultimately related to temporality (Dreyfus, 1994), with being described as both in time and anticipating the future (Barnett, 2007).

Using the concept of “*Dasein*” (Heidegger, 1926/62, p. 20) to represent human “being” – or as described by Barnett (2007) as “being-there” (p. 28) to represent our *placedness* of being – Heidegger described us as being “in the world” (Inwood, 1997, p. 11) and our being as essentially temporal. He depicted *Dasein* as always understanding “itself in terms of its existence” (Heidegger, 1926/62, p. 33) and suggested that an analysis of *Dasein* needs to focus on the basic state of “average everydayness” (Heidegger, 1926/62, p. 38) to “bring out the being of this entity” (Heidegger, 1926/62, p. 38). Thus *Dasein* denotes the human entity in all its ways of being (Collins & Selina, 1998).

Barnett (2007) explored this Heideggerian concept of *Dasein* in terms of student learning and pedagogical being and concluded that each student has being as a student as well as a person more broadly. These aspects of an individual’s experience are not, however, separate entities as each permeates the other and there is interplay between the two, and as such, each student has both a generality and particularity of being (Barnett, 2007). In essence the being of each student is the way the student is in the world (Barnett, 2007). However, the curriculum, academic relationships, and social codes within an institution will all influence the students’ pedagogical being and ultimately encourage certain modes of being a student (Barnett, 2007).

A sense of self is a fluid and changing concept and can encompass confidence, happiness, imagination, and self-knowledge (Barnett, 2007). States of mind affect both emotions and moods and Heidegger also contested that in order to understand concepts of *being* we must also consider time. Heidegger believed that time was “the horizon for all understanding of Being” (Heidegger, 1926/62, p. 39) and thus that ‘the central problematic of all ontology is rooted in the phenomenon of time, if rightly seen and rightly explained’ (Heidegger, 1926/62, p. 40).

Applying these Heideggerian concepts to students' sense of being, Barnett (2007) asserted that individual students' being is both fragile and enduring at the same time and we need to understand students as being "*in* their educational setting" (Barnett, 2007, p. 28 – emphasis in the original text). This being is a dynamic and unique sense of self and is influenced by both past educational experiences and the anticipation of future educational experiences and achievements. As such, an individual student's being is complex, both general and specific and fully conscious whilst barely there at the same time, and is infused with other life roles and being a human being (Barnett, 2007).

Methods

Narrative inquiry is a methodology that is set in stories of individual experiences, with these stories providing researchers with a form with which they can investigate how people experience the world (Webster & Mertova, 2007). It is not an objective reconstruction of a person's life, but a rendition of how life is perceived and retold detailing the chosen aspects of the storyteller's life (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative methods are typically used in research to address "real-life" issues as they always reflect an individual's perspective (Carter, 2008) and they result in rich data (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). A key aspect of narrative inquiry is temporality, as narratives are concerned with life experienced on a continuum (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); people live stories and when retelling their stories detail how their experiences happen narratively, providing listeners with an insight into their lives and experiences. Life and story are not separate phenomena as life informs and is informed by stories (Josselson & Lieblich, 1999).

This longitudinal study was a narrative inquiry over a three-year time frame used a series of narrative interviews with a sample of six students conducted throughout the students' undergraduate studies. The particular focus was on the students' first year experiences and how these impacted upon the students' on-going learning experiences. The first author [CH] therefore interviewed the students who participated in the study every term of their first year (three times) to explore their initial transitions and experiences and then subsequently at the start of their second and third years to explore their learning transitions and experiences as they progressed through the programme. When individual students were available on campus, further interviews were offered in addition to this minimum of five interviews during their second and third years (a total of 36 student interviews). This study design was based on the belief that:

- Interviewing the students every term in their first year would allow them to detail their on-going transition to degree-level study and subsequent progression through the second and third years.
- We would gain extended accounts of lives that developed over a series of interviews allowing insights into the wholeness of students' experiences.
- We would gain an insight into how their learning experiences were influenced by their lives outside of the institution.

At each interview the students were encouraged with a narrative prompt to tell the stories of their experiences beginning and finishing wherever and however they felt was most appropriate. This narrative prompt was carefully developed to encourage the students to tell their stories as a series of episodes as much as possible without pre-set borders, and although there were individual variations in the words chosen the narrative prompt is broadly captured below:

I would like you to tell me the story of your learning experiences, beginning wherever and however you want and including whatever is important to you. If it helps you to get started, then consider the story as a series of chapters or episodes and include whatever you think has been important to you.

This prompt encouraged the students to speak about themselves in relation to their being over time and convey their learner experiences of higher education from their own point of view.

At each subsequent interview the students were asked to tell the next episode and the stories the students told allowed us to view holistically their learning experiences in all their complexity and richness. Each of the interviews lasted 40 -50 minutes and they were audio recorded to allow for both greater depth of analysis and addition of reflective notes. The tapes and audio-files were subsequently transcribed verbatim, including para-linguistics, pauses and laughter by an in-house transcription service. To ensure accuracy the first author [CH] subsequently reviewed the transcripts on a computer screen whilst listening to the tapes (see Holstein & Gubrium, 2003); with discrepancies and omissions being identified and amended.

Sample

The sampling frame for the study consisted of all students enrolled on the undergraduate physiotherapy degree programme at the start of the 2009-10 academic year. These students attend for three years on a full-time basis with the first year curriculum taught on campus and the subsequent two years delivered via both campus-based teaching and work placements within the clinical environment. These work placements are delivered in a variety of settings and students must complete a minimum of 1,000 hours in order to qualify as a physiotherapist.

After a presentation describing the study, twenty-six students who volunteered were allocated a number alongside their name on the sign-up sheet and a random number programme used to generate a sample of eight students (10% of the cohort) for the study. One student subsequently left the programme and another had significant personal difficulties so six students are included within this paper.

Data analysis

Narrative analysis refers to a range of methods for interpreting texts that have a storied form, with a range of different perspectives (Riessman, 2008). These texts may have started as spoken accounts but via transcription take a textual form with the features of the stories found within the text (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Within all such narratives there is temporality – a sequence of actions over time – and the consideration of these ‘sequences of action’ within stories separates narrative analysis from other types of analysis (Riessman, 2008). The goal of narrative analysis is therefore to uncover the overarching topics or plots that develop within the storied form over time (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The analysis of narratives thus becomes a way of analysing individual lived experiences to discover narrative linkages (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

Within this study data analysis was on-going throughout the three years and began shortly after the first interviews. The first author [CH] began preliminary analysis, in terms of defining and categorising the topics of the narratives at the end of the first year when each student had attended for three interviews. Using a process similar to that of the framework analysis of Ritchie and Spencer (1994) – with the identification of a thematic framework, following a phase of familiarization and subsequent indexing, mapping and interpretation of the data within this framework. Riessman (2008) emphasises the need for close reading

during this time and each interview transcript was read and re-read with attention to both detail and language. Each of the students' narratives were complex, extended accounts with some running to over 20 pages of transcribed, convoluted stories. The data analysis was therefore an iterative process where the students' transcripts were read as a set to gain an impression of the dominant topics within the individual stories and subsequently annotated with significant sections highlighted. In summary this was a four-step process:

- CH read each of the transcripts several times as individual texts to gain an understanding of the students' stories as a whole.
- CH subsequently read each student's transcripts as a series of episodes to explore the topics that ran across the interviews over time. CH then looked at how each episode was related to the others in the sense of understanding the whole story.
- CH identified and highlighted sections within the texts, which were believed to be representative of orientating topics.
- The identified sections were read together to identify the dominant topics that were central within each student's story.

CH then discussed the dominant topics from the analysis of the interview with the co-researcher (KJ) and the interpretations of the data were analysed. Similarities and differences were discussed and consensus was reached. Working in this way meant that the interpretation was discussed over time and premature closure was not arrived at by either researcher.

Ethical considerations

This project was approved by the Manchester Metropolitan University ethics committee (Faculty of Health, Psychology, & Social Care). Involvement in the project was voluntary and students had at least two weeks to decide if they wanted to take part. A student information sheet outlining the ethical considerations was given to all participants; once a time for interview had been arranged the students were given an opportunity to ask questions before the interview began and written consent was given to the recording of the interviews.

Personal position

Our theoretical and interpretive position in this study was informed by our experiences as health care practitioners and as educators, both in the clinical and university setting. With 25 years' experience as a physiotherapist (CH) and 28 years as a registered nurse (KJ), we have seen multiple changes in the educational preparation of health care practitioners. Having chosen to focus our careers in the educational setting, our passion is to ensure the student voice is heard as we believe that students and educators should adopt a partnership approach to teaching and learning. In this research we were able to give the students a voice; to allow them to talk about their experiences as they developed over time in their own words. We believed that understanding students' experiences within the context of their everyday lives – "average everydayness" – as social and personal transformation takes place over time, was vital to gain insights into the meaning and significance of higher education for individual students (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Draucker, 1999). This perspective has influenced the stories presented within this paper (using pseudonyms) as we believe that research is shaped by the personal history and perspective of those undertaking a research project as well as by those who choose to be involved.

Results

The aim of this research was to explore the meaning of being a student using the philosophy of Heidegger (Heidegger, 1926/62) to facilitate a more insightful understanding of the phenomenon. As described by Barnett (2007), being is a key concept in any serious examination of students' experiences. Listening to students describe their experiences to explore what being a student meant to them, was central to the project.

Two students (pseudonyms, Oliver and Paul) started university with clear expectations of their futures, of both their immediate undergraduate experiences and of a future career beyond that. Each student brought initial, individual expectations with them to university and these shaped their concepts of being a student throughout their studies. At times they both struggled with anxieties over unmet expectations when they compared the present of their everyday experience with what they had imagined their future experience could be. Their sense of being-in-the-future and being here-and-now were interwoven (see Heidegger, 1926/62).

The following excerpts are from Oliver, who had already completed an undergraduate degree and was concerned about the impact that studying had upon his finances:

I think the only thing that's quite uncertain now is the financial situation because I am classed as a mature student. Student Loan companies don't finance second degrees which means you're very much left to your own devices... it's very difficult because we're encouraged by lecturers not to spend too much time working because it could affect your studies; yet at the same time you've got this balance of earning enough money to simply survive and make ends meet and sacrificing a bit of study time to work those hours to be able to earn that money. I think that the amount of hours you might need to work per week is actually digging into my study time at the moment and I think that's the only thing I'm concerned about or worried about really.

During Oliver's second interview, the issue of finance returned and he describes the unsettling nature and insecurity linked with lack of money, particularly when he was used to having a salary before he started the programme:

Since coming here you're constantly insecure, one month you might not know if you're going to be able to afford the food, well you do, of course you do, it's not that bad it's just you never have any real, I don't know security or anything like that. You don't know how much money you'll have. Striking that balance is difficult, last year in semester one there was no chance I could've worked. I couldn't have even mustered up the time to make an eight hour shift never mind work enough shifts or enough hours to make a hundred pounds a week which is probably a minimum amount to get by on.

Throughout the interview it was clear that Oliver's past childhood financial experiences could have had an impact on his experiences:

As I got older, I cottoned on to financial problems at home and things like that, you understand these things and you pick them up. I mean when I was a kid I used to moan at my dad for a new bike all the time. Apparently, I later learned about 15 years later that it got him really stressed out, me asking for this expensive bike ... You want your parents to be proud of you don't you?

Well, I certainly do anyway. I would like to say to my mum I'm doing good for money you know I don't need this and I don't need that.

The centrality of finance to his undergraduate experience was clear when Oliver stated that he had “had his finance hat on all the way through.” It was a dominant theme for the future as his clear focus was on employment at the end of the academic year. He had already started reviewing his options:

My absolute objective is employment just because being without money for a period of times dramatically reduces your options in terms of what you can do. So I have two options really if I want to stay in physiotherapy I have to get a job offer pretty quick, within a month or two of qualifying. I'm going to start applying for jobs I think just before I graduate, I really hate that my career can be dictated by the need for money rather than the ambition for a career.

The importance of finance to student life is also revealed in the following narrative excerpts with another student, Paul. However in contrast to Oliver, the following excerpts reveal the negative implications of attempting to pursue employment whilst undertaking a full time programme, in terms of academic progress:

I think because I have worked full time before I'm used to earning a certain amount of money so I'd like to try and maintain a certain lifestyle, eat good food and be able to go out at the weekend or be able to buy clothes. I think I do try and work as much as I can just so I can live that lifestyle, but I suppose study comes first. I've got a job in retail now working there a few days a week. Here and there I've been doing two jobs at one time. I have been pretty shattered, sometimes exhausted actually. We don't get a lot for our bursary, mine covers the rent basically almost and then I just have to work to make up the rest. I think with work and finances and stuff it has been difficult. It sometimes gets to you with regards to having to do uni work and stuff and being tired in uni but I think that is just the way it is isn't it?

This pattern continued through the programme and Paul found himself in the third year struggling academically as well as financially. When he was on work placement he had been busy nine to five, Monday to Friday and had therefore had to work every weekend in order to earn enough money to afford his rent and food. His three placements totalled 15 weeks and during that time he had effectively worked seven days a week and some night shifts as well; at the end he was exhausted. The outcome of working so hard was that he had forgotten to hand in a written assessment:

So yeah that was panic and like this is another example of me being stupid and forgetful ... I forgot to hand in the assessment and then I realised like a week later and they said, “There's nothing you can do.” So to be honest, I can't wait to graduate and have a nine-to-five job and have the weekends off.

Although Paul completed his degree, on reflection, he believed he could have done better. However, being a student, trying to hold down employment and trying to maintain a certain standard of living, had had a negative impact:

I scraped my way through in the end I suppose but I still enjoyed it and had a good time despite it being difficult. I'm not a good multi-tasker I think and I just found juggling jobs, working and lifestyle and uni all at the same time all quite difficult.

The following excerpts from two of the other students included in the study (pseudonyms Jack and Adnam) demonstrate the temporality of learner development in their first year. Struggles with learning transitions was an on-going theme for Jack throughout his secondary educational studies, as he revealed that he had struggled with the transition from public examinations at the end of formal schooling to the next stage of post-compulsory education (16-18 years). And at times he desired a greater level of support from the academic team whilst also aware that he needed to develop as a learner, "I suppose in a way it's good doing self-learning and stuff but, it might be nice to have a bit more of a helping hand. I think for me anyway."

It is important therefore to consider whether Jack's willingness to engage was influenced by his perceptions of his higher education learning experiences or whether it was a mind-set that had developed over his previous educational experiences that he brought with him to university. His narrative detailed how he had struggled to fully engage with his studies and assessments for a number of years and was aware that this was particularly apparent around planning and writing assessments:

We have two assignments to do at the minute. It's only a couple of weeks to the end so I should get started on the assignments I guess, but yeah one has just been hanging over my head a bit. I'm not really a big fan of assignments but I'm kind of starting to work a bit harder on it. This course has moved so quickly. It was a lot of work, a lot of work and I definitely haven't done enough of it. It's just with every session you get taught a little and then if you don't do the study they don't check up, you just get found out.

The narrative extract below from another student, Adnam, also articulates a mismatch between academic preparedness and learning experiences during the first year:

...with A levels they told you everything that you needed to know about your studies ... while here mostly your studies are new materials it's really different. Everything is like, learning, I like things done for me so I prefer they taught us everything but that'd take so long.

Adnam acknowledged that at times he did not put in the maximum effort: "I've got a lazy personality." On campus in taught sessions he tended to be distracted by his friends "messaging about" and therefore believed that the staff and other students considered his group of friends to be "slackers:"

All of us in that group, we're not slackers but we're not known to put the most in probably. Within the students anyway, I don't know what the teachers think of us. We kind of know ourselves. Everyone knows who are the hard workers and who are the slackers or whatever, I think we are maybe in between but most likely in the slackers kind of thing sometimes.

He particularly struggled to engage after the Christmas break in his first year:

It's been fairly easy and tedious sometimes and you're still in the holiday mood after you come back like at Christmas because we didn't have anything to do over that time. You just carry on relaxing and I find it hard to get out of that once I'm in it.

He therefore acknowledged that he would have to make more effort when on work placement:

I think I'm looking forward to it now really 'cos I think we've all had enough of being in uni and learning ... so we just want to get out there and do all the stuff. We all feel like we do know a lot of the basic stuff and then, like I said we do tend to mess about ... but it's totally different when you get out there, so we just want that experience of being out there. I think I'm definitely going to have to be a lot more mature in the practice placement area, like I said, just when you're in uni you're always messing about and stuff you can't do that [on placement].

Jack and Adnam made the transition to higher education from a past educational experience of didactic teaching. They had to adapt to their new circumstances during their gradual process of becoming a student as they responded to change over time. Each described difficulties incorporating the required changes into their lives and in some respects both students were therefore between two concepts of being a student: the student that developed as an independent learner striving to achieve the best possible grades in their assessments and the student that was directed by teaching staff.

Initially both Jack and Adnam continued in the mode that all of their previous educational experiences had taught them was appropriate. Adnam in particular began to be less committed to his studies and towards the end of his first year he adapted his learning processes doing what others do possibly to fit in and conform (Heidegger, 1926/62). As described by Barnett (2007), students can only develop as far as their will to learn, and whilst this will is not everything, without it nothing is possible.

A sense of internal striving for resoluteness (Heidegger, 1926/62) was particularly apparent within the narratives of two female students (pseudonyms Alice and Sara) who struggled to develop peer relationships at the start of their first year. The students made reference to occasions where they felt pressured by the anonymous they and their narratives reveal how this pressure led to tensions and an internal struggle caused by the stress of an internal call to consciousness (Heidegger, 1926/62).

Peer support is a multi-faceted and dynamic concept that is underpinned and influenced by individual expectations and sense of identity. It has different meanings and interpretations that are profoundly individual and specific to time (Hamshire, 2013).

For the following two students (Alice and Sara) their transition into higher education was perceived as a new beginning and an opportunity to make lifelong friends and develop a supportive network of peers as an extension of their previous relationships. However their initial experiences were in stark contrast to their expectations.

Alice was unable to get a place in the university halls and had to rent a flat in private accommodation. She felt isolated in the evenings, as she only saw her flatmate occasionally and they had not established a friendship:

I only live with one flatmate and we don't see each other a lot. I'm on my own quite a lot at uni, I make an effort but she's not very sociable and I just think she wants to keep herself to herself really. I'll knock on her door, I know she's

in her room and her telly is on and her door is open but she doesn't answer me. At home I prefer it as there's more of a social aspect, we are a close family.

Alice was also relatively isolated within her tutorial group as she had failed to make any lasting friendships with the other students on her programme. She only rarely saw these students in an evening or at a weekend and she talked at length about how excluded she felt from the majority of her group who shared flats together in the same halls of residence:

I don't really see anyone to be honest. At first we all went out and I think I've been out once with a couple of girls. I've got a couple of friends like four or five girls and I speak to a lot of people in my group. I think if I would've been in university halls and had a flat where I'd met some really nice friends but because I've only really been out five times since I started in September. They're in flats with five or six people ... they're all really friendly with their flatmates.

There was a clear divide between Alice and the small group of students that she had occasionally socialised with: "We're probably like ... we're none halls people." During the third interview, however, things had changed and the following excerpt refers to the development of some new friendships. As part of a group presentation, Alice had been randomly assigned to a group that included two mature students and their work on the project together had led to the friendship. One of the key aspects of these friendships was the peer support as they shared knowledge and revised together:

Since then I've started hanging around with them a lot more because I need to be doing stuff to learn. These girls are a lot older than I am, I don't know some people might think it's weird but I get on with them really well and we work together really well, we all email each other our work.

Even though these students were much older, they had a shared ethos and were becoming close friends:

I think I get on with them better because they seem to work harder. Whereas some of the younger students who are more my age they're more for "oh we're going out tonight" or whatever. We're not in uni that often are we, so the times that I am in I'd rather be working and learning and concentrating on what I'm doing. I think in that sense it's good for me because they work a lot harder, Emily, she's old enough to be my mother but she makes me laugh and we get on really, really well.

The next excerpt is from Sara, who had also been unsuccessful in gaining a place in her first choice halls of residence and felt isolated from her tutorial group, noting that "all the other Physios live there apart from me." Although she seemed to be getting on reasonably well with her flatmates she highlighted the differences between herself and the others, "It's just everyone in my flat is out all the time and I'm in." She also admitted to feeling homesick, stating "I just didn't fit in, not fit in that's the wrong word but I just didn't feel at home" and went on to describe her initial isolation:

It's just like everyone has bonded like already, you come in maybe to one or two lectures on the Monday so you're in and then you go back to your flat and

you're like well what do I do now? You're just kind of sat there thinking "oh" so yeah, that was hard.... the first week you have to go out; you are a wet blanket it you don't go out in that first week it's just like Freshers week and you have to go out every night and I don't want to go out every night. So when you stayed in on Freshers week it was like what you doing you can't stay in on Freshers week? I didn't enjoy the pressure of feeling like you had to go out. I did go out but it was the fact that everyone else felt they had to go out and no one stayed in so you were alone when you did stay in.

Moving accommodation when a vacancy had become available in Sara's first choice hall of residence had a positive impact on her whole experience of university:

We all have our strengths and weaknesses so we help each other out, I think we were all quite motivated just to get it done and out of the way. There was never anyone in the first flat. It was lonely and I thought it's time to move and one of my friends had a flat that had a spare room that someone had moved out of. It has been so much better living there. It has made the whole uni thing completely different, completely!

Sharing a house with this group of students in her second year had also changed her view on how to learn. The group worked together to support each other's learning and on the days that they had taught sessions they travelled in together and arrived early to prepare for the sessions "it's good because you have half an hour to read up on anything." Sara continued to explain how the students studied and revised together. This had been a revelation to her and she had found it much easier to learn and engage with the subject now that she studied as part of a peer support group:

I think it is interesting actually because I have only just found out how to learn, everyone sits there writing notes for ages and I just do it because everyone else does it, I don't learn a thing from doing that at all. I have got away from the writing of notes and started talking it out more because that is the only way I remember. I'm gutted it has taken me twenty years to work that out! Also, when someone else is working it encourages you to work so because you feel guilty they are working and you're not ... I think I have learnt a lot about studying, I have changed the way I learn.

Discussion

The strength of this narrative inquiry is that it provided an opportunity for students' understanding of their experiences to be heard. Throughout the study we were committed to making a space for their voices to be conspicuous amongst the dominant discourse of research that focuses upon academic concepts of students' experiences. How the students spoke about their understanding of their experiences has therefore permeated and led the study, making the voice of individual student's experience developing over time possible. By using only a narrative prompt at the start of the interviews we gave the students the power to define both themselves and their experiences. The resultant narrative form illuminated the meaning of the students' higher education experiences (Price, 1999) as they each explored ways of being.

The challenge for this study is that it is focused on the narratives of a sample of six students. Inevitably there will have been topics that these students chose not to bring into

their stories and opinions and beliefs that they have decided not to communicate as they did not fit with the self that they wished to present. Other students who originally volunteered to be part of the study but did not participate may have had very different stories and perspectives. In addition if we had analysed the data within a different time frame or from a different philosophical underpinning we may have viewed the personal narratives otherwise. There are therefore multiple possible readings of the narratives. Although the study included a diverse group of students that in some ways represented the cohort, all experience is essentially personal and therefore there is a tension in extrapolating the research to the student population overall. Whilst we can consider the transferability of the findings, it is not possible to generalise from these personal experiences.

Each of the students described their own journeys in their own words and their stories were thus unique accounts of individual development and learning that reveal how experiences shaped the students' sense of being a student over time. Therefore, central to all of the stories was temporality as each of the students was influenced by the passage of time. Heidegger (1926/62) affirms that we are temporal beings and that the importance of our historicity cannot be underestimated as it has an effect on all of our future understanding. Being a student is not simply a linear procedure, but a gradual process of becoming, as students change and adapt over the three years of their undergraduate studies. Neither is it an abstract undertaking that only occurs when academic studies are undertaken; being a student is a broad context interwoven with *being* in general with both individual and social contexts combined; hence, students' experiences are constantly mobile as changes occur.

Central to Heidegger's philosophy is the way that being is linked to time and temporal presence (Heidegger, 1926/62). As human beings, we are not only aware of the present moment but look both forward into the future and back into the past (Heidegger, 1926/62) and it was as the students looked forward to their future that they began to focus on being a student. However the past also had a substantial effect on how some of these students lived in the present time.

Heidegger asserted that in order to understand concepts of being, then we must also consider time, which he described as "the horizon for all understanding of being" (Heidegger, 1926/62, p. 39). Each of these students' narratives can be seen as a depiction of their sense of self "rooted in the phenomenon of time" (Heidegger, 1926/62, p. 40) and how the narratives explained this impacted upon their sense of authentic self. As suggested by Heidegger (1926/62, p. 20), *Dasein* is not confined in its awareness of the present moment; it goes ahead into the future and is influenced by the past, as being is essentially temporal (Heidegger, 1926/62).

For some students their past experiences influenced their perceptions of both their present and future, and informed the expectations that they had for themselves. Each student arrives at university as a product of their past and for those who had work experience beforehand, there became clearly defined expectations of being a physiotherapy student and at times their expectations both sustained and diminished them. Heidegger (1926/1962) suggested, "... any *Dasein* is as it already was, and it is 'what' it already was. It is its past, whether explicitly or not" (p. 41) and it thus understands its sense of being in terms of its whole life (Heidegger, 1926/62). Historicity, as described by Heidegger (1926/62, p. 41) – the past influencing the present – had an apparent influence on these students as each was "bound up with temporality" (Inwood, 1997, p. 11). Temporality influenced their perceptions of both their present and future as past experiences informed the expectations that they had for themselves (Miller et al., 2005).

Throughout his philosophy, Heidegger (1926/62) explored the concept of authentic self, resoluteness and the 'call to consciousness' in relation to being. The students' sense of authentic self and being was apparent across the narratives and it is clear that it fluctuated in

response to assessment results, peer support, and personal circumstances. At times all of the students articulated how they felt that their authentic self was lost to inauthenticity when they believed that they had to conform to the expectations of others, and the struggle of whether or not to adapt to what the *they* did and said (Heidegger, 1926/62). Some students in this study had the possibility of many ways of being a student and after a difficult period, chose to return to their authentic self (Heidegger, 1926/62). As described by Barnett (2007), this reconciliation with authenticity was not achieved lightly and some students spoke at length about their inner turmoil; whilst they struggled to be an authentic student their consciousness was lost to others and they became essentially inauthentic (Heidegger, 1926/62) as at times they lost their will to learn. However, as stated by Inwood (1997) “this is by no means an unqualified blemish,” (p. 27) as for the majority of people this is the normal condition for us most of the time (Inwood, 1997). It would be difficult to stay constantly within the state of authentic self at all times. Some students, in Heidegger’s conception, decided to make their own way, regardless of other voices and perspectives – the *they* (Barnett, 2007). They chose to be a student in a manner that was authentic to themselves, unencumbered by the perceptions of others and as such developed as learners and attained academic success. As described by Barnett (2007) to be an authentic student is to ‘take hold’ of educational experience and make something of it in your own account.

Personal, social and financial factors were identified as being important in influencing being and becoming and so is what the student brings with them in terms of their ability to be a self-directed learner. Higher education requires students to be their own agents and develop their own interpretations, judgements, and actions (Barnett, 2007); this means that students have to develop as independent, autonomous learners with a will to learn. To achieve this, students have to “reach into themselves and draw something out” (Barnett, 2007, p. 34) which can lead to a sense of anxiety as some students feel overwhelmed with the tasks confronting them (Barnett, 2007). As stated by Heidegger (1926/62), “That in the face of which one has anxiety is being-in-the-world as such” (p. 230).

A holistic view of student experiences and engagement needs to take into account each of these multiple factors and the impact upon students’ academic achievements and sense of belonging to an institution. Students’ engagement will vary over time as personal and social factors impact upon experiences; and future projects that aim to promote student engagement need to be sensitive to these and take into account the entirety of students’ on-going experiences.

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Article Citation

Hamshire, C., & Jack, K. (2016). Becoming and being a student: A Heideggerian analysis of physiotherapy students' experiences. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(10), 1904-1919. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss10/10>
