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Placing diversity among undergraduate Geography students in London: reflections on attainment and progression

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Abstract

This paper explores the idea of 'place-based diversity' to examine the nature of undergraduate Geography students' attainment and progression with a specific focus on gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. In addressing the empirical neglect of progression when assessing inequalities in achievements among geography students in general and the specific lack of research at the departmental level, the paper contributes to debates on challenging intersectional exclusion within the discipline at a university in London. While it shows that undergraduate Geography no longer privileges male, middle class students in terms of attainment, those from BME backgrounds perform less well. While this is partly addressed by encouraging patterns of higher progression rates among BME students, much more needs to be done. Contributing to existing Bourdieusian analyses of student experiences as well as the role of the university in society, this requires exploration of students' identities and agency, especially their 'dutiful aspirational capital', together with the 'institutional habitus' of departments and universities and where they are situated geographically. While departmental support mechanisms have helped in facilitating progression for the disadvantaged, this must be combined with developing more positive diverse role models, curriculum change, and targeted support practices that avoid the 'black deficit model' which assumes that BME students are 'lacking'.

Keywords

Introduction

The need to decolonise and engender Geography and geographical knowledges is now firmly on the agenda (Radcliffe 2017). It is acknowledged that the traditionally white, masculinised and middle-class nature of the discipline must be challenged from the perspective of students (Daigle and Sundberg 2017), the research 'industry' (Noxolo 2017) as well as recruitment into the academy (Maddrell et al 2014). While recognition of the historical imaginary of geography constructed as 'male' (Rose 1993) is particularly well-established, there is less work addressing gendered, racialised and classed inequalities in higher education (HE) in different contexts from the perspective of the student body. This said, research on the geographies of educational experiences has contributed significantly to wider debates on the such experiences among local and international HE students within and beyond the discipline (Holloway et al. 2010; Holton and Riley 2013; Waters 2012). Furthermore, the university itself has been interrogated as influencing the experiences of students especially in terms of the inclusion and exclusion of students according to class (Reay et al, 2001) or race and religion (Hopkins, 2011). Therefore, there remains considerable scope to align research on student experience from an intersectional perspective within geography, with that on the role of the university and its environs to consider how these influence diversity and inclusion among the student body (Solís and Miyares 2014). This paper draws on recent research on student diversity, progression and attainment within a department of Geography in east London in the United Kingdom (UK). Drawing on statistical analysis of data from 2011 to 2014 as well as small-scale qualitative research, it argues for the need to address attainment *and* progression in relation to diversity, especially in terms of gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity. It suggests that conceptualising an inclusive and diverse geography department requires attention to the interconnections between the agency and practices of students, the influence of universities through their 'institutional habitus' (Holdsworth, 2009), and where they are located geographically (Solís and Miyares 2014).

Placing an inclusive and diverse discipline

There has long been recognition that the discipline of geography needs to be more gender, racial and class diverse in a range of contexts (Maddrell et al 2014). Dating back to Monk and Hanson's (1982) early work, this can be traced in relation to gender (McDowell and Peake 1990) and race (Peake and Kobayashi 2002). Although less attention has been paid to the intersections between gender and race, much work on race in the academy has been undertaken by women from ethnically diverse backgrounds (Mahtani 2004) whose epistemological vantage points have also been feminist (Sundberg 2003).[i] While this work is welcome and essential in challenging the white masculinist vision of geography, it has generally focused on academic staff over experiences of students. Yet important work has been undertaken on the gendered nature of the geographical canon (Maddrell 2012) and gendered postgraduate representation (McKendrick 1996), and on teaching geographical curricula in ways which address gender, racial and class inequalities (Monk 2000).

Research on British HE more broadly outlines how the expansion of the sector has led to a more diverse student body with more complex identities, mobilities and access options (Holton and Riley 2013; Hopkins 2006) and internationalisation (Brooks and Waters 2011). The university itself has been interrogated as a regional and urban development hub, as a site fomenting protest and resistance, and increasingly, as a contested space of exclusion and inclusion, especially along racial and religious lines (Hopkins 2011; also Holloway et al. 2010). The university also promotes certain types of values among students and staff usually reflecting the dominant cultural group (Holdsworth 2009) and resulting in the valorisation of a middle- rather than working-class ethos (Reay 2001). This research thus highlights the relationships between universities and the influences on students across a range of spaces from homes to workplaces and across borders and actors such as parents and friends (Holdsworth 2009). Conceptually, Bourdieu's (2005) notions of habitus and capitals have been frequently utilised to ground debates on equitable access to HE in terms of social and cultural capital (Holdsworth 2006; Waters, 2012). Bourdieu challenges the idea that HE reduces social inequalities and arguing that privileged students who possess more cultural capital and associated habitus are more successful (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Beyond access, habitus is useful in assessing student's lives and how they respond to the challenges of university once they are in the system. Of particular relevance here is the concept of 'institutional habitus' reflects the collective values and practices of universities in shaping student experiences (Holdsworth 2009).

Specifically within Geography, there have long been calls to capture political activism in relation to pedagogy and diversity (McDowell 1994; Radcliffe, 2017) although *how* this is actually done within universities has received less attention. On one hand, this can be done through curriculum initiatives such as Daigle and Sundberg's (2017) attempt to 'unsettle the classroom' in an introductory human geography course, with a specific focus on race, and with mixed results. On the other, we suggest that identifying any gender, race and class inequalities in attainment and progression within a given department is a crucial starting point before interventions are developed. Complementary to this is the recent shift towards embedding gender equality within departments and institutions through the Athena Swan accreditation system in the British case. Although this is welcome (Maddrell et al 2014), fully understanding diversity also requires an exploration of how relationships within HEIs and among students 'are geographically contingent, spatial in nature, or connected across scales' (Solís and Miyares 2014, 169). 'Placing' the diversity of an institution and department thus needs to be understood by examining interactions between the structural and geographical conditions within which HEIs are situated, the role of individual departments and the practices of students in influencing inclusionary practices and values (Holloway and Jons 2012, Maddrell et al 2014).

Attainment, progression and diversity among geography students

Much analysis of attainment and progression among students in general and within Geography is at an aggregate level (Desai 2017, Maddrell et al 2014). There is much less research on individual departments where in-depth understanding of diversity can be garnered and concrete changes made. While a recent benchmarking review highlighted an upward trajectory of students studying Geography at over 80 HEIs with around 30,000 students at any one time, it also noted severe under-representation of social, cultural and gender minorities (ESRC 2013). While there have been improvements in representation of women among staff and students since 1979 (McDowell and Peake 1990) to reach rough parity by 2012/13, gender inequalities remain at senior levels (Maddrell et al 2014, 50). Ethnically, only 9 percent of staff in geography are from BME backgrounds, reducing to 4 percent when non-UK nationals are excluded (ESRC 2013, 19). Among UK-domiciled students in HEIs in general, 20 percent are BME compared to 7 percent of geography students although the proportion is higher in London (Desai 2017, 320)

Turning to the role of diversity in influencing attainment and progression of geography students at an East London university between 2011 and 2014, a range of issues (gender, ethnicity, domicile, disabilities, socioeconomic background, previous school and entry qualifications) were assessed in relation to attainment and progression using a Probit model. This was complemented by small-scale qualitative research involving three focus groups and two semi-structured in-depth interviews.[ii]

The student body emerged as feminised with more than half (54 percent) being women, consonant with findings nationally (Maddrell et al 2014). Yet, almost a third (31 percent) of the students were from BME backgrounds, higher than the 22 percent of London-based Geography students (Desai 2017). Among the BME students, most were Asian (18 percent) with black and mixed race representing around 6 percent and 7 percent respectively. Levels of disadvantage were high with almost half of all students (47 percent) receiving bursaries. Yet 45 percent of students came from families with parents employed in managerial and professional occupations with only 14 percent working in routine and semi-routine jobs. Just under half (46 percent) had parents with higher education, with over half (53 percent) having previously attended state schools (14 percent came from private schools) (see Table 1). Only 8 percent of students were mature while 15 percent reported having a disability (mainly a learning difficulty such as dyslexia or dyspraxia).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The department appears to have a more feminized and ethnically diverse student body than within British Geography as a whole (Desai 2017, Maddrell et al 2016). Yet, while access is important, systemic transformation of social inequalities through the pipeline from

undergraduate to doctoral level and ultimately to academic staff requires much greater attention to attainment and progression. In terms of progression then, female undergraduates are more likely to attain a 'good degree' (first/upper second) than male. Indeed, a slightly higher proportion of women obtained a first class degree than men (14 percent compared with 12 percent) (see also Cotton et al 2015, Richardson 2015). The corollary was that 38 percent of men attained lower second class degrees compared with 23 percent among women (Smith 2004). The reasons for these gender differentiated outcomes are complex and are related to women taking their studies more seriously, and men being more involved in partying, sports, being afraid to be labelled as 'a geek' (Cotton et al 2015; Holdsworth 2009). For example, John who was white, related male under-achievement to 'the social side of things' which he viewed as male-dominated. In turn, Sumi, of Bangladeshi origin said she was shocked in first year:

> 'when I walked into a lecture and saw a guy with his head down – when I asked him what was wrong he said he was hangover … and that was in a lecture! I think it affects because it distracts you from your studies … you have to be disciplined'.

Attainment by ethnicity paints a more negative picture with white students more likely to achieve first class degrees (15 percent) than BME (6 percent). In turn, 74 percent of white students attained a first or upper second, compared with 61 percent of BME. These proportions overall are lower than national averages yet reflect similar gaps with 80 percent of white Geography students nationally achieving a first/upper second compared with 69.5 percent of BME (Desai 2017, 321). Slightly more positively, the differences in attaining a 2:1 degree were the same (58 percent of white and 59 percent of BME), yet it is striking that 36 percent of BME students achieved a 2:2 or lower compared with 25 percent of white. The ubiquitous under-achievement of BME students in the UK (and beyond) has received significant attention (Richardson 2015). Often drawing on Bourdieusian analyses of possessing social and cultural capital, these tend to revolve around BME students finding it more challenging to integrate into university life, as well as issues such as living at home, relationships with parents, and being less likely to be involved in extra-curricular activities (Cotton et al 2015, Holdsworth 2006). For example, Anwar, from a BME background discussed how he struggled in first year, partly because he was working part-time in a laundry, but he also found the transition from school difficult:

> 'you need to put in lots of work. Before you didn't have to worry too much about the little stuff, such as referencing … at university this becomes crucial and gives you the marks … All of the sudden I had to learn about the email and online learning environment'.

While ethnicity had a clear influence on degree outcomes, socio-economic status was more complex with indications that such disadvantage was more easily overcome (acknowledging they are interrelated). Students with parents employed in routine and semi-routine occupations proportionally achieved more first class degrees (18 percent) compared with 14 percent of those in managerial and professional jobs. Yet, students with parents with higher education did not necessarily ensure good degree outcomes with fewer attaining first class degrees. Partly corroborating this, bursary receipt was not associated with lower attainment even accounting for ethnicity; for example, 66 percent of BME students received bursaries compared with 47 percent of white in 2012/13, yet with no effect on final degree performance (indicating the success of bursaries).

Therefore, socio-economic status and family background do not automatically lead to lower attainment as often suggested, but rather a working class background can potentially create a 'moral advantage' (Lehmann 2009) and tools linked with life experience that can encourage such students to strive (see Holton and Riley 2013). Especially important in the current case is 'aspirational capital' (Yosso 2005), again drawing on Bourdieusian analysis linked with parents maintaining hopes for the future through their children despite barriers to achievement (also Holdsworth 2009). In the current case, it is the students who feel a sense of duty towards their parents as well as a desire to live a different life as a form of 'dutiful aspirational capital'. For instance, Hamza from a working-class Pakistani background stated: 'my parents always say how they lived in poverty and (that) they don't want me to live like that; when you hear those stories it's like a wakeup call; it pushes you'. Likewise, Sarah, a white working-class student commented:

> 'Neither my father nor my mother went to university. In fact, I am the first person in my family to come to university; it could be that people in that situation work harder; perhaps we have more to prove; my parents are very proud.'

Turning to progression rather attainment among Geography students reveals a slightly different picture to achievement patterns. As would be expected in relation to attainment, women were more likely to progress compared with men. However, white students were slightly less likely to progress than BME, with those with parents employed in routine and semi-routine occupations being the most likely of all to progress. As a corollary, having parents with higher education actually decreased the probability of progressing, as did coming from as state school (see Table 2). Again, recalling the notion of 'dutiful aspirational capital', disadvantaged students appear to strive to do well for the sake of their families and to ensure social mobility combined with family pressures. For example, Omar from a working class Asian background noted: 'The scary thing about failing was putting shame on the family – there was a lot of pressure to make sure that I progress'. More privileged students seemed to be less worried about progression, presumably because of their families could support them if they dropped out. For example, Paul who was white and from a privileged background

noted: 'I don't need more than a 2.1 to get the jobs I want. Some don't even require a degree, let alone a first. Even if I get a 2.2 it would not be the end of the world'.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Institutional habitus, student attainment and progression

Much of the discussion above has focused on the actions and agency of students, yet the institutional habitus must also be taken into account, along with the role of the department and the staff within it and the place where it is situated in order to try to account for the various inclusions and exclusions (Hopkins, 2011; Solís et al 2014). As such, place-based diversity needs to incorporate the intersectional social identities of students as well as the support provided by the department and university within its geographical context. In terms of the location of the university, it is also worth recalling Holton and Riley's (2013) suggestion to reverse the focus from 'studentification' and the impacts of students on university locations, to how these locations influence students.

In the current case, at the university level, 57 percent of the students in 2013/14 were from BME backgrounds, which is among the highest of Russell Group/elite universities with many of these students living at home and within East London itself. The area where the university is situated has an average Index of Multiple Deprivation score double the national and London average. Tower Hamlets borough where the university is located is home to the largest Bangladeshi community in the UK (32 percent), and in neighbouring Newham, 61 percent of the population identify as non-white (McIlwaine and Ryburn 2014, 5-6). This has created an institutional habitus whereby diversity is generally acknowledged and celebrated at university and departmental level. The case of Mary who was a white local student from Hackney who was the first to go to university who noted:

> 'People are very motivated and there is huge cultural diversity; this is crucial because this means different ideas. This is a characteristic of that has switch on my engagement – it makes me think more about my arguments'.

At the departmental level, a range of mechanisms have been established over time that have enhanced and encouraged diversity. Not only does it have a bronze Athena Swan accreditation, but there is near gender balance for all Teaching and Research and Research posts which compares favourably to a national average for all subjects of 39.4 percent female and 60.6 percent male. This obtains for professorial posts where there is a gender balance of nine male and nine female professors in 2017 (far exceeding the national benchmark of 21 percent female). This is partly the result of having gender inclusive role models among academic staff dating back several decades. Yet ethnicity remains a problem with only 6

percent of academic staff identifying as Asian and 3 percent as of mixed race in 2016/17 although this is more diverse than the national average of 4.3 percent (Desai 2017, 322).

With this important caveat in mind and focusing on students, a range of initiatives have been developed to provide more support for students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, the department has a 'Stepping Stones' mentoring programme to promote access to HE and enhance social mobility for able students from East London and the Thames Gateway with limited previous exposure to university. This entails undergraduate mentors working with 3-4 target schools with 16-20 students. In addition, a 'Springboards' transition project is led by trained undergraduates who provide support channels for new students through face-to-face sessions and social media engagement, again targeting those with limited previous exposure to university life. Systematic efforts have also been made to work on student engagement with a revamped monitoring system managed by a Student Experience Administrator and an online student engagement monitoring tool. The department is also one of the first in the UK to devise a Fieldwork Diversity Policy that has since been shared with 14 other departments. Together with a tutorial and advisor system, and a university-wide Peer Assisted Study Support scheme, these mechanisms have provided a nurturing environment for disadvantaged students to progress. For example, Sumi, of Bangladeshi background stated:

> 'I feel that support is quite strong at this university. Lecturers and professors I have met have given me a very strong support. I think university is about your independent work, but when you get that extra support it really makes a difference.'

Although these support systems have arguably assisted in the largely positive retention and progression rates, attainment remains unequal for BME students. While this requires more in-depth analysis, one area identified by students was curriculum development and the need to 'destabilise the classroom' (Daigle and Sundberg 2017) as part of encouraging a more inclusive learning environment. For example, John commented on Geography as a 'white' discipline:

> 'Maybe … Geography itself is very white … there was a very interesting class this year which was the first discussion we had about the Middle East … Perhaps we are not teaching the things that are appealing for people who are not white.'

While addressing the structural reasons on ways that universities through their institutional habitus influence how students from diverse backgrounds progress and attain is essential, it is also important to avoid what Shilliam (2017) refers to as the 'black deficit' model. This is where those from BME backgrounds enter the university assuming they have a 'cultural deficiency and cognitive incompetency'. While some of the departmental initiatives identified

above have been careful to avoid this and arguably have contributed to reducing ethnic, gender, and class-based inequalities in progression through actively aiming to be inclusive along intersectional lines, more recent institutional level mechanisms have the potential to fall into the deficit trap.

Conclusions

Place-based diversity incorporates acknowledgement of students' diverse identities and agency as well as the institutional habitus of departments and universities and where they are situated geographically. This paper has examined these issues within a specific department of Geography at an East London university from the perspective of attainment *and* progression among the student body. It has shown that studying undergraduate Geography is no longer the domain of the white, male middle classes who will automatically progress and perform better than their counterparts from more diverse backgrounds. However, while female undergraduates outnumber and outperform their male peers, with many from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds being able to progress and achieve, the same cannot be said for BME students. While departmental support mechanisms have helped in facilitating progression, much more needs to be done. While the provision of enhanced support mechanisms is essential for ensuring that all students have a level playing field regardless of their background, it is essential to refute the 'black deficit' trap (Shilliam 2017). Instead, we are in favour of a model that echoes the 'reverse studentification' notion (Holton and Riley 2013) in relation to diversity where those in more privileged positions learn from where they are living (in this case a hugely diverse part of the city) and from their peers in a university where more than half the student body are from a BME background. We argue that the notion of 'place-based diversity' can be useful in capturing this in combination with some Bourdieusian interpretations of cultural capital or what we call 'dutiful aspirational capital', and that this contributes to the growing body of research on the need to address the role of the university as a contested space of inclusion and exclusion in relation to diverse identities (Hopkins 2011) as well as work on the need to explore the role of diversity from a place-contingent perspective (Solís et al 2014). It also feeds into the need for Geography as a discipline to acknowledge the progress it has made in terms of gender equality at undergraduate level, but that this needs to be ensured through the academic ranks (Maddrell et al 2014). Finally, it contributes to understanding of the urgent need to address ethnic inequalities in geographical education as part of Desai's (2017, 322) call for an 'honest and frank discussion on the experiences of BME staff and students in the current economic climate'. More systematic approaches are required to address such 'toxic geographies' (Minelle 2104) and inequalities departmentally, institutionally and in wider society potentially. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest specific interventions, this might be done through first delineating the issues in terms of attainment and progression, as well as through developing more positive diverse role models, curriculum change, targeted

support mechanisms that avoid the black deficit model, and more active engagement across the board to address discrimination.

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[i] It is not clear why this might be the case. However, it might be that those with experiences of exclusion within the academy feel prompted to explore the reasons for this and/or those not from these backgrounds do not consider this a relevant or appropriate area of research.

[ii] Including six young men and two young women, three who identified as white and five who identified as Asian.