The University of
Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Ashwin, Paul and Abbas, Andrea and McLean, Monica (2016) Conceptualising transformative undergraduate experiences: a phenomenographic exploration of students' personal projects. British Educational Research Journal, 42 (6). pp. 962-977. ISSN 1469-3518

Access from the University of Nottingham repository:
http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/39654/7/Ashwin_et_al-2016-British_Educational_Research_Journal.pdf

Copyright and reuse:

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the repository url above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact eprints@nottingham.ac.uk

Conceptualising transformative undergraduate experiences: A phenomenographic exploration of students' personal projects

Paul Ashwin[a]*, Andrea Abbas[b] and Monica McLean[c]
[a]Lancaster University, UK; [b]University of Bath, UK; [c]University of Nottingham, UK

Existing ways of understanding the transformative potential of students' undergraduate experiences either focus solely on the formal educational elements of these experiences or present an overly static picture of students' intentions in engaging in higher education. In this article we argue that the notion of 'personal project' offers a more flexible way of understanding what students are trying to gain from being at university. Based on a phenomenographic analysis of interviews with 31 students over the three years of their degrees, we examine how sociology students' accounts of their personal projects develop over the three years of their degree programmes and how these relate to their accounts of their integration into their institutions and the development of their intellectual engagement with their discipline. We argue that students' accounts of their personal projects are relatively stable over the course of their degrees but do not appear to shape the development of their intellectual engagement with their degree programme. What appears to be more significant is whether or not students understand their time at university as an educational experience. Based on this, we argue that the transformative elements of an undergraduate education lie in students developing their personal projects and intellectual engagement through the educational context that is offered at university.

Keywords: higher education; knowledge; personal projects; phenomenography; students; transformation

Introduction

Higher education is often claimed to be transformative, yet the ways in which it is transformative are not well understood. For example, Watson (2014) raised a number of questions about this transformation such as: What is it about higher education that is supposed to change students? How do these changes come about? and What is needed for them to occur?

The existing literature that examines students' transformations in higher education either tends to focus solely on the formal educational elements of these experiences or present an overly static picture of students' intentions in engaging in higher education.

*Corresponding author. Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 5BD, United Kingdom. Tel: +44 (0)1524 594443
Email address: p.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk; Twitter: @paulashwin

There are two areas of literature that tend to focus solely on the ways in which students are transformed in relation to the formal educational elements of their experiences. Research into 'transformative learning' (Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2007, 2008) and 'transformative teaching' (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012) focus on the ways in which participating in particular programmes of study lead to changes in the ways that students interpret the world or their experiences. The focus tends to be on examining the extent to which aspects of programme design support students in going through the stages of transformative experiences. Similarly, the literature on threshold concepts focuses on how students are transformed by their engagement with knowledge in their undergraduate degrees (Meyer & Land, 2005). A second area of literature does take account of students' wider experiences at university but focuses on the extent to which these experiences support students in becoming 'independent' (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007; Christie *et al.*, 2008, 2016) or 'ideal' learners (Reay *et al.*, 2009, 2010; Gale & Parker, 2014).

Thus both these areas of the literature position students' personal transformation solely in terms of their identities as 'learners' rather than 'students' (Ashwin, 2009) and thus implicitly assume that it is the educational aspects of these experiences that lead to changes in students' sense of who they are and their relations with the world.

Research into students' orientations to university (for example, Clark & Trow, 1966; Beaty *et al.*, 1997; Morgan & Beaty, 1997; Spronken-Smith *et al.*, 2009; Brint, 2012) does provide a focus on students' wider university experiences. While student orientation to university typologies initially focused on whether or not students were involved with ideas and identified with their institutions (Clark & Trow, 1966), more recently they have been extended to include a wider range of reasons that students attend university and a wider range of possible relationships that students could have with their institution. For example, Brint's (2012) extended typology categorises the reasons for attending university in terms of intellectual development, skills development, having fun or gaining a qualification and students' relationships with their institutions to whether students have a positive, neutral or hostile relationship to their institution.

While it does provide a greater focus on students' wider experiences, there are two limitations with the students' orientations approach to understanding students' personal transformation through their university experiences. First, in a range of learning orientations research (for example, Clark & Trow, 1966; Beaty *et al.*, 1997; Morgan & Beaty, 1997; Spronken-Smith *et al.*, 2009; Brint, 2012), it is assumed that students are either mainly focused on the economic value of their degree or in knowledge for its own sake whereas there is evidence that this is not the case (Hurst, 2010, 2013). These assumptions can be seen to reflect class-based stereotypes about students' engagement with their universities (Hurst, 2010, 2013; Keane 2012).

Second, while it does take greater account of students' non-educational experiences, the students' orientations approach presents a static sense of students' university experiences. The logic of students' orientations is that adopting a particular orientation leads students to engage with their university experiences in particular kinds of way, which, in turn, leads to particular kinds of outcomes for both students and institutions (for example, see Clark & Trow, 1966; Beaty *et al.*, 1997; Morgan & Beaty, 1997; Sproken-Smith *et al.*, 2009; Brint, 2012). This is in stark contrast to the

research cited earlier (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007; Christie *et al.*, 2008, 2016; Ashwin, 2009; Reay *et al.*, 2009; 2010; Gale & Parker, 2014), which highlights how the knowledge that students encounter at university can change their sense of who they are and, critically, the meaning of being at university.

Together these two limitations mean that research on students' orientations to higher education suffers from a lack of dynamism within the categories that are produced. This appears to be because rather than focusing on the relations between the different elements that make-up students' orientations and how students can build orientations in new and interesting ways, the focus has been on orientations as a holistic expression of students' university trajectories.

An alternative way of understanding students' transformative experiences of higher education is offered by research that has examined three dimensions of student experience (Dubet, 2000; Jary & Lebeau, 2009). These are 'personal projects', which reflect students' view of the value and usefulness of what they are studying; students' level of social integration into university life; and students' level of intellectual engagement with their studies. Using this framework, students' personal transformations can be seen to occur when they have personal projects that are directed to changing who they are. Thus, students' personal transformations are analytically separated from their engagement with their institutions and their engagement with knowledge. This means that this framework allows for a separate consideration of (1) what university is for, (2) how students relate to their institutions and (3) the academic ideas that they encounter and (4) a consideration of how these three elements impact on each other. In this article, we draw on Dubet's framework to explore how students' personal projects, their views of their institution (social integration) and their views of knowledge (intellectual engagement) develop over time and relate to each other. This exploration is based on a phenomenographic analysis of interviews with students over the three years of their sociology degrees in four United Kingdom (UK) institutions.

Methods

The research project

The Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University First Degrees Project was a three-year investigation of sociology and related social science degree courses in four universities, which were given the pseudonyms Prestige, Selective, Community and Diversity Universities in order to reflect their different reputations. The departments at Prestige and Selective have been regularly rated in the top third of UK higher education league tables for their research and teaching in sociology, while those at Community and Diversity have been regularly rated in the bottom third.

This article reports on a phenomenographic analysis (Marton & Booth, 1997) of 86 interviews with the 31 case-study students who we interviewed in over the course of their undergraduate degrees. Twenty-four of these students were interviewed in all three years and seven were interviewed in their second and third years. These interviews focused on students' identities, their experiences of studying at university and their wider experiences outside university. In each interview they were asked about what they were hoping to get out of being at university and what they felt they were

getting. It was on these aspects of the interview transcripts that the analysis for this article was focused.

The case-study students were self-selecting participants who responded to invitations to be involved in the project that were distributed to all first-year students studying criminology or sociology at each institution in the first year of the project (2008). They were given a £20 shopping voucher for their involvement in each interview and were interviewed by members of the project team who were from a different institution and, therefore, not involved in teaching or assessing them. There were nine students from each of Diversity and Prestige, seven from Selective and six from Community who acted as case-study students. In reporting the outcomes each student has been given a pseudonym. In phenomenography a sample should maximise the potential variation in accounts between participants (Trigwell, 2006). Table 1 sets out the demographic information for the case study sample compared to the students studying social studies degrees in each of the institutions. It shows that the case-study students include a higher proportion of older, minority ethnic, male and working-class students, as well as students who identified themselves as having a

Table 1. Demographic information of case study students compared to social studies student populations for each institution

	Diversity		Community		Selective		Prestige	
	Sample No (%)	All[1] (%)	Sample No (%)	All[1] (%)	Sample No (%)	All[1] (%)	Sample No (%)	All[1] (%)
Age								
18–21	4 (44)	80	4 (66)	90	3 (42)	80	8 (88)	100
22+	5 (56)	20	2 (33)	10	4 (58)	20	1 (11)	0
Ethnicity[2]								
White British	1 (11)	20	6 (100)	90	3 (43)	50	5 (36)	40
Black British	2 (22)	10		0	1 (14)	10	1 (11)	0
British Mixed Ethnicity	2 (22)	10		0	3 (43)	0	1 (11)	0
Asian British	2 (22)	20		0		10	1 (11)	10
International	2 (22)	40		0		30	1 (11)	40
Gender								
Female	6 (66)	80	2 (33)	70	4 (57)	70	7 (88)	80
Male	3 (33)	20	4 (66)	30	3 (43)	30	2 (11)	20
Identified self as having a disability								
No	6 (66)	100	5 (83)	90	5 (71)	90	9 (100)	90
Yes	3 (33)	0	1 (17)	10	2 (29)	10		10
Social class[3]								
Middle	4 (44)	50	2 (33)	50	4 (57)	70	7 (88)	80
Working	5 (56)	50	4 (66)	50	3 (43)	30	2 (11)	20

[1]Based on Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures for Social Studies in 2008–2009 (HESA Reference: 30690). Figures rounded to nearest 10% to protect the anonymity of the institutions
[2]Based on HESA categorisation of ethnicity
[3]Based on categorisation used in UK performance indicators on social class and participation in higher education.

disability and a lower proportion of international students compared to all students studying social sciences. In general, this maximises the potential variation between students in terms of these demographic factors. It should be noted that the majority of our case-study students and the majority of those studying social sciences were women. This is reflected in our use of student quotations in this article.

Students' personal projects

In this article we have analysed our interview data using a phenomenographic approach (Marton & Booth, 1997). We adopted this approach because it allowed us to examine qualitative differences in how students understood their purposes for being at university and then to examine how these changed over the three years of their degree. We conceptualised these purposes as evidence of students' personal projects in being at university.

Taking a phenomenographic approach, categories of description were formed by examining the variation in the meaning of students' accounts of purposes across all of the interview transcripts, rather than seeking to categorise each individual in the study (Marton & Booth, 1997; Åkerlind, 2005). This process involves examining both the qualitative variation and the logical relations between each of the categories of description. Categories are formed and reformed by moving between these two forms of examination with the aim of constituting a hierarchy of empirically grounded and logically consistent categories of description that together form an outcome space. This outcome space presents categories of description in an inclusive hierarchy based on the qualitative variation between the different categories. (Marton & Booth, 1997; Åkerlind, 2005). This inclusive hierarchy means that each subsequent category of description includes the previous one and that the final category includes all the others: thus it is the variation between the categories, rather than the categories themselves, that is the focus in phenomenography.

An inclusive hierarchy also means that any one interview may contain more than one of the categories of description constituted in the study. Thus when examining how students' accounts of their personal projects changed between their first and final interviews, individuals were assigned to the highest category of description that was evident in their interview. It is important to recognise that this is a use of phenomenographic outcome space rather than an aspect of phenomenographic analysis, which simply involves the creation of categories that represent the qualitative variation in participants' accounts of particular phenomena across all the transcripts in the study.

Finally, the claim being made about the outcome space is that it is constituted in the relation between the researcher and the data (Marton & Booth, 1997). Thus, it is accepted that the nested hierarchy of categories presented is not the only possible outcome that could be constituted from the data. What is important is that the categories can be argued for convincingly on the basis of the data [see Åkerlind (2005) for an analysis of the different approaches taken in phenomenographic studies]. The analysis of the data and the formation of the categories of description were initially carried out by the first author and then were checked by the other authors.

Students' social integration into their institutions and intellectual engagement

In order to gain a sense of students' social integration into their institutions, we considered how students appeared to position their integration into their institution. For example, did they see being at university as something that was focused on the courses they were studying, the wider university or both? Such questions allowed us to examine the relations between students' personal projects and their social integration in their institution.

To explore students' intellectual engagement, we drew on analysis from research reported in a previous article in order to consider how students' accounts of sociological knowledge in their first and final interviews related to their accounts of their personal projects and the context in which these personal projects were located (see Ashwin *et al.*, 2014). The five different ways of accounting for the discipline of sociology in this previous article were:

1. Sociology is about developing my opinions on a broad range of issues.
2. Sociology is the modules that I study.
3. Sociology is the study of societies/other people.
4. Sociology is the study of the relations between people and societies and includes me.
5. Sociology offers a number of different ways to study the relations between people and society each of which offers a different and partial picture of these relations.

These categories of description shift hierarchically from seeing sociology as about the development of the students' opinion, to seeing sociology as the modules that they study, to seeing sociology as the study of other people, to the student seeing themselves implicated in this kind of study, to seeing sociological knowledge as in some ways partial. Category 3 gives a systematic view of sociology, while Category 4 is crucial in the students seeing themselves as being implicated by what they study.

Overall, while this research focuses primarily on variation in students' personal projects at university, it also allows us to relate this to their social integration into their institutions and their intellectual engagement. So we can examine the extent to which students' personal projects drive their engagement in their institutions and with intellectual ideas as suggested by the students' orientation to university literature.

Research outcomes

We constituted five qualitatively different categories in which students accounted for their personal projects at university.

1. Being at university is about getting a degree;
2. Being at university is about learning things;
3. Being at university is about learning about myself;
4. Being at university is about changing as a person;
5. Being at university is about changing the world.

Table 2 sets out the outcome space as a whole and how the different categories of description fit within this. The structural aspects focus on the changes in what is in

Table 2. The referential and structural aspects of the categories of ways of describing the project of being at university

Structural aspects	Referential aspects		
	Gaining	Learning	Changing
General	1. Being at university is about getting a degree	2. Being at university is about learning things	
Self		3. Being at university is about learning about myself	4. Being at university is about changing as a person
World			5. Being at university is about changing the world

the foreground and background of the accounts. These shift from students' personal projects being focused on something very general, to the projects being focused on the students themselves, to the projects being focused on the world. The referential aspects focus on the meaning of the projects, which shifts from the project being about gaining things, to the project being about learning things, to the project being about changing things. These structural and referential aspects come together to form each category of description. So that under category 1 students' projects are about students generally gaining a degree, category 2 is about students generally learning, category 3 is about students learning about themselves, category 4 is about students changing themselves and under category 5 students' projects are about changing the world. Thus it is in relation to categories 4 and 5 that students' personal project appear to be focused on personal transformation. We now set out each of the categories in turn and to give a richer sense of the variation between the categories.

1. Being at university is about getting a degree

Students' accounts that aligned with this category described their personal projects in relation to university in terms of generally gaining a degree that would allow them to get on in their lives. There was a focus on the exchange value of having a degree, as illustrated in the quotation from Elliot, in which the process of getting a degree was very much in the background of their concerns.

> It means getting a foot up in things. It means being able to get to places where I'd like to. If there are things that I want to explore in life, getting a degree just helps so much. The education side is one thing and that's all well and good and I really do appreciate that, but sadly it doesn't work like that in the real world. It's not just a case of by really enjoying something that you get places. You get places by having a CV that says I've got a first class honours degree. (Elliot, Selective, Year 3)

> I'm here so I can get a First [class honours degree] or a 2:1 [Upper Second Class honours degree] and then just to be able to have a secure degree to get a comfortable job . . . I just want to be happy in my job, I want to be comfortable in my job and I want be able to afford the things I want. (Linda, Diversity, Year 3)

2. Being at university is about learning generally

The accounts of students that were aligned with this category described their projects in terms of the general things that they would learn by being at university. Their accounts of what they would learn through this process were not specific, but in contrast to category 1 there was a clear sense that they would gain something from the process of being at university as well as from the exchange value of their degree.

> I just want to gain a more insightful knowledge of the world . . . I want to know why people do things, what makes them do it, how they do it and everything like that. I think generally people are such a broad thing to study because you can just talk about them for days. (Lemar, Diversity, Year 1)

> I [came to university] to gain more knowledge about everything, like why people behave the way they do . . . Some people, they're prejudice against other people and stuff. Why are they like that because we're all humans? (Leena, Diversity, Year 2)

3. Being at university is about learning about myself

The accounts of students that were aligned with this category described their projects in terms of learning about themselves. In contrast to category 2 where the learning described was of a very general nature, in accounts that were aligned with category 3, students focused on what they would learn about who they were through the process of going to university.

> I'm really enjoying my time here. It sounds really clichéd but you kind of find yourself and I like who I am. Finally, I'm more confident. Yes, I'm more confident in myself which is the main thing which includes work and stuff but more so my own personality. I'm loving my time here, it's brilliant. (Fiona, Year 1, Prestige)

> I think I've been able to find out more about myself and I've been able to do more things for myself as well, such as like cooking a lot more and making sure that I get my priorities right. Also financially I've had to balance out money. (Elizabeth Year 2, Selective).

4. Being at university is about changing as a person

The accounts of students that were aligned with this category described their projects in terms of changing as a person. While in accounts aligned with category 3 students described learning about themselves without talking about changing who they were, in accounts aligned with category 4 students described becoming a different kind of person through their engagement with university.

> [I am a] totally different person . . . I am a lot more accommodating and tolerant then I was before. I would say a lot more independent . . . Even dress sense. Everything has changed, everything. I would go to a lecture in a tracksuit before, now I would not get caught dead in one . . . You never know what network event may come up in the evening. You can't go looking like a tramp. (Faith, Year 3, Prestige)

> I think it's the whole way of thinking anyway that you change. I don't know if you come to university and do something else, like business, I don't know maybe you open your eyes a little bit to different things, but in terms of sociology I think it has helped me to look at, it has helped me in my life ... I wanted to learn about sociology, I wanted to learn about theories, I wanted to understand society better. It has done that, I wanted to be a better person and it has done that. I wanted to improve and yeah, it has done that, I think. (Lauren, Year 3, Diversity)

5. Being at university is about changing the world

The accounts of students that were aligned with this category described their projects in terms of changing the world as well as changing themselves. In the accounts aligned with this category there was a sense that this change would not be easy and sometimes a sense of regret about what this commitment to changing the world will entail:

> I am really passionate about human rights and I'm really passionate about the politics behind that sort of thing. I don't think I could walk out of Uni with all of this awareness of the world and all of the things I know, the horrific things going on in the world and then just go in work in Boots [a retail outlet] and pretend nothing happened. It's not an option for me to do it but I just feel like all this time would be wasted by coming out of university ... I was one of these people who came to Uni and I wanted to get a degree and I didn't come here expecting to get all of this awareness. (Martin, Community, Year 3)

> I know that to change the world you will have to change yourself. So I am sort of conflicted. I know that I have to be able to gain a position wherein I can change the world, I can't change myself because the world is a class prejudiced world. And if I were to sort of go against all of that and not take advantage of the privileges that I have had, I won't get as far as I would if I did take advantage of those privileges... Because where I want to be at a certain point, will be in a position of a certain amount of power where I can make decisions that will impact peoples' lives. (Esther, Selective, Year 3).

Changes to students' personal projects over time

Table 3 sets out the highest category of sociology that could be identified in the students' interview transcript in their first interview, whether this was in their first or second year of undergraduate study, and their third year of undergraduate study.

Table 3 shows that 20 of the 31 students' accounts of their personal projects appeared to be the same in their third year as their initial interview (the unshaded cells). In nine cases the account of their personal project appeared to be more inclusive in their third year than their initial interview (the black cells). In two cases students' accounts appeared to be less inclusive in their third year than their initial interview (the grey shaded cells). This suggests that in general students' accounts of their personal projects appeared to be fairly stable over the course of their degrees with nearly two thirds of the students being aligned with the same category in their first and final interviews.

Table 3.   Relations between students' accounts of their personal projects in their first and final interviews

Initial highest category of description[1]	Year 3 highest category of description					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
1. Being at university is about getting a degree	8	0	2	0	0	10
2. Being at university is about learning things	1	1	0	1	1	4
3. Being at university is about learning about myself	0	0	5	3	1	9
4. Being at university is about changing as a person	0	0	1	4	1	6
5. Being at university is about changing the world.	0	0	0	0	2	2
Total	9	1	8	8	5	31

[1]In 24 cases this was an interview in their first year, in 7 cases this was in their second year

Students' social integration in their institutions

Students appeared to perceive their social integration into their institutions in different ways. Across the interviews we found that, in their accounts, students positioned their integration in relation to three different contexts: their course; the wider university context; and a combination of their course and the wider university context. The context that students positioned their integration in relation to did not appear to change between their interviews.

Course context.   Fourteen of the students perceived their integration with the university in terms of the course they were studying. When these students talked about their experiences of university and what they were gaining from it, they would talk primarily in terms of the course they were studying and the ideas they were engaging with through studying the course. For example, Lucia describes how much she has changed through her engagement with her course:

> I've gained so much confidence in believing in myself because the tutors always say to me 'you're doing a good job' and I always tell them what's going on … and it's helped me think differently and it's made me expand my mind and question things and challenge things … the university classroom has helped me take that and use that in my real life. (Lucia, Diversity, Year 2)

Similarly, Elliot describes his project at university in terms of arranging his coursework:

> I've always viewed being a student as a job and I feel that I'm self-employed. I have to do work, you always need to pick up contracts and stuff if you're self-employed, but again going back to the kind of, the more effort you put in, the more reward you get and I see it as the same thing. (Elliot, Selective, Year 3)

Wider university context.   In contrast, twelve of the students' accounts of their integration with their institution were focused on the wider university context. In these accounts, students emphasised that it was the experience of being at university with

other people and engaging in social activities that was far more central to their experiences than the course they were studying.

> I'd have to say, for me, I think it's more about the wider experience. If I sort of step out and look at it and look at how much I've changed, I think I've changed more than I've learnt, if that makes any sense and I'm so grateful for that. I've got a lot more confidence, more independent as I said … I see that change as more important to the future than that sort of educational change really. (Fiona, Prestige, Year 3)

> I've gained loads of friends, who will probably be friends with forever. I think I've become more sort of outgoing and better with people. I hope to gain more opportunities in life through things like meeting people and getting opportunities through people and getting my degree and everything really. It just opens more opportunities for anything really. (Mandy, Community, Year 2)

Course and wider university context.   Five of the students described their integration with university in terms of both their course and the wider university context. In these accounts, students emphasised the interactions between what they were learning on their course and the wider university context:

> It's completely changed me. Quite a lot I think to do with just what I'm studying because it's so completely different. I was never particularly interested in politics or anything like that before I came to university but now I really am and I am in this campaigning society for environmental issues and trade justice issues … I've always wanted to do a job to help people because I don't really see what else would really motivate me and now since I've sort of learnt all this politics and sociology and stuff I actually see how I can do that. (Fay, Prestige, Year 2)

> You have to do your own washing up and your own washing. You make your own tea and things like that and it makes you sort of grow up as a person. So I think in that way I would say that I would not be the same person today if I did not come to university … I would say both the course and experience together create the sort of the university, the graduate … because you learn responsibility, you learn the education. It sort of makes you a different person. You understand and you are able to do more things. (Mark, Community Year 3)

Relations between students' accounts of personal projects, integration into university and their intellectual engagement

Within this sample of students there appeared to be no strong relations between participants' ethnicity, gender, social class and their personal projects either in their first or final year and how they perceived their integration into university. Mature students were more likely than post-school entrants to perceive their integration with their institution in terms of their course (80% of mature students compared to 30% of post-school entrants). There were also no strong direct relations between students' accounts of their personal projects and their accounts of sociological knowledge in their first and third year interviews or in terms of the change over time.

Table 4.   Relations between students' accounts of their personal projects in their final year and context of integration into their institution

Year 3 highest category of description	Context of integration into the institution			
	Course	Wider University Context	Course & Wider University Context	Total
1. Being at university is about getting a degree	2 (14%)	7 (58%)	0	9
2. Being at university is about learning things	1 (7%)	0	0	1
3. Being at university is about learning about myself	4 (28%)	3 (25%)	1 (20%)	8
4. Being at university is about changing as a person	4 (28%)	2 (17%)	2 (40%)	8
5. Being at university is about changing the world.	3 (21%)	0	2 (40%)	5
Total	14 (100%)	12 (100%)	5 (100%)	31

However, Tables 4 and 5 show that there was evidence of relations between the context that students perceived their integration in relation to and their accounts of their personal projects and their accounts of sociological knowledge. In relation to their personal projects, 49% of students' accounts, which positioned their integration with their institution in relation to their course, presented the purposes of being at university as changing themselves or changing society. For those accounts which set the students' integration in the context of the course and wider university, 80% of students presented the purposes of being at university in terms of changing themselves or changing society. This was in contrast to those accounts that set the students integration in their institutions only in the context of the wider university, where only 17% saw being at university in this way.

There are similar patterns in relation to students' accounts of sociological knowledge, which are set out in Table 5. Within this outcome space from a previous study (Ashwin *et al.*, 2014), the crucial move is between categories 3 and 4 which move from seeing sociology as something outside the student to something in which the student is personally implicated. None of the students who perceived their integration with their institution solely in terms of the wider university gave accounts of sociological knowledge in which they were personally implicated, compared to 49% of students' who positioned their integration into the institution in relation to their course and 40% of students who positioned their integration with their institution in the context of their course and wider university.

Discussion

So what do these outcomes suggest about how students' personal projects develop over time and how this development relates to their views of their relation to their institution and the development of their relations to knowledge?

Table 5.   Relations between students' accounts of sociological knowledge in their final year and context of integration into their institution

Year 3 highest category of description	Context of integration into the institution			
	Course	Wider University Context	Course & Wider University Context	Total
1. Sociology is about developing my opinions on a broad range of issues.	1 (7%)	1 (8%)	1 (20%)	3
2. Sociology is the modules that I study.	2 (14%)	6 (50%)	0	8
3. Sociology is the study of societies/other people.	4 (28%)	5 (42%)	2 (40%)	11
4. Sociology is the study of the relations between people and societies and includes me.	3 (21%)	0	2 (40%)	5
5. Sociology offers a number of different ways to study the relations between people and society each of which offers a different and partial picture of these relations.	4 (28%)	0	0	4
Total	14 (100%)	12 (100%)	5 (100%)	31

First, these outcomes suggest that, contrary to what is implied by research into students' orientations to university, how students see the purpose of being at university is less significant than how they understand the context of their university experience. Students who focus solely on the wider university experience rather than their programmes of study appeared to give less inclusive accounts of both their personal projects and sociological knowledge in their third year. In particular, none of the students who were focused solely on their wider university experience had accounts of their personal projects that were focused on changing society. They also did not give accounts of sociological knowledge that involved seeing themselves as being implicated in the knowledge that they were studying.

This means that, contrary to the literature on students' orientations (Clark & Trow, 1966; Beaty *et al.*, 1997; Morgan & Beaty, 1997; Spronken-Smith *et al.*, 2009; Brint, 2012), it is not how students understand their primary purpose at university that is important nor is it whether or not students are hostile to their institutions that matters (Brint, 2012). Rather, what is crucial is whether students see going to university, at least partly, as an educational experience.

If this analysis is correct, then it lends some support to those who criticise typologies of student orientations for simply reflecting class-based ways of being in the academy rather than students' engagement with their studies (Hurst, 2013). It provides support for Hurst's (2010, 2013) argument that focusing on gaining a degree certificate and being interested in knowledge for its own sake are not mutually exclusive. This is because it is less students' particular orientation to university that matter but whether they see studying as a part of what they are doing while they are at university.

Second, this finding highlights the importance of not focusing solely on the educational aspects of students' experiences, as is done in many approaches to considering

personal transformation in higher education (Meyer & Land, 2005; Taylor, 2007, 2008; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). This is because, in implicitly assuming that all students perceive university as an educational experience, it misses those students who see higher education in other ways. The outcomes from this study suggest that it is important not to lose sight of these students because they seem to experience less personal transformation than other students.

Third, it is interesting that we found little change in students' personal projects over time. However, it would be wrong to conclude that this challenges research that has focused on how students change through their engagement with university (for example see Scanlon *et al.*, 2007; Christie *et al.*, 2008, 2016; Ashwin 2009; Reay *et al.*, 2010; Gale & Parker, 2014). This is because the more inclusive categories of description 4 and 5 are focused on students changing themselves and changing society. As these kinds of accounts were mainly provided by students' who saw their personal projects at least in part in the context of their programme of study, it again highlights how this form of personal transformation comes from the educational experience of being at university. In Dubet's (2000) terms, this involves seeing the usefulness of being at university in terms of the ideas that they are engaging with as well as the social relationships that they develop through this experience.

Overall, our outcomes suggest that understanding the students' personal transformations at university can be usefully explored using a framework, like Dubet's (2000), which considers the relations between their personal project, their experiences of their institution and their intellectual engagement. Crucially our outcomes suggest that what is important about the relationship with their institutions is not whether it is ambivalent or supportive but how students' perceive the nature of this relationship. Seeing being at university as an educational experience rather than only a social experience appears to play an important role in how students understand their purposes in being at university and the relations that they develop with knowledge while they are studying at university.

Conclusion

Our outcomes in this study are based on a relatively small number of students from a single discipline. Clearly more research is needed to see whether our outcomes are supported by other studies, particularly those examining other disciplines. There is evidence that students' accounts of knowledge through their undergraduate degrees have similar elements of variation in range of disciplines (see Ashwin *et al.*, 2014). If students' accounts of their personal projects showed similar variation to that generated in this study, then what would this tell us about the transformative nature of being at university? One way of understanding this is to consider how students' accounts of personal projects and knowledge develop as a set of categories. Students' accounts of their personal projects shift from a general focus to a focus on self to a focus on the world; whereas students' accounts of knowledge shift from a general focus on issues to a focus on the world to a focus on self. In other words, students' accounts of their projects move from the self to the world, whereas accounts of knowledge shift from the world to the self. This suggests, in response to David Watson's (2014) challenge, that the transformational nature of undergraduate degrees might lie

in the relations between students' personal projects and their engagement with knowledge, where students' sense of self is changed through their engagement with knowledge. This involves students relating their personal projects to the world and seeing themselves implicated in knowledge. This process does not always happen; it requires students to be intellectually engaged with their courses, which is dependent on both students and the quality of their educational experience. Thus in Dubet's (2000) terms the transformational quality of a university experience comes from students' perceiving their social integration with their institution in terms of the educational aspects of their university experience which supports them in developing both their personal projects and their intellectual engagement with disciplinary and/or professional knowledge.

Acknowledgements

References

Åkerlind, G. (2005) Variation and commonality in phenomenographic research methods, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 24, 321–334.

Ashwin, P. (2009) *Analysing teaching-learning interactions in higher education: Accounting for structure and agency* (London, Continuum).

Ashwin, P., Abbas, A. & McLean, M. (2014) How do students' accounts of sociology change over the course of their undergraduate degrees? *Higher Education*, 67, 219–234.

Beaty, L., Gibbs, G. & Morgan, A. (1997) Learning orientations and study contracts, in: F. Marton, D. Hounsell & N. Entwistle (Eds) *The experience of learning* (2nd edn) (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press), 72–86.

Brint, S. (2012) Undergraduate student orientations in the United States: Academically adrift? *Bildung und Erziehung*, 65(2), 195–207.

Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V., Hounsell, J. & McCune, V. (2008) 'A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': Learning to be a university student, *Studies in Higher Education*, 33, 567–581.

Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V.E. & McCune, V. (2016) 'It all just clicked': A longitudinal perspective on transitions within university, *Studies in Higher Education*, 41, 478–490.

Clark, B. & Trow, M. (1966) The organizational context, in: T. Newcomb & E. Wilson (Eds) *College peer groups: Problems and prospects for research* (Chicago, Aldine), 17–70.

Dubet, F. (2000) The sociology of pupils, *Journal of Education Policy*, 15, 93–104.

Gale, T. & Parker, S. (2014) Navigating change: A typology of student transition in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(5), 734–753.

Hurst, A. (2010) Schoolcraft vs. becoming somebody: Competing visions of higher education among working-class college students, *Qualitative Studies*, 1(2), 75–90.

Hurst, A. (2013) Student types as reflection of class habitus: An application of Bourdieu's scholastic fallacy, *Theory and Research in Education*, 11(1), 43–61.

Jary, D. & Lebeau, Y. (2009) The student experience and subject engagement in UK sociology: A proposed typology, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30, 697–712.

Keane, E. (2012) Differential prioritising: Orientations to higher education and widening participation, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 53, 150–159.

Marton, F. & Booth, S. (1997) *Learning and awareness* (Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum).

Meyer, J. & Land, R. (2005) Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning, *Higher Education*, 49, 373–388.

Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative dimensions of adult learning* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass).

Morgan, A. & Beaty, L. (1997) The world of the learner, in: F. Marton, D. Hounsell & N. Entwistle (Eds) *The experience of learning* (2nd edn) (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press), 217–237.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. & Clayton, J. (2009) 'Strangers in paradise'? Working-class students in elite universities, *Sociology*, 43(6), 1103–1121.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. & Clayton, J. (2010) 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education, *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), 107–124.

Scanlon, L., Rowling, L. & Weber, Z. (2007) 'You don't have like an identity … you are just lost in a crowd': Forming a student identity in the first-year transition to university, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10(2), 223–241.

Slavich, G. & Zimbardo, P. (2012) Transformational teaching: Theoretical underpinnings, basic principles, and core methods, *Educational Psychology Review*, 24(4), 569–608.

Spronken-Smith, R.A., Bond, C., Buissink-Smith, N. & Grigg, G. (2009) Millennium graduates' orientations to higher education, *College Student Journal*, 43(2), 352–365.

Taylor, E. (2007) An update of transformative learning theory: A critical review of the empirical research (1999–2005), *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26(2), 173–191.

Taylor, E. (2008) Transformative learning theory, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 119, 5–15.

Trigwell, K. (2006) Phenomenography: An approach to research into geography education, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 30, 367–372.

Watson, D. (2014) *The question of conscience: Higher education and personal responsibility* (London, Institute of Education Press).