

## Theorizing cohortness

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# THEORISING COHORTNESS: (MIS)FITTING INTO STUDENT GEOGRAPHIES

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper argues for greater attention to what we term ‘cohortness’ in understanding articulations of identity and everyday life. Our main aim is to develop – and to exemplify – a theory of cohortness that can posit key points of departure in enabling geographers and others to explain particular kinds of group identities and experiences, as they are manifest across intersecting spatial scales. Specifically, our interest is in groups of individuals who are ‘thrown-together’ (after Massey, 2005): who are – perhaps through an institutional space, club, voluntary organisation or workplace – tied together by a mixture of chance and design, and who experience facets of their identities *as* a cohort. We argue that despite vast literatures about identities, and despite the prevalence of ‘cohorts’ of various kinds in all walks of social life, the features of cohortness, and the ways in which cohorts are assembled and represented, have not been systematically theorised, either within the geographical canon or elsewhere. We also contend that cohortness is a crucial element of identity-formation that has diverse implications – ranging from the micro-spatial, emotional geographies of ‘belonging’ (e.g. Bartos, 2013) within a given social context, to critical reflections upon the entanglement of neoliberal imperatives with/in contemporary lifestyles (Kelly, 2018).

Our theory of cohortness does more than merely denote a particular kind of belonging or group identity (e.g. Neal et al., 2015; Wood, 2017). Rather, in our formulation, cohorts *frame* processes of belonging, identity and/or subjectification: one can be part of a cohort

but not necessarily (always) *belong* to or *identify* with it. Thus, since one's identity may not be in any way contingent upon a cohort (even if one may belong to one), or may be loosely reliant upon it, or may be heavily resistant to it, or may be heavily invested therein, cohorts do not *necessarily* correspond with senses of either individual or group identities. Yet, one may, whether by institutional affiliation, or simple serendipity, nevertheless be placed within a cohort and find that it frames various aspects of daily life – including one's identity (however temporarily). As we will argue, members of a cohort may be aware of some loose and fortuitous sense of *synchronicity* – of being thrown together in the same time and place – but are equally aware, nevertheless, of how different they are to one another because of prior or other senses of identity they carry with them.

The secondary aim of this paper is to advance geographical scholarship about students by analysing the experiences of five cohorts of students at an English University. Our analyses are based upon an innovative ongoing project, which involved over 300 Year 3 undergraduate students at a post-1992 UK University. The project enabled the creation of a unique dataset through which collective (cohort) identities could be articulated by students. By focusing upon the intertextual and performative nature of the research-education activities in which students engaged, we argue that rather than telling us much about the identities of *individual* students, thinking in terms of *cohorts* enables an alternative way to examine how students perform, feel and express their subjectivities. Thus, we afford a sense of how students, *as cohorts*, grappled with issues as diverse as the emotional geographies of belonging in-place, popular cultures and fashions, and the logics and challenges of neoliberalisation that have, for many commentators, come to characterise (Higher) Educational systems around the world (Hanson Thiem, 2009; Holloway et al., 2010; Brooks et al., 2016). The paper not only provides further empirical weight to burgeoning 'student

geographies' (Smith, 2009), but also responds to recent calls to specify the experiences of heterogeneous groups of students beyond both common stereotypes and their relentless framing as arch-neoliberal consumers (Holton and Riley, 2013).

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. We situate our arguments within a broad sweep of research on the geographies of identity. We observe that – for a variety of (good) reasons – recent scholarship on identity has not grappled with more generic questions of identity-construction, focusing instead upon particular identity groups and performances. We briefly review two key literatures in this regard, which are pertinent to our analyses: geographies of intersectionalities and geographies of encounter. We then introduce existing scholarship on cohortness and generations, noting the absence of detailed, empirically-informed theories of cohortness in geography and elsewhere. Subsequently, we outline the project methodology in some detail, since these details both inform our argument and might support future studies of cohortness. The remaining sections develop our theorisation of cohortness through analysis of three broad empirical themes, before the conclusion draws together these arguments towards a schematic theorisation of cohortness and a series of key considerations for future scholarship on cohortness in geography and elsewhere.

## **2 THEORISING COHORTNESS AND (STUDENT) IDENTITIES**

Geographers have held a longstanding interest in how individual and group identities and subjectivities are constituted through processes of spatialisation (e.g. Keith and Pile, 1993; Dowling, 2009; Merriman and Jones, 2017; Hopkins, 2017). From a 'turn' to examine the geographies of different identity categories in the 1990s has spawned an enormous variety of work on processes of subjectification, differentiation, encounter, performativity, power

and far more besides. Indeed – in distinction to the feminist and/or postmodern bent of geographical writing of twenty years ago – it has become increasingly unusual for geographers to talk of, or theorise, ‘identity’ processes in a more generic sense. This is in part because empirical studies of identity (if they even use the term) have become increasingly concerned with relational and/or intersectional processes (Crenshaw 1989; Carbado et al. 2013) that hone in on very particular characteristics, which either combine or exceed ‘traditional’ social categories (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). Both politically and empirically, the argument is that studies of intersectionality – which combine identity categories – afford a sense of the complexities and dynamisms of identity, since to focus on just one generic categorisation of identity (such as gender) is both homogenising and context-blind. Specifically, it has been demonstrated that particular combinations of identity categories (such as ethnicity and gender) can lead to particular and often deepened forms of marginalisation (as has been the case for black women, in whose work studies of intersectionality originated). Thus, the past few years have witnessed intersectional studies of children’s national identities across borders (Christou and Spyrou, 2017); everyday acts of sexual racism (Ruez, 2017); and, intersections of class, race and age in English suburbs (Nayak, 2010). Whilst such analyses have become increasingly common, they have attracted critiques: for a *tendency* to engage in a kind of ‘oppression Olympics’ (Brown, 2012) – a race to research *the most* deprived or disadvantaged group without necessarily considering the ethics of doing so; and, for a *tendency* to rely on the analytical primacy of traditional social categories such as gender or race, without necessarily considering how those categories are contingent and performative (Staunæs, 2003). Nonetheless, intersectional approaches provide some key touchstones for our theorisation of cohortness, albeit with an important twist: on how students collectively *assembled* their diverse identities, rather than how

individual students *expressed* different facets of their own identities in a way we could clearly trace.

A second reason that geographers tend not to theorise 'identity' in a more generic sense is that the theoretical landscapes of the discipline have shifted significantly. Feminist, nonrepresentational, actor-network, assemblage and new-materialist geographies have all ushered forms of 'post-phenomenology', wherein the figure of the identifiable, individuated human subject has looked increasingly unstable (Ash and Simpson, 2016). Therefore, it has become increasingly difficult – if not impossible, for some geographers – to talk of 'identity'.

Recent geographical work on 'encounter' is to some extent exemplary of attempts both to move beyond the critiques of intersectional analyses, and to witness contingent, performative, embodied and more-than-human plays and assemblages of difference (e.g. Lobo, 2014; Bennett et al., 2017). Wilson (2017) argues that encounter has become a central concern for human geographers, drawing together work on (post)colonial contact, urban conviviality and multicultures, and cross-species encounters. She notes that "encounters are fundamentally about difference and are thus central to understanding the embodied nature of social distinctions and the contingency of identity and belonging" (Wilson, 2017: 452). In particular, an attentiveness to encounter can help geographers to theorise the often ambivalent, fleeting, power-laden production of contact zones in multicultural cities (Swanton, 2010).

This work is also particularly helpful for constructing a theory of 'cohortness' because the methodology on which this paper is based – and through which students' sensibilities of (mis)fitting were articulated – was premised upon mass encounters of a particular kind. Yet, whilst this paper draws inspiration from that work, we are also wary of a range of critiques.

Centrally, whilst we may learn much from momentary meetings of difference, it does not follow that they will lead to progressive, longer-standing changes in attitudes or behaviours (Valentine, 2008). For other critics, there has been too much of a focus upon the (perhaps) rather-more-spectacular, (perhaps) rather-more-visible, and (often) rather-more-adversarial encounters surfacing in *urban, multicultural* contexts (Wilson, 2017). Thus, whilst not at all wishing to diminish the significance of these studies, we ask through our work with students *what else mattered* (Horton, 2010) to students' feelings of (mis)fitting, as those feelings were produced within and beyond a rather different kind of 'encounter'.

In response to the above broad contexts, this paper advances and exemplifies a theory of cohortness, which may at once aid understanding of the rather particular processes of identity-construction amongst students, and hold more general conceptual purchase in both complementing and extending beyond theories of identities that are espoused via notions of intersectionality and encounter. To do so, we turn next to extant scholarship on cohorts and cohortness, which has largely proceeded in sociology and educational studies rather than geography. Some of the most wide-ranging work (but of less direct relevance here), is the longstanding use of 'cohort studies' across a range of disciplines in a methodological sense. Cohort studies afford often quantitative, longitudinal, large-scale, demographic studies of particular birth cohorts, in order to assess synchronous and diachronous similarities and differences in health, attitudes, mobilities, and far more besides (for recent geographical examples, see de Kadt et al., 2014; Camara and Garcia-Roman, 2015).

Loosely related to cohort studies, sociologists have considered cohorts in relation to studies of generations. Several sociologists (and geographers) have observed that studies of generation – and intergenerational relations – lag behind studies of other identity

characteristics, and notably of young and old age (Tucker, 2003; Hopkins and Pain, 2007; Burnett, 2016). Notably, they have advanced studies of youth within generational perspectives (e.g. Alanen and Mayall 2001) – although, it should be noted, rarely in the specific empirical context of students, who are the subject of the present paper. Moreover, and more significantly, within those studies, less attention still is paid to differentiating generations from cohorts, or to constructing detailed theorisations of the latter. Yet, in a text generally considered foundational to the study of generations, Mannheim (1952) differentiated between cohorts and generations, clearly preferring the latter as an object of sociological analysis. In this formulation, cohorts are defined externally (by researchers, the military or educational institutions), dependent upon their birth year or entry into an institution. Sometimes, cohorts may be specified through fairly straightforward intersecting categories – such as ‘English students born in or around 1992’ (as per one year group in our study). There is a kind of ‘throwntogetherness’ (Massey, 2005) to being a part of such a cohort, even if various social forces and individual choices have led to the presence of our *particular* group of students at our *particular* University, studying our *particular* course. By contrast, generations are social groups who have cohortness in common but who generate a social consciousness about their positioning within society that can be as powerful as class in affecting an individual’s sense of identity (Burnett, 2016). It is consciousness of this synchronicity that enables members of a generation to ascribe particular traits to themselves (and others), plus an affiliation for particular kinds of technologies, fashions, attitudes and so on (Wachelder, 2016).

For Woodman and Wyn (2014), a sociology of generations enables the study of youth that enables us not only to understand how youth transitions (and identities) are changing, but how young people are actively changing the conditions of those transitions through their



own generational self-consciousness. Moreover, they argue that a nuanced conceptualisation of generations steers a path between subcultural and post-subcultural analyses, between history and biography, and between micro- and macro-scalar processes. Woodman and Wyn (2014) argue that such generational analyses might allow youth studies scholars to move beyond the confines of the individualisation thesis in revising what it means to be(come) an adult.

Finally, and of greatest potential relevance to this paper, there are fairly-well established (if recent) lines of enquiry in education studies around cohort learning and communities of practice, particularly in the realms of teacher education (e.g. Fenge, 2012) and collective doctoral training (e.g. Hakkarainen et al., 2016). Some of the best-known work centres around Wenger's (1998) notion of 'communities of practice' – on how cohorts of trainee teachers come to constitute functioning groups with a collective sense of purpose, and on the various forms of learning that follow (Cuddapah and Clayton, 2011). With a focus on professional *practice*, most of these texts are not necessarily focused on theorising *cohortness per se*; nor are they particularly concerned with identities, although Cuddapah and Clayton (2011) do examine how particular teacher-identities, behaviours and roles emerge through membership of a cohort.

There are therefore huge lacunae in the ways in which cohortness – and cohort-identities – could be theorised as key social (and spatial) processes, with particular attention to the synchronicity of cohorts and cohort experiences, as they are felt, performed and experienced at the (often) micro- scale of institutional spaces, yet as they articulate wider-scaled processes and politics. Another key omission is in affording a sense of *how* cohorts are throwntogether (Massey, 2005) in ways that do not (solely) correspond with notions of

'generation'. Rather, cohorts are experienced *as* forms of throwntogetherness: as distinct forms of assemblage (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011) in which multiple facets of identities and subjectivities, different temporalities and spatialities, and a vast range of interests and world views are brought together and *framed* through collective, often institutionalised experiences and (as we will demonstrate), dialogues. In order to afford a superficial sense of the complexity of how we wish to theorise cohortness – in a way that has not been adequately conceived in the literatures reviewed above, and which certainly does not correspond entirely with conceptions of 'generation' – we might express the cohortness of our students thus:

*'a cohort of some mainly young, mainly English, mainly middle-class, students, in the UK, at the University of Leicester, studying human geography, between 2009-2016'.*

We develop this theorisation throughout the paper and in conclusion. We propose a framework for studying not only students' individual identities but their *collective* articulations of identity – moving from the more overtly micro-scale to the meso-scale of encounters in a fairly large class, as expressed in the rather prosaic formulation above. We use this theorisation in order to break down and move beyond the 'ambivalent' discourses of and engagements with neoliberalism that have come to characterise contemporary discourses about students – not to ignore the pressing effects of the pervasive neoliberalisation of academe (Davies and Petersen 2005; Gregg, 2010), but to witness *what else matters* within and alongside such experiences.

As a final point of departure, then, and although seeking to develop a broader theorisation of cohortness, this paper is situated within burgeoning work on the geographies of students

(for an excellent review, see Holton and Riley, 2013). Early work on 'student geographies' focused upon studentification – the development of student housing markets in University towns – as a distinct kind of gentrification during the rapid expansion of UK Higher Education (Chatterton 2000, Smith and Holt, 2007; Smith, 2009). Since then, and alongside work in the geographies of education (Holloway et al., 2010), geographical scholarship on Higher Education and the experiences of students has proliferated.

Of most relevance to the present paper is a range of work that has concentrated on the experiences of students in (or seeking to gain access to) University places. That work has proceeded on a number of fronts. Firstly, there has been significant attention – drawing upon work in sociology and elsewhere – on inequalities in accessing Universities, particularly in terms of class and ethnicity (e.g. Reay, et al., 2001). For instance, Brown's (2011) study of a programme designed to encourage young black and minority ethnic Londoners to study medicine worked with potential applicants to examine how young people aligned (or did not) their aspirations with those of the programme. Elsewhere, Reay et al's (2010) analysis of how working class students 'fit in' or 'stand out' at four different institutions sought to develop a sense of how individual students' identities were comprised of their learner identities, their relationship with their chosen discipline, and the institution at which they studied.

Secondly, and overlapping with the above work, several studies have engaged what Hopkins (2011) terms 'critical geographies of the university campus'. In his work, Hopkins (2011) focused on the complex experiences of Muslim students at UK campuses, wherein the campus can be both a tolerant and exclusionary space. More recently, a series of papers (e.g. Andersson et al., 2012; Brooks et al., 2016; Cheng, 2016) has critically analysed

assumptions about the neoliberalisation of campus spaces and, especially, a sense in which students have become 'consumers'.

Finally, calling for more 'micro-geographies' of students, Holton and Riley (2013) have spearheaded recent work that has drilled down into the experiences of students in a variety of spaces on and beyond campus (see also Sykes, 2017, for a further important example). For instance, their focus upon students' bedrooms highlights the everyday, banal ways in which students negotiate the transition to, through and from University via the careful introduction and management of material artefacts taken from their family home and other places (Holton and Riley, 2016). But they also call for more work that extends beyond the alcohol-fuelled, consumer-focused stereotypes that abound, where "much more work is needed [...] on the diversity of experience within and between student groups, particularly in breaking down these monolithic dualisms in favour of set of more fluid, heterogeneous classifications" (Holton and Riley, 2013: 68).

Within the broader arguments of this paper, we respond to Holton and Riley's call, whilst, for the first time, focusing on students as a *cohort*. Building on Holton and Riley's critique, we also argue that the majority of studies of studenthood have focused on student subjectivities, consumerism and the marketplace. Thus, by thinking about how it is that students understand themselves and negotiate their senses of self in relation to one another, synchronously and in-place, we are able to propound a theory of cohortness that articulates how institutional and other spaces produce forms of relationality that do not necessarily propagate senses of belonging, sameness or identification (in some cases with anything other than the fact of being part of a cohort).

### 3 METHODOLOGY

This paper is based upon an ongoing project, which has now run for five years and involved nearly 300 final-year undergraduate students at the University of Leicester. The university is a relatively small research-led institution that operates outside the Russell Group of major research-intensive universities. The project involved large groups of students engaging in an exercise on 'mis/fitting', which encouraged them to articulate (as individuals and groups) which identities it was 'easy' to perform/hold/display as students, and which it was not. The project also involved a range of subsequent reflective discussions with each group.

In total, 263 students participated in the workshops over the five years. There were 45 in 2011/12, 52 in 2012/13, 53 in 2013/14, 61 in 2014/15, and 52 in 2015/16. The gender split was quite even, with 53% of participants identified as women, and 47% identified as men across the five years of the project. However, it was only in 2012/13 and 2014/15 that female students formed a majority of the individual year groups. The vast majority of the students who participated were recorded by the university as White British (although, as the identities they claimed in the workshops demonstrated, for many, their understanding of their ethnicity was more fine-grained than this). Only 9% of the participants (n=24) were recorded by the university as being from 'non-white' ethnicities. By our calculation, 17 of these students (71%) were women. In total, 39 (15%) of the students who participated in the project were recorded as having a disability (most of these either being specific learning disabilities or chronic mental health issues). In most years, students with disabilities represented less than 10% of the cohort. However, in 2013/14 they were 26% (n=14) of the group and the following year they were 20% (n=12). It is not clear if this represents a change

in the composition of the student population, or a change in the University's reporting mechanisms.

In the context of developing an undergraduate module on 'Geography and the Everyday Politics of Identity', the authors collaborated on a workshop for use with undergraduate geography students. The workshop was run in the opening two-hour session of the module, before any substantive module content had been delivered. The mis/fitting workshop took the form of an extended series of linked activities and discussions designed to help students reflect on their own senses of identity and how the different aspects of their identity were expressed in context. It was significant that this was a final-year module because the students had had time to get to know each other and were therefore well able to comment on their individual and collective relationships with the cohort, as well as its many factions. There had also been time to *become* a student; for their student identities to sediment; and, for them to become normalised in some ways (for some students, if not others).

Anecdotally, we know that a small number of students (mostly young white men) reflected afterwards that found the workshop unsettling and disconcerting, as they did not believe they had 'an identity'. However, we did not witness any ways in which they actively disrupted or disengaged from the workshop (although some of the more humorous responses noted later in the paper could be interpreted as minor acts of resistance or markers of their discomfort). The workshop itself began with a scripted statement setting some ground rules for the activities, designed to create a safe and inclusive learning environment. We encouraged students to help us create a space where they and their peers could feel able to be honest with each other. With these ground rules in place, the workshop began. Students were asked to stand up in a single large circle, facing each other, around the room. Within this circle, they were encouraged, in turn, to quickly name one or

two identities that they had which they felt comfortable sharing with the group. They were told just to name these identities, not to explain or contextualise them. We encouraged students, as they were thinking about what to say, to notice how comfortable they were with saying somethings in this group but not others; to pay attention to which identities were easy to claim there and which were not.

Next, students were asked to organise themselves into small groups. We suggested that they might want to link up, not with their existing close friends, but with people who they had just discovered might share common identities with them. In these trios, the students were asked to think about and then answer the questions “How well does the word ‘geographer’ fit you? Why (or why not)?” Each student was given one minute to talk about this, without interruption, to the others in their group; and then a second round (after each of them had spoken once) so that they could elaborate on what they had said previously, or feed off ideas and comments the others had made in their talks.

The workshop then shifted back into a plenary. Based on what they had observed during their University career, and what they had heard and thought about during the workshop, the students were encouraged to fill in ‘everyone seems’ sheets, wherein they reflected upon particular identity norms at the University and more widely within the city.

Once most students had completed a few of these slips, we collected them and read out a random selection. On every occasion, the resulting statements offered a mix of humour and pathos. Typically, some themes were repeated several times by multiple participants; but also, different students within the group would articulate diametrically opposed assumptions about the people round them.

Next, building on this exercise and on their earlier discussions about their sense of identity, in their trios, the students were asked to each to take two, one-minute turns to talk about the following question:

“Apart from being a geography student, what are the other identities that are important to you, and how do you feel about that identity when you are here at the University of Leicester? How easy is it to be open about the other elements of your identity at University?”

As they were talking, they wrote down the identities that are important to them on adhesive labels. Thereafter, the students were invited to stick their (identity) labels on to a long sheet of paper at the front of the classroom (Figure 1 – which is best viewed online). They were instructed to think of this sheet as a continuum running from those identities that it was easy to be (or talk about) in the Geography department through to those that they thought were difficult to be (or talk about) there.

**Insert Figure 1 here**

The resultant long paper scrolls containing the students’ assembled component identities constituted the main data analysed for this paper. We analysed five sets from sequential cohorts. Photographs were taken of each scroll, which are used to illustrate this paper. Each scroll was also transcribed as a table in MS Word, paying close attention to how labels were positioned in relation to each other (as best as possible); the images in Figures 1 – 5 show each in their original form. The transcribed tables were then thematically coded in NVivo. In analysing these data, we looked both for the frequency with which particular (groups of) identities were named by students, as well as paying attention to patterns in the clustering of how identities were assembled by students on the scrolls. Because the individual



identities named by students on these scrolls were placed anonymously, our analysis cannot disaggregate the multiple, intersecting identities of individual students. Instead, what these data do very well is to present a sense of how students managed, presented and performed their identities in relation to each other –crucially, how they were assembled, and assembled themselves, into a *cohort*.

Insert Figures 2 – 5 here

#### **4 COMPONENTS OF COHORTNESS**

In the rest of this paper, we examine three components of cohortness that emerged from our data. We use our analyses for two purposes: firstly, and more immediately, to distil key, empirical facets of cohortness that are characteristic of the (in some cases diverse, in some cases fairly homogeneous) identity traits of students at an English University; secondly, and in combination with the earlier discussion, we extrapolate from these components a more general theory of cohortness that could be applied to (m)any identity groups, but especially those ‘throwntogether’ in institutional or other contexts (Massey 2005). We highlight three significant themes: intertextual dialogues; (in)visible norms and commonalities; and, the significance of personality. Each of these themes is framed by an often ambivalent articulation of contemporary (neoliberal) ideals around studenthood and the HE sector (Andersson et al., 2012; Holton and Riley, 2013).

##### **4.1 Intertextual dialogues**

A key starting point for our analysis is the observation that the workshop itself – as a rather contrived space of encounter – framed a series of performances and, especially, *dialogues* as students stepped up to disclose their identities. Our argument is not only that each of the five scrolls is different because of the diverse students in each year, but that mixtures of deliberation and chance produced *within* each cohort a series of in-class, intertextual dialogues. Although we build on work on the geographies of encounter (e.g. Wilson, 2017), a distinct feature of our analysis is the emphasis upon (fairly minimal) textual utterances as that acted as the centrifuge for performances of cohortness. Whether or not these accurately reflected the identities of individuals or subsets of the group is not our concern here – although, certainly, we are aware that a range of power relations, both implicit and explicit, will have led to the disclosure of some identity-traits and concealment of others (as we discuss in the next section). Rather, and notwithstanding these power relations, our interest is in what was ultimately produced – in the kinds of intertextual, intra-cohort dialogues that were articulated during the workshops and that ‘made it’ onto the scrolls.

One way in which the students visualised a sense of *what mattered* (Horton and Kraftl, 2009) during the workshops was in the positioning of similar identity traits in proximal places on the scroll. This practice was evident, for instance, in two scrolls: in 2012-13, students placed a number of broadly ‘sports’-related identities in a similar position (broadly top and middle-left, ‘easy to be here’); in 2014-15, several students added labels pertaining to location-based identities – particularly national and regional identities within the United Kingdom (broadly middle and bottom-left, again, ‘easy to be here’). Conversely, in 2012-13, students’ feelings about inter-personal relationships were polarised into two distinct (and in each case, proximate) camps: being a sibling or other family member was ‘easy’, whereas being a girlfriend (in particular) was ‘hard’. Whilst students in other cohorts agreed that

being a sibling or family member was often 'easy', this was the only cohort in which such attention was given to the difficulty of being a girlfriend.

By contrast, selected identity traits seemed to transcend year groups, affording a wider sense in which each class was also part of a longer-term cohort of students. On this front, and unsurprisingly, identities and aspects of identities related to being a student (and a geographer) were 'easy' to claim at university. Meanwhile, the student-related identities that were harder to occupy were those that marked individual students out from their peers, or set them outside their cohort in either a temporal and/or spatial sense— being a returning year abroad student, someone who commutes from home, or who did not live in halls in the first year (compare Holdsworth, 2006; Fincher and Shaw, 2011). Interestingly, although present in all five scrolls, these kinds of identities were particularly evident in the 2013-14 and 2014-15 cohorts.

Finally, the ostensibly anonymous nature of the scroll task – wherein the scrolls were displayed for the whole class to see, and we read out selected highlights/common themes to the class – meant that in-cohort, intertextual dialogues also held a performative quality (see Staunæs, 2003, on the performativity of (intersectional) identities). The scrolls witnessed a range of in-jokes (who is 'Roger the Alien?'), ongoing conversations (of which the labels were a mid-way 'snippet'), current concerns, angsts and fears (from mental health issues to alcohol consumption) and current affairs (from the fortunes of the city's football club to recent musical trends). In some cases, and reading the scrolls at some temporal and spatial distance, the juxtaposition of probable silliness with rather more poignant, even concerning labels, is one that strikes us in several places. Just one example (from 2015-16) was the fairly proximal placements of 'sheep shagger' with 'one lung'. We are of course not

in a position to judge each of these labels in terms of their seriousness or not; yet, as Horton (2010) points out, these labels point to the vast array of stuff that simply goes on, in the everyday constitution of peer-to-peer relations, and which so often goes under-the-radar of those in authority.

A crude quantification of the location of different types of identities reveals some interesting trends. Identities based on bodily performances (i.e. things the students 'do'), which were by far the most common identities claimed (representing 15% of the total identities over the five cohorts), were easier to claim than not (these identities were claimed as 'easy to claim' 117 times, compared to the 45 times they were placed neutrally, or the 45 times students thought they were 'hard to claim' amongst their peers). Similar patterns occur for place-based identities (8.3% of the total); study-related identities (6.7% of the total); and, sports-related identities (also 6.7% of the total). In contrast, identities based on personality traits (7.8% of the total) and body size or shape (3.8%) were more negatively positioned, with the largest number of codings for these being as identities that were 'hard to claim' in the department. Spotting cumulative trends across the cohorts is trickier and there are no particular identity categories that appear to have become either significantly harder or easier to claim over time. Clearly this is a qualitative study and while these quantitated patterns are interesting, there is little of significance that can be inferred or generalised from them.

Our argument thus far is, then, that cohortness may be articulated through intertextual dialogues, which, in turn, may constitute performances of a kind. The research was generative regarding cohorts: we witnessed the *assembling* or becoming-assemblage (if that is not a tautology) of cohorts and hence the social world (deLanda, 2006). The

activity facilitated the stickiness of togetherness (and of divisions, and of outliers) that will have circulated beyond the workshops, shaping and texturing a cohort. These kinds of lively dynamic and performance enabled – at a micro-scale – individuals to work across difference and create a sense of being part of a cohort, even if they did not necessarily feel they *belonged* (compare Wood, 2017). These dialogues manifested in three ways: through the proximal placing of similar identity traits; through facets that seemed to transcend year groups, but nonetheless characterise ‘our’ cohort of students over the meso-scale of five academic years; and, through a sense in which the labels provided short extracts (and performances) of ongoing conversations, in-jokes and concerns. These observations underlie the rest of our analysis, even where in some cases we emphasise commonalities and/or differences across cohorts.

#### **4.2 (In)visible norms and commonalities**

At a basic level, the relative positioning of identities that are ‘easy’ or ‘hard’ to have as students reveals something of the commonalities shared within this cohort. However, the types of identities that were named (repeatedly) when set against those that were not named (so commonly or assertively) is indicative of normative processes that might delineate the boundaries of the cohort (or, indeed, any identity group; see, for instance, Dowling, 2009, on class). So, for example, sporting interests (both as active participants and as supporters) were named frequently as ‘easy to be’. However, it seems that there was a hierarchy of ‘legitimate’ sports - and it was more ambivalent to be a cricketer or have an interest in Formula 1, than to be a footballer or a rugby player. While to be an enthusiast for a particular sport, or a follower of a specific sports team appeared to be accepted and

celebrated by the group, this contrasted with declaring oneself a 'fan', which was frequently declared 'hard to be'.

To declare oneself as a 'fan' of a particular musical artist also appeared discredited amongst the cohort. We interpret this as a marker of excessive interest in a sports club or musician that sets individuals outside the collectively-constituted norms of the group. We also suspect that fandom as understood as something immature that students should have outgrown by the end of their undergraduate careers (compare Horton, 2010). As in our previous discussion about intertextual dialogue, there are hints here of the ways in which norms operated and were policed within the group.

Another marker of the acceptance of certain (unremarked) norms within the cohorts as the way in which students appeared to take for granted some aspects of their presentation of self, without needing to *name* it, or affiliate it with a named identity or subculture. Rather than declare themselves as members of particular subcultures, several students in the cohorts simply stated that their identity was comprised of 'the music/clothes I like'. While this might be indicative of a period that is (still) post-subcultures (Bennett 2010), we argue that these students' statements might also be indicative of a commonplace comfort with knowing that the things they wear and listen to fit (enough) within the defining boundaries of their cohort (Miller 2010). As Miller (2010) suggests, these might not be norms with strong disciplinary effects in action, but they are markers of comfortable proximity to what is deemed 'ordinary' and unremarkable within the cohort. We return to this argument in the next section.

We identified and witnessed other ways in which this comfortable proximity was articulated within the cohort. For example, few students named an identity based upon their political

beliefs or actions. This suggests that, in this context, talking politics can be uncomfortable. Having said this, almost all of the (small group of students) who named a political identity saw themselves as 'feminist', some variety of left-wing/socialist, or as environmentalists. If a political identity must be named, these affiliations are not deemed particularly out of place within a geography cohort (at their university). Even so, an analysis of where students placed their political identities on the scrolls, suggests that claiming a belief system was easier (or, at least, less ambivalent) than being an activist for that cause. Once again, we infer that to declare oneself as an 'activist' is to present oneself as *excessively* political, and therefore on the periphery of the cohort.

Although there were very few mentions of sexual identities, what was very clear here was the sharp distinction between heterosexuality (so common and assumed that it is quite literally unremarked by most students) and bisexual, gay, and lesbian identities. In this context, even a potentially disreputable expression of heterosexuality (as a 'dogger' interested in public sex) appeared easier to claim amongst the group than most LGBT identities. Having said this, gay (male) identities appeared somewhat easier to claim in this context than lesbian or bisexual identities – we cannot know whether this is an expression of emerging 'homonormativity' at a society level, or a consequence of having *visible* gay men amongst the teaching staff in the department. More generally, however, these examples demonstrated the ways in which norms and boundaries for this cohort were expressed and policed *through* the spaces of encounter constituted by the workshops (compare Lobo, 2014).

#### **4.3 The significance of personality, performance and embodiment**

Feminist scholars have for decades sought to elucidate the significance of the body to the expression of identity (e.g. Rose, 1993; Colls and Hoerschelmann, 2009). In a sense, the rather reductive nature of the workshop – the production of labels – mitigated in principle against the articulation of nuanced observations about how bodies were of expressive (or not) of particular kinds of identity. However, it transpired that the number of labels pertaining to embodiment (3.8% of total), bodily performances (15.8%), and personality traits (7.8%) was (in overall terms, a combined 27.5% of the total) 2-3 times larger than any of the other categories (the next most common being place-based identities at 8.3% of the total). On this front, we would pick out three particularly significant kinds of identity trait that characterised our student groups, across the five cohorts.

Firstly, and developing our arguments above about *what matters*, many students pointed to the apparently *mundane* nature of their personality and bodily traits. As Miller (2008: 1-3), writing about the material cultures of Londoners' homes has argued, reducing people's lives to conventional social-scientific identity categories might help identify some of the structural inequalities that constrain their life chances, but it is inadequate to providing a deep understanding of the feelings, frustrations and delights that provide meaning in their lives. As we intimated above, Miller (2010: 424) argues that, rather than adhering to rigid social rules and norms, people in contemporary British society seek to achieve 'ordinariness', which is most frequently achieved through the attainment of 'comfort' (both physical comfort and 'comfort' as a social quality). This state allows people to achieve a sense of 'inconspicuousness' and 'unobtrusiveness' where they do not feel as if they stand out from the crowd (even if, in many ways, their subject position might be expected to differentiate and distinguish them from the majority in any given context) (Miller 2010: 424). In this regard, it is perhaps not surprising that students articulated *personality* traits



over identity categories. In doing so, they drew attention to the embodied ways in which they felt (dis)comfort amongst their cohort, and (partially) obscured those identity categories that might produce fault lines within the cohort (Sinfield 1992).

Secondly, we were struck by how – when taken as a group – the students seemed to construct *norms* (of sorts) in terms of what was ‘acceptable’ (and what was not) when performing the identity of a geography student at the University of Leicester. For instance, many students found it hard to hold identities that connoted drug or alcohol consumption that was excessive or ‘unacceptable’. They tempered being a ‘hardworker’ (easy or fairly easy) with being a nerd, and contrasted being a people person with being ‘cool’. In these ways, the students seemed – through intertextual dialogues that will inevitably have reflected wider conversations in their peer and friendship groups – to be constructing, policing and, in some cases, querying the particular norms that characterised studenthood for their cohorts. Thus, students contested some of the stereotypical characteristics (surrounding alcohol consumption, for instance) that Holton and Riley (2013) argue still underpin some analyses of student life.

Finally, the students used the occasion of the workshops to raise, reinforce and challenge some of the neoliberal traits that (they are told) future employers might want (also Cheng, 2016). For instance, several of the students, across the cohorts, noted how hard it was to want a *really* good job and to focus on their career development whilst at university – as if being ‘too serious’ about one’s career was outside the performative norms of the cohort. In one sense, this raised a series of questions about the effect that attending University – and being part of a cohort with particular kinds of collective ambitions – could have on students’ career development, although our data do not enable us to delve into this issue any further.

In another sense – through what appear to be quite deliberate intertextual dialogues – the students made explicit links between ‘neoliberal’ character traits (such as self-reliance, flexibility, and aspiration) and expectations and the underlying mental health issues (stress, depression) that may result. The confluence of pressure to succeed with mental health issues was particularly evident in the ‘hard to be here’ section of the 2011-12 cohort (where ‘perfection’, ‘depression’ and ‘anxious’ were proximate). As we argued above, these traits – and their juxtaposition with apparently altogether less ‘serious’ and prosaic facets of identity – afforded a far wider sense of *what matters* to students, both as individuals and as a cohort, in both reproducing and contesting the tropes of neoliberalism that appear to frame contemporary HE spaces (Brooks et al., 2016). Our intention here is less to engage in on-going debates about the affective life of neoliberalism (Anderson 2016) than to argue that those affects identified with neoliberalism are throwntogether with a range of other embodied traits and performances in the interactions of (student) cohorts in ways that exceed most analyses of neoliberal subjectification.

## **5 CONCLUSIONS**

Although inspired by recent scholarship on intersectionality, encounter and generations, we argue that (whether separately or in combination) none of these strands of work adequately explains the ways in which students articulated their senses of identity, (mis)fitting and belonging in our study. Moreover, whilst more traditional, sociological deployments of the term ‘cohort’ – as articulated in the second section of the paper – have some resonance, the term has hitherto not been adequately theorised. We contend that a theory of cohortness might not only help explain our students’ experiences, but those of cohorts who come

together in a vast range of institutional, workplace and leisure settings. A theory of cohortness requires an un-tethering of the notion of cohortness from overt generational analyses, and a more wide-ranging conceptualisation of what constitutes cohortness. Central to this conceptualisation is an understanding of cohorts as phenomena that *frame* multiple aspects of human experience (such as belonging, subjectivity, individual and group identity), which may be extremely powerful in the constitution of those experiences, but which may equally be resisted or (virtually) irrelevant to certain people, in certain places, at certain times. To elaborate beyond this central point, and based upon our analyses, we contend that a theory of cohortness should contain at least five features (indicated below), which could frame and inspire future studies of cohort identities within human geography and beyond. However, clearly, analyses of other kinds of cohorts, in different institutional spaces and geographical contexts, might emphasise other characteristics, so these features are posited as key points of departure rather than a programmatic 'agenda' for future research.

First, our groups of students do not constitute discrete generations. Or, rather, to be more precise: being part of five successive year groups, they *are* part of a generation of *students*, most of whom had to pay the newer, higher tuition fee rate in England. And they are not *just* a generation, since it is not only (perhaps ever) their birth year that matters, but a vast range of other traits (and here we note overlap with concepts of generation that do admit heterogeneity [e.g. Woodman and Wyn, 2014]). And they are not *all* part of a generation by either year or place of birth – in each cohort, there were older students, students not born in the UK, and overseas exchange students. Thus, future scholarship could think more carefully and critically about the nuanced ways in which generational synchronicity is entangled with, and exceeded by, the vast range of other traits that constitute cohortness –

especially in institutional or other settings where there may be yet-more diverse individuals in terms of (for instance) age or place of birth (with large and complex workplaces such as multinational headquarters or hospitals being two obvious examples).

Second, there was an explicit temporality and spatiality to being a student in one of our classes. There was a 'throwntogetherness' that exceeded the immediacy of work on the geographies of encounter, since the students inhabited the same space for at least a semester, if not the full three years of their study (also Andersson et al., 2012). There was a contingency – a synchronicity – that is only partly a function of students' 'generation'.

Meanwhile, the university classroom is a very different space to the (multicultural) public urban realm in which much work on the geographies of encounter has taken place (Wilson, 2017). Certainly, it is in many ways a more privileged, exclusionary and 'closed' space; yet – like the other kinds of spaces to which our theory of cohortness might apply – it is also a space imbued with *other* possibilities, in which *other* negotiations of difference and identity might *matter*. Thus, we argue that whilst theories of encounter could be useful in developing analyses of cohortness, those theories require a wider definition of 'encounter' that spills into and is aware of the longer-term routines, habits and rituals of everyday life.

Third, in a reflexive sense, our work with the students did, by its very nature, articulate a sense of collective consciousness amongst the students present, and not least through the intertextual dialogues that were generated on the scrolls. Whilst this *consciousness* might have been shared during the encounter of the fitting/misfitting exercise, it should not be inferred that students' stake in that consciousness was shared in any other sense. Rather, it was differentiated by both the sheer diversity of character traits, bodily capacities, interests, political associations and social categories that the students chose to share in any given

year; and it was also differentiated by their levels of investment in (and, in some cases, boredom, frustration or difficulty with) the session. Therefore, we have sought to instigate a 'twist' to more traditional, intersectional forms of analyses (e.g. Hopkins, 2017): rather than considering the various identity traits that constitute an *individual's* identity, we have examined how intersecting identity categories, character traits, embodied performances and more were combined in the production of *collective* norms, tensions, differences, boundaries, in-jokes and more besides, and how those were heightened or downplayed in any given year group. We would argue that considerable further work is required in order to understand the nuances of how cohort identities are produced through such intersecting processes and concerns.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, in methodological and conceptual senses, the *outputs* from the session represented *collective* (cohort) expressions of identity, as much as they were contrived of words placed there by individuals. The exercise did not, really, overcome or undermine the idea of the individuated human subject as much as the more radical post-phenomenologies might require (Ash and Simpson, 2016). Yet, in distinction to the vast majority of studies on identity, with their reliance upon interviewing or biography, the five scrolls (Figures 1 - 5) represent a *collective* endeavour – a collective expression of identity, even if it was not in any sense coherent. It is hard, even for us, to identify individual students from these scrolls, and to trace the particular inputs any individual made. These scrolls are assemblages of sorts (DeLanda 2006; Anderson and McFarlane 2011); they bear witness to a large-group encounter over a couple of hours, which, involving up to 70 students at a time, were neither strictly micro-scale nor macro-scale in nature but, perhaps, *meso-scale*. More specifically, and, notably (given the nonrepresentational bent of much

recent work on assemblages and subjecthood in geography) they are *textual* assemblages. The scrolls are (quite barely) articulated and centred around the production of simple descriptors and labels. Yet those assemblages are, in turn, ciphers for a huge amount of material work – assemblages of students’ lives-to-that-point, of the particularities, mundanities and materialities of student life at their university, and of the performative, rhythmic comings-and-goings of the fitting/misfitting exercise itself. The scrolls represent forms of synchronous intertextuality (presented as actually fairly simple textual material) that in their post-hoc reading efface the sheer, performative work involved as students – tentatively at first – stepped up to the scrolls, alongside and in full view of their peers, and considered where to place their stickers. Therefore, we would call for geographers and others to experiment with other methodologies – perhaps involving ethnographic, participatory, artistic, or digital social media approaches – through which cohort identities and their lively *assembling* could be interrogated, and the other ‘texts’, performances and emotions that comprise cohorts could be witnessed. A particular application of this aspect of our theory of cohortness might be within other arenas in which texts and especially *brief* (inter-)textual encounters mediate life (such as in social media, where forms of social network analysis might also prove useful for analysing and visualising cohorts).

Finally, whilst cohorts and their theorisation extend beyond the purview of geographers, we have sought to highlight some particularly geographical elements of cohortness. The most important of these is the sense of throwntogetherness – or, as we have specified, *synchronicity* – that emerges in the ways in which individuals are corralled into institutional and other collective spaces. We have been at pains to emphasise how the everyday, emotional, material experience and *performance* of that synchronicity can at once be

accidental and deliberate, and can at once lead to both senses of belonging and exclusion. In other words, as we argued at the beginning of this paper, the spatialities and scales of cohorts – from the classroom in which our fitting/misfitting exercise took place, to the University campus and the city in which it is situated, to the increasingly-globally-circulating discourses of neoliberalism that we articulated at the end of the paper – are key to the ways in which they *frame* senses of belonging, identification, and/or subjectification. Cohorts may form a part of an individual's or a group's experience of identity; cohorts may contain diverse and often competing subject positions; and cohortness may be performed (and represented) in intertextual dialogues such as those we presented in the first part of our analyses; yet cohorts do not necessarily or neatly correspond *with* those subject positions. And this is, in part, because cohorts are materially and symbolically *emplaced* – whether institutionally, legally or serendipitously. They are also, by extension, not merely spatial but dynamic: the spatiotemporalities of cohorts see the entanglement of multiple spatial and temporal scales – from the immediacy of intertextual encounters, performances and dialogues in the classroom through the rhythms of undergraduate life, to the generational positioning of (largely) young, English, middle-class undergraduate students in an era of tuition fees and neoliberalisation. Indeed, future scholarship might draw on this aspect of our theory of cohortness to assess the multiple temporalities and durations of cohorts in ways that our research could not, perhaps following some of the methodological pointers indicated above. Beyond the experiences of students, however, and beyond the groundswell of geographical literature that is examining their lives, we argue for a closer interrogation of the manifold and diverse incarnations of cohorts. In conversation with (and exceeding) languages of belonging, identity and subjectification, such a move should enable

yet-richer, more contextually-aware, and nuanced conceptualisations of a facet of *collective* human experience that has hitherto gone under-theorised and under-researched.

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