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Transition to postgraduate study: postgraduate ecological systems and identity

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This paper explores and examines the distal and proximal systems which construct **social science** postgraduate study in the UK and analyses the emergent identities of postgraduate students as they negotiate the multiple and interacting practices in their transition to study.   The data represent part of a one year research project, funded by the Higher Education Academy, in which staff and students from five UK universities participated. The paper takes a socio-cultural perspective and situates staff and students in the wider macro context of policy and practice surrounding postgraduate study as well as exploring the micro processes which construct the proximal experience of the transition. We argue that the silence surrounding postgraduate transition in the literature must be addressed in light of existing literature and the present research both of which suggest that the systems which construct postgraduate study are complex and challenging to students, who do not always receive the support they require. We discuss the practices which implicitly assume expertise in postgraduate students in contrast to student self-identification as confused and struggling. Commonalities with other educational transitions are identified but we argue that there are distinct aspects to postgraduate transition which require greater breadth of research with both successful and unsuccessful postgraduate students.

Keywords: postgraduate study, transition, ecological theory

The landscape of postgraduate study research

The experience and practice of postgraduate study in higher education institutions has suffered (we use this word deliberately because the lack of research means that we have little knowledge about the experiences of postgraduate students) from a paucity of research across a range of issues. We have commented previously (Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit, 2010; O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom & Zammit, 2009; Tobbell. O'Donnell & Zammit, 2008) that there is very little research which focuses on the transition to postgraduate study particularly, despite a wealth of literature surrounding other educational transitions. For example, transition into school has highlighted the different practices which construct nursery or kindergarten education versus that of the primary school, specifically the shift in emphasis to the pursuit of a curriculum (Hännikäinen & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010) which presents a different set of challenges for both children and teachers (see also Fabian, 2000 and

Docket & Perry, 2004). In the UK, Hargreaves and Galton (2002) have focused on the transition (often referred to as transfer in their work) from primary to secondary school and once again the very different practices which construct study and participation in the different institutions has demonstrated the task which faces new secondary school students. The essential transition tasks have also been demonstrated in other contexts, by Kvalsund (2000) in Finland and Midgley, Anderman and Hicks (1995) in the USA. This emphasis on new practice is also evident in work that examines transition from school to university for both younger students (school to university (Walker, Matthew & Black, 2004; Macaro & Wingate, 2004; Haggis & Pouget, 2002)) and the transition of adult learners to higher education (HE) (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Ramsay, 2004; Reay, 2002). It is perhaps this focus on the new which has contributed to the lack of research in postgraduate contexts. It may be that assumptions are made that there is nothing new in postgraduate transition because it follows on, in the same type of institution, from undergraduate study.

A number of researchers have acknowledged this gap in research and literature. Jepsen and Neumann (2010) have investigated undergraduate student intentions surrounding decision making to undertake postgraduate study and note that they have broken 'new ground' (p465) in that research, highlighting the 'scarcity' of research in this area. Wakeling (2005) expresses his surprise about the almost total lack of research which explores social class and participation in postgraduate study despite a body of research which demonstrates the influence of class in accessing higher education at undergraduate level. He provides an overview of class participation in postgraduate study but calls for 'further in-depth empirical research' (p521) in order to further understand the relationship between class and study. Hall and Wai-Ching Sung (2009) suggest that in light of the expansion in postgraduate provision to overseas students in UK universities, attention must be given to the learning experiences of those students. It may be that international students face more complex transitions than UK students because of shifts in culture and challenges surrounding second language use. There are however little data which explores this.

The small body of research which addresses postgraduate student experience is puzzling. Postgraduate students (both taught and research students) make up about 23% of the total student body in the UK (HESA 2011) and so represent a significant number of students as well as a significant income to HEIs. We have suggested previously (Tobbell et al., 2010; O'Donnell et al., 2009) that this may, in part, be due to assumptions of 'expert status' surrounding postgraduate study. That is because postgraduate students, by definition, have been successful undergraduates and so there is an implicit assumption of competence in negotiating and performing in the HE environment. However, the research that exists challenges this assumption and illustrates that the assumptions of competence are inextricably bound with learning identities. By this we mean that constructions (which can be understood as explicit policy and practice, and implicit meanings emerging from their absence in the academic literature) of postgraduate student status shape the delivery of their studies and their experience of their studies. We have examined the subjective experience of students in previous work (Tobbell et al., 2010) and argued that the expectation of independence, which may emerge from the 'expert' assumption, in postgraduate study promotes feelings of isolation in students and may undermine confidence and shape transition trajectories in particular ways.

Work which has included postgraduates as participants (although the fact that the participants are postgraduates seems somewhat incidental within some of that work) highlights the often fragile status of the students' identity. Littleton and Whitelock (2005) explored postgraduate meanings in an online learning community. Participants revealed their anxiety in contributing to the community, fearing judgements of worthlessness. The authors comment that 'Issues of confidence, identity, self-presentation and social comparison clearly loomed large and were of paramount importance to these students' (p156), findings which would seem to contrast with assumptions of expertise and reveal the importance of exploring postgraduate student participation in their studies. In another study by Blount and McNeill (2011) postgraduate students were found to require support to enable engagement with educational technology and moreover, such technology needed to be seen to be part of the curriculum to prompt engagement. In our own work referred to above (Tobbell et al., 2010) students highlighted the need for personal tutors to help them negotiate their study. One participant commented '...I'm not the only one who is losing sleep and even feeling a bit tearful ...' (p271). Falloon (2011) investigated participation in the use of a virtual classroom in postgraduate online teacher education and found that students wanted to identify with their group and develop relationships based on trust and rapport. When they experienced a lack of understanding around the rules of the classroom, a reluctance to participate was demonstrated. Blount and McNeill (2011) provide further support for this lack of confidence, suggesting that from their research they found postgraduate students needed support to build their confidence surrounding the use of technology (an issue which is prominent in many postgraduate students' academic lives).

Magano (2011) generated narratives which explored the identity of women who were teaching professionals participating in postgraduate research programmes in South African universities. In their studies the women revealed a lack of self-worth in relation to the perceived power of their academic supervisors which militated against a supportive mentoring relationship to enable them to fully enjoy and benefit from their studies and importantly make identity shifts which would enable more complex participation in the academic community. McCormack (2004) in a study conducted in Australia, also provides evidence of this identity mismatch. She found profound differences between postgraduate students' understanding and the universities' understanding of their research project (both in terms of purpose and process) and argues that such misunderstandings threaten timely completion and undermine student participation.

Such representations challenge any notions of postgraduate students as 'expert' and instead suggest that they need support in building their confidence to enable effective learning identities and academic trajectories to emerge. This range of research does not promulgate an understanding of postgraduate students as unproblematic and argues for the attention of the academy in understanding their experience and the contexts in which they study.

Contextualising postgraduate study

The research discussed above suggests that the context of postgraduate study is a complex one and the dimensions of that context include: shifts in practice over time in response to new technology; wider macro influences such as social class and participation; university systems from research imperatives to pedagogic practice; interpersonal relationships in the form of personal tutorial programmes and supervisory relationships; and individual identity issues including feelings of competence and freedom to participate. This suggests that an understanding of the postgraduate

experience demands multi-level data. The data need to represent the layers of systems which construct the practice of study and so that data can usefully be analysed through the lens of the systems to understand the complexity of the transition to postgraduate study. A model to conceptualise and theorise this data may also prove a powerful tool in postgraduate research. One such model is Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) which positions the individual in the centre of interacting systems which range from the proximal to the distal in terms of the power of direct influence on development. The microsystem represents the face to face relationships and activities which construct the immediate experience of the individual. In terms of a postgraduate student this system may be made up of a series of contextual relationships such as family, other students, staff, friends; and of tasks and activities such as work, study in the form of research and technology, and social life. Clearly these would differ across students. The pattern of connection between the microsystems is represented by the meso level. For example in our own research (Tobbell et al., 2008) we found that postgraduates' work activity differed markedly. Some students had part-time research or teaching posts in the university and were as a result more familiar with the practices and importantly more engaged in them, whilst other students supported themselves through restaurant or call centre work which demanded a very different set of practices from those of studying. Similarly in understanding connection patterns in the mesosystem we found that some students had the support of their families whilst others were encountering some hostility, requiring more effort in managing the mesosystem connections. The exosystem is the next identified level of influence and encompasses those factors which are external to the individual's immediate environment. For example in Blount and McNeill's research discussed above, an external publishing house was instrumental in the use of an important software programme that made up a part of their study, but over which they had little control. The most distal influence is identified as the macro system and this represents overarching culture and societal practice. Wakeling's exploration of social class and postgraduate participation is one such influence. Importantly, these systems are synthesised with the developing individual via the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The chronosystem represents the passage of time in an individual's life in interaction with change processes represented by the interaction of the systems discussed above and can be conceptualised as the life transitions of an individual. For example, whilst postgraduate students will have negotiated transition to undergraduate study, it does not necessarily follow that the interaction of systems which constructed that transition reflects the current one of transition to postgraduate study. Many aspects may have changed, such as relationships, university imperatives and government policy.

Although the ecological model was originally proposed as a theory of human development, it has been employed in a variety of other change contexts because of its utility in positioning experience and individual identity as distributed phenomena; the understanding of which requires attention to multiple levels of influence. It is increasingly being used as a model to explore educational transition (Tobbell, 2003; Seung-Lam & Pollard, 2006; Tissington, 2008; Sanagavarapu, 2010; Durden & Witt, 2010) perhaps because as the depth and breadth of transition research has developed there has been a concomitant understanding of the complexity of influence which underpins the process. Important in understanding the model, but often overlooked, are the mechanisms which Bronfenbrenner theorises underpin change and development. He argues that in order to facilitate positive development an individual must engage in activity with sufficient frequency and increasing complexity. He emphasises the reciprocity of human activity and foregrounds the importance and quality of relationships with others, but also the importance of the wider cultural mechanisms which

should underpin the activity in a manner that gives it value. This makes it a quintessential transition theory because the work of transition is in the participation of the practices of the new community. The individual develops or changes in response to her/his action with and upon the new educational context. This suggests that the enabling or disabling of action on the part of the context will affect the transition trajectory of the individual. McCormack (2004) identifies a mismatch between her postgraduate participants' desires and understandings surrounding research and that of the university. Whereas the students had personal desire for collaboration, self-understanding and the power to enact institutional change, they experienced the university focus as being 'economic/market-oriented ... focused on speedy completion and measurable outcomes.' (p323). Such perceptual mismatches resulted in particular (and to the students, unhelpful) participatory patterns, and their journeys towards postgraduate success either ended in failure or took much longer than the specified time period.

Another model for understanding transition, complementary to the ecological model (for a synthesis of ecological theory and communities of practice theory see Tobbell, 2006), is that of Wenger's community of practice (1998). Again, this model argues for a distributed understanding of the individual. Identity is understood as participation in the practices of the range of communities to which an individual belongs. Important to individual identity is the nature of the participation and this is constructed as a result of the individual interacting with the valued practices of the community. The identified paucity of research representing postgraduate experience perhaps assumes that such students are full participants in the academic community by virtue of their undergraduate success. This would be in contrast to the assumption that they are legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which would be the usual assumption made about other new students. Neither participation nor practice should be understood as neutral; both are profoundly embedded in the proximal community and distal range of communities which construct the world. Thus, valued practice in the postgraduate community (the use of primary, peer reviewed sources for example) will reflect values from the wider academic community (the peer review process as a gatekeeper to quality) which reflect societal understandings (the power of 'expert' opinion). If taken at face value the use of sources is a simple matter for the student, however, more knowledgeable participants, through experience, understand the subtleties and complexities of their use. Some peer reviewed sources are more valued than others (journal prestige), the data source may be contested (the qualitative – quantitative debate) and the status of an expert shifts (religious leaders in some cultures versus scientists in others). Only through appropriate experience will a new member of a community understand this, and moreover that understanding may not be straightforward. A student might reject the views of the identified experts or may fail to see themselves represented in the data they read and so their use of sources is problematised. As such the process of participation becomes a reciprocal endeavour, where the new participant and the community work together and make mutual shifts and as a result both develop. Indeed this is one of the ways in which Wenger defines full participation. One understanding of successful transition then might be the extent to which individuals and educational institutions shift in response to each other's presence and participation.

The research and theory discussed above argue for a complex construction of postgraduate study. The individual student in making the transition is attempting to participate in long established institutions which have been constructed over long periods of time and from which reified practices have emerged. This statement is, of course, true for all students in transition. However, whilst there

is a growing breadth of research which addresses the school environment and transition from school to HE, there remains little which specifically targets the postgraduate experience, so little is known about the postgraduate ecological environment. This paper uses data collected from a research project exploring social science postgraduates in transition in the UK context, and using that data, seeks to begin to address this silence. Some data from this project has been published previously (Tobbell et al., 2010) and provides an initial understanding of the subjective experience of postgraduate students in transition. But here we seek to move beyond these initial understandings and focus specifically upon the ways in which that data provide insights into the ways in which multiple proximal and distal systems interact to construct the complex process of postgraduate transition.

Methodology

Taking account of both the lack of breadth in transition to postgraduate study research and the ontological assumptions inherent in the distributed models presented above, the aims of this paper are:

- To explore the distal and proximal practices which constitute the postgraduate study environment;
- To understand how distal and proximal practices serve to construct the postgraduate context.

A qualitative epistemology was called for, in that this research required data that would contribute to an understanding of the practices of the postgraduate environment and the actual experience of that environment. Moreover, because of the paucity of research in this area there was a necessity to allow the meanings to emerge from that data.

The research took place over a one year period and included participants from five UK universities (which included two Russell Group institutions, one 1960s university and two post 1992 universities), all of whom were part of social science departments. The fact that the participants in this study were social science students is an important one to note – a sample which included other disciplines (such as the natural sciences or humanities) may have generated very different data. The data were collected using a range of methods which were:

- One to one semi-structured interviews with students and university staff
- Focus group interviews with students
- Observational fieldnotes of teaching sessions (because the research took place in different universities across different programmes, observations were carried out in research methods classes, to enable some continuity)
- Email diaries from students (prompts were sent to volunteer participants on a regular basis, requesting responses to questions regarding activities engaged in, new skills acquired, challenges faced)
- Document analysis (including policy documents and university handbooks and guidance).

In all 230 participants took part in this study (44 student interviewees, six staff interviewees and 180 students in the observations), and numbers were approximately evenly distributed across all five institutions. The interviews were carried out at different time points in the year and the email

diaries were collected bi-monthly at the outset and after three months, on a monthly basis. The focus groups took place in the latter half of the academic year, when students had had a range of experiences including tutorials and lectures, and had undertaken assessment and received feedback. These methods generated a considerable amount of qualitative data. The data presented here, therefore, constitutes only a fraction of the total amount, but represents data collected in all five universities.

The student participants included doctoral students, Masters research students and taught Masters students. The Masters students were all in their first year of study whilst the doctoral students were at different stages in their study from year one to writing-up. The staff members were all programme leaders for postgraduate courses.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by participating universities and followed guidelines laid down by both the British Psychological Society and the British Educational Research Association. Anonymity in terms of individual and university identity has been preserved at all times.

Analysis

The data were analysed inductively using a constant comparative technique in which all transcripts, fieldnotes, diary entries and document contents were read and coded individually by each of the researchers. Key emergent themes were identified and then compared – actual themes were then refined in light of this comparison.

The analysis followed Anderson's (2002) focused problem approach since it was informed by the socio-cultural, distributed models discussed in the introduction. The incoming data were analysed with the existing theory and transition literature through a process of disassembly and reassembly, revealing underpinning meanings and theoretical insights.

Exploring the postgraduate experience

Negotiating access and paying for it

One of the major emergent themes from the data is that of structures of support for postgraduate students. From the macro to the micro level the data reveal the importance of the presence or absence of mechanisms of support and there is a discernible theme which emphasises 'independence' – that postgraduate students are ready and able to go it alone.

In the UK there is a considerable infrastructure that underpins undergraduate study. Firstly, schools and colleges work with students in their applications for university. Undergraduate admissions are controlled by UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) which requires prospective students to complete one application form which is distributed to the relevant universities. No such system exists for postgraduate study (with the exception of some vocational areas such as Postgraduate Certificates in Education or doctoral study for clinical psychology). There are websites that provide summaries of the courses and recruitment advertisements in newspapers for PhD studentships, but applications are generally made to each individual university, each of which may have different demands for negotiating entry (for example some postgraduate degrees require

practical experience, others may ask applicants to provide essays on particular topics). It is difficult to say how this influences prospective postgraduates but it is clear that there may be considerable effort involved in negotiating with multiple institutions. Importantly, this represents a range of new practices to negotiate; past experience will not assist in accessing postgraduate study, so from this aspect at least we can posit a definite shift in the chronosystem. We cannot say from this research if transition to postgraduate study would be facilitated if the application process was more straightforward. However, Bronfenbrenner's propositions posit that for positive development to occur, wider cultural influences need to demonstrate the value of the activity. But this lack of centralisation in the application system may serve to construct value in two ways. For those with lower self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) it may serve to demotivate as a result of the effort required; but equally for those who manage to negotiate entry it may increase the perceived value of the educational experience because of the effort required to access it. However, Barboza, Yang and Johns (2010) suggest that, in line with self-efficacy theory predictions, effort may be connected to previous success, albeit in academic activity. The process of application may therefore be worthy of more specific, focused research

A second aspect of the postgraduate infrastructure which was identified as key to the student experience is that of finance. Whilst undergraduate funding levels for degrees has become a contentious political issue in the UK (English students are now required to borrow up to £27,000 per annum at the time of writing, for fees plus living expenses, although this is not the case in other areas of the UK), there is a visible funding structure to which all undergraduates are given access. This is not the case for postgraduate study. Artess, Ball and Mok's (2008) report lists the sources of postgraduate funding, and it is a long and complicated list including research councils (funding from these sources is much more likely at the more elite Russell Group universities), employers, Local Education Authorities, the EU and seemingly most often, self-funding. Artess et al.'s report demonstrates the complexity of postgraduate funding in the UK and may not be easily understandable to non-professionals. The putative postgraduate must negotiate this for themselves. It may be that those students whose microsystems encompass experience with postgraduate study and access to funding are privileged, and that macro level shifts which enabled widening participation in undergraduate study (O'Donnell et al., 2009) would benefit struggling postgraduate candidates. Jespen and Neumann (2010) have argued that more research is needed concerning the decision making underpinning entry into postgraduate work and we would suggest that part of that research might investigate access and understanding of funding as a possible constraint.

In terms of postgraduate experience the funding imperative loomed large amongst the participants. At multiple points students commented that their studies had had to be de-prioritised whilst they increased their hours of work. The following comment is typical in response to one of the email diary categories which ask if there have been any constraints to study:

> I refer you again to my earlier comments about working. I've no funding for my PhD and therefore have to work. Maybe something that would be helpful would be some guidance on funding possibilities.

> PhD student (email diary)

Important to understanding the postgraduate experience though is the understanding that these students have already devoted considerable financial resources to their studies and that the pursuit of postgraduate study represents a further financial burden. Given shifts in macro policy in the UK discussed above, this financial burden is likely to increase. One student (note that she does not clearly understand the process surrounding student loans) commented:

> *I don't know if this is the university, but it would be good if we didn't have to pay back our student loan. Then we'd have a bit more money to play with.*
>
> *Master's student (focus group)*

The data from this research reveal that there is very little macro support for postgraduate study. Participation then seems to be dependent on self-efficacy in the application process and either financial independence or knowledge of funding streams which are not always obvious. From an ecological perspective, it is clear that the macro systems which construct undergraduate study are not those which construct postgraduate study. Therefore there has been little opportunity for increased participation in the practices necessary to enter the postgraduate community. Importantly, in terms of understanding the transition, there is a discontinuity between the two different study communities.

The relational nature of study

An important notion in both ecological theory and communities of practice (CoP) is that of relationship. Bronfenbrenner foregrounds the importance of interaction with others, not only in learning but also in the development of complex action. CoP theory foregrounds identity in the learning process and posits that learning can in some ways be conceptualised as shifts in identity in the face of participation in new practices. Such participation is facilitated through relationship. The participants in this research lend support to these propositions and there is an almost constant presence in the data of the desire for learning relationships that enable participation. The postgraduate students were particularly impressed by displays of knowledge and clarity in staff and this gives credence to our argument that postgraduate students cannot be assumed to be knowledgeable, and that their learning needs require careful assessment and structured input to be met.

Students recognise the importance of input in progressing:

> *Support from staff has greatly helped. Without [PhD supervisor's] advice I wouldn't know where to start my proposal.*
>
> *First year PhD student, (email diary)*
>
> *[Tutor] spent a lot of time with me going over the structure of the lit review and which I was really struggling with.*
>
> *Master's student (email diary)*
>
> *The tutors for the LAB report were very helpful and gave us clear instructions and handouts. Students also discussed the stats section of the report to make sure we all had the same answers.*

Taught Master's student (email diary)

The staff at the library helpdesk were extremely helpful and made using the library facilities very easy and hassle free.

Taught Master's student (email diary)

Brilliant discussions in diversity and Identity lectures

Taught Master's student (email diary)

I've found the staff to be very helpful. The lecturers or whatever, supervisors, the course secretary. I think that if you have a problem they're always willing to meet you. That's what I found. They are very good, very open. Probably because they're interested in the subject. They've written a lot of papers about this, adult education, and they're interested in adult education and the issues to do with adult education. So it's quite good to be able to speak to someone. Sometimes it's, I mean I suppose right at the beginning I was kind of apprehensive, to do that. But I found that they're actually quite easy to talk to.

PhD student (focus group)

The positive comments about access to time and expertise reflect the ontological imperatives of socio-cultural theory. It might be argued that the students here are reporting the construction of a microsystem, that they are making enabling face-to-face relationships with people who can help them increase their expertise. The ecological principle that development occurs as a function of increasing participation in complex actions over time is illustrated in these comments. Moreover, CoP theory argues for apprentice models of learning. Clearly, for these to be effective students need to have access to staff and to spend time with them; without this there can be no transfer of knowledge or skill.

Participants were clear in their needs for relationship with staff and relationship was understood in terms of staff knowledge, staff presence and staff time. This was particularly clear in a course where external university staff delivered much of the course:

In terms of course, I have found it really difficult that a lot of our tutors are external and are not [name of university] uni staff, this makes it really difficult to get in touch with them and to be honest I, along with a lot of people in my class, have not always been impressed by the involvement we have had.

Taught Master's student (email diary)

It was also clear from the data that enabling microsystems extended beyond relationships with staff members. The necessity for wider relationships in the new community was emphasised by nearly all participants; they discussed the need to spend time with fellow students and seek their experience and advice:

There's a wee group of us that are pulling together and sharing resources-that makes a big difference-we're thinking about forming a revision group as course is 75% assessed to help motivate us during summer.

Masters student (focus group)

The journal articles we read for health psychology were discussed in the lecture as were the articles for individual differences. This meant we could compare our thoughts with the lecturers and other students to gain a wider appreciation of the articles.

Masters student (email diary)

We had a morning or a day or something when we all had to attend. All the staff go, and it's a great kind of induction day, but the great thing was when the teachers went off for a coffee, and they left us with last year's students, and we got to ask them all sorts, "and the best place for a coffee is…", and "don't go to such-and-such a place" and "there's a good pint at wherever", and they also told us what they found difficult, what they found tough. In some ways it was worth a hundred weight really. And then some of them are doing further studies, and some were in their second year when I was in first, so already you've got some kind of network, and in a really kind of intimate way, because they're going and tipping you the wink.

PhD Student (focus group)

The practices of the educational institution are important to consider in light of these comments. To what extent do the systems enable students to make relationships, not only with people who study alongside them, but with a wider student community? These participants are highlighting learning opportunities in collaboration with other students which were facilitated by staff members, perhaps suggesting that such opportunities need to be considered in pedagogic design.

The data suggest that the effectiveness of the microsystem is not just about time, but also about quality and that this quality can be understood in terms of respect accorded to the students' expressed needs. Participation was not enabled when staff were seen to be unresponsive or unsuitable:

The whole year's felt unapproachable … we've actually had someone in the front of the class who's said to me 'I'm not paid to do that.' It was noted down by our rep. It was very standoffish all year and I've not felt able to … I keep saying I'll laugh, you know when I look back I'll laugh.

PhD student (focus group)

I'm a qualitative researcher and was given a quantitative supervisor who did not respect qual methods … I got a lot of support from my undergraduate dissertation supervisor [in another university] and I kept in contact with him and he gave me support through my transition to postgraduate study and he ended up being my director of studies for my PhD, so I've kept that contact.

PhD student (focus group)

They needed more insight into where the students were coming from… I think what they've done has benefited me but they should have researched where the students were coming from because I think maybe a few students drop out, I don't know.

PhD student (interview)

It seems to be very important that in the construction of microsystems attention is paid to the practices which constitute teaching. The lecturer's approach was identified as influencing opportunities for participation. This suggests that certain practices may enable more advantageous microsystems. If we accept that one of the goals of successful transition is the development of enabling microsystems, then this calls for overt attention to be given to those practices and perhaps for both staff and students to monitor the microsystems which emerge. To illustrate this, the quotes below show that students seem to value an informal atmosphere which was promoted by opportunities for group interaction. The following data are from observational fieldnotes:

The first half of the class was delivered in a formal lecture style, the lecturer reading directly from his notes, the observer noted: Following the small-group exercise and the 10-minute break, the atmosphere in class is more relaxed and informal.

Observation – methods class, PhD students

The first half of the session was given in the form of a lecture on qualitative methodologies and paradigmatic change. The lecturer used only 1 OHP (which has key theorists' names on) and spoke about the qualitative turn in wordy language. The lecturer was engaged and excited about this kind of research and was trying to convey this to students.   A group of international students at the front asked for clarification on terms such as discourse, ethnography and critical psychology. Short definitions were offered and students assured that 'this would become clearer during the course'. Students during this session started to text on mobile phones, whisper to each other and turn attention elsewhere. There was little writing down of anything.

Observation – methods class, mixed postgraduates

In email diaries and interviews, informality was identified as helpful:

We had an informal group tutorial about our assignments; it was interesting and informative - very helpful.

Masters student (email diary)

In the Masters it was more about discussion and doing presentations, two whole days a week, sitting round in small classes and having informal discussion. You needed to make sure that before each session you knew your stuff… you couldn't go into a discussion unless you knew your stuff.

PhD student (focus group).

Postgraduate programme leaders certainly recognised the need for discussion and activity; the following are representative of pedagogic approaches by postgraduate programme leaders, taken from interviews:

> *The philosophy of this course is of the student as the active learner, so workshops and assessed coursework more the norm than lectures and exams.*

> *With the MA we go in with a course outline, asking what have they been reading, and there is a less formal presentation style, it's a conversation. The structure is there for both. Traditionally, there is a gap between teaching and learning, the conversation model closes this gap. There are of course points that we must touch upon, but it is less rigid than undergraduate teaching.*

The fact that such philosophies were not always enacted in the classroom perhaps reflects wider university systems which militate against collaborative pedagogy.

The notion of the mesosystem was discussed earlier and we commented that where there are connections between mesosystems, advantages may be found. A number of students commented on their wider microsystems which made up the mesosystem, discussing these in terms of their study, demonstrating that learning and participation in study is not just a case of individual capacity and behaviour but rather is distributed across systems and communities of practice. For example, various participants mentioned positive and negative aspects of their wider social relationships. Where there was positive support, the postgraduate study was experienced as a family event:

> *... but also there's a part of me which is doing it for my son. My husband left school without any qualifications, my son's just gone up to high school, my husband has no sense of... he keeps on saying that I've got qualifications all right and he wants to put them in frames and put them on the wall! ... I got an 'A' for one of my essays. He got all the kids round the table! "Look at that, son! That's your ma! ... So it was all that kind of thing about, their identity and what I'm giving them. ... Because my son, who's started high school, is now going up and sitting doing his homework, without being... And [husband] says that's a knock-on effect of seeing me sitting here. It definitely has a knock-on effect, there's all sorts of advantages ...*

> *Masters student (focus group)*

But where support is less, participants reported this as a constraint in their studies:

> *My partner's family disapprove of my studies; they think I should be working full time. The resulting tension is difficult to endure.*

> *PhD student (email diary)*

The needs of postgraduate students then are perhaps not dissimilar from those of other learners. They need ongoing and targeted support not only from their teachers, but also from their wider social relationships. They do not necessarily have competent academic identities and perhaps think of themselves as peripheral participants at the start of their transition. It is worth saying at this point that very few of the postgraduates who took part in this study were recent graduates. Many

of them had spent a number of years outside the academic community working or having families. As such their ecological systems were complex and often demanding. Moreover, the inevitable shifts in practice within the university CoP entailed them dealing with new challenges (such as electronic literature searching) which were inevitably embedded in the increasing complexity of their lives. It may be that in future years, given the shifts in undergraduate funding, increasing numbers of potential students will be working out of academia for a number of years prior to postgraduate study and so competence in academic and technological practices cannot be assumed. This illustrates the significance of shifts across time as represented by the chronosystem, to the work of transition. This will require and does require that specific attention be given to the ecological systems of students to ensure that they are enabled to engage in increasingly complex activity and relationship to enable the emergence of effective postgraduate identities.

Conclusion

This paper reports data from one research study which sought to explore postgraduate experience and transition for social science students. We do not seek at this stage to claim exhaustive or even great breadth of knowledge of this area, but rather to present the data to argue for further research which will represent the wider postgraduate community both in terms of numbers and disciplines. Further research might usefully explore the experiences of postgraduate students in transition to subjects other than the social sciences, since it may be that practices inherent to social science study which result in particular participatory trajectories are not relevant in natural science study, where guided laboratory work constitutes a large part of the study experience at all levels. Given that the participants only include those who have successfully entered postgraduate study, we cannot draw any conclusions about practices which prevent entry, although there are indications that macrosystems in the form of application and finance and microsystems in the form of work commitments and family support constitute worthy areas of further exploration. We have cited Jespen and Neumann's Australian research that explored decision making in undergraduates who do not necessarily take up postgraduate study and the targeting of such participants may provide valuable insight regarding identity and further study.

We have argued for a socio-cultural theoretical framework for understanding both postgraduate experience and transition, a framework which addresses the undoubted complexity of the context. The data presented, and the analysis above illustrate the various ways in which ecological systems at the micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono level serve to construct the process of transition to postgraduate study as a complex and challenging one, and challenge the assumption implicit from the lack of previous literature that this is a straightforward process. The data and analysis presented here also illustrate the significance of opportunities (or lack thereof) for participation in valued practices for the emergent learner identities of postgraduate students, and reveal how the different distal and proximal systems impact upon those opportunities.

What is clear is that macrosystems require determination and tenacity to negotiate and that once study commences postgraduate students do not necessarily possess effective academic identities. Rather postgraduate students, in common with all those in transition, struggle with new practices and actively seek positive, participatory pathways which need to be supported by university staff and by wider social support systems. This similarity with other students in transition argues for further research attention to be given to the postgraduate context. The differences (approaches to

pedagogy, new technology, complex social lives) argue for more work to complement the existing transition literature, which may not itself be directly applicable to postgraduate transition.

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