Education + Training

Becoming a professional: A longitudinal qualitative study of the graduate transition in BSc Psychology.

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Abstract

Purpose

Research into the experience of BSc Psychology students and graduates in the graduate transition was carried out to enquire if ontology is central to educational transformation; if professional work experience is important in the process of becoming; and how graduates experience the transition from student to professional.

Design / methodology

In this qualitative longitudinal in-depth interview investigation four one-year work placement students were interviewed twice and five graduates were interviewed at graduation and again two years later. Student transcriptions were analysed thematically and graduate transcriptions received Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Findings

Placement students became legitimate participants in professional life. Graduates thought that BSc Psychology should enable a career and were dissatisfied when it did not. Professional psychology dominated career aspiration. Relationships and participation in work communities of practice were highly significant for learning, personal and professional identity and growth.

Practical implications

Ontology may be central to educational transformation in BSc Psychology and is facilitated by integrated work experience. A more vocational focus is also advocated.

Originality/value

The UK Bachelors degree in psychology is increasingly concerned with employability however becoming a professional requires acting and being as well as knowledge and skills and Barnett and others have called for Higher Education to embrace an ontological turn. This is explored in the context of BSc Psychology student experience and reflection on work placements, graduation and early career development.

Key words

- Graduate transition
- Psychology education
- Ontology
- Work experience
- Longitudinal
- Qualitative IPA

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the graduate transition experience from undergraduate to professional life of BSc Psychology students in the UK, including year-long sandwich work placement (internship) experience. It aims to bring together perspectives on employability, identity development, ontology and becoming a professional with data from a longitudinal qualitative study. The studies reported take interpretative phenomenological analysis [IPA] and thematic analysis approaches however the case studies are not reported in detail here. This paper summarizes the principal themes identified in the analyses and addresses their implications for undergraduate education as preparation for professional life.

The graduate transition is conceived of here principally in terms of ontology; of identity and becoming. Thus undergraduate education is construed in the manner of Dall'Alba (2009), Barnett (2009) and Su and Feng (2008) as not only about knowledge and skills, but also about learning to become. Becoming, and the integration of knowing, acting, and being may be difficult for undergraduate education to enable, but adding professional work experience to undergraduate education may help and may lead to broad ontological development.

The focus of this paper is BSc Psychology. In the UK this popular but non-vocational degree can lead to graduate vocational training and professional psychology careers for a minority. These opportunities are fiercely competed for. Participants all attended a university with a tradition of sandwich degrees in which the majority of students take a year-long work placement between their second and final years of study. In Psychology typically two-thirds of the cohort take a placement year and the majority of these take honorary (unpaid) posts as Assistant Clinical Psychologists. The work placement year is considered here as a part of the graduate transition.

Review

As Holmes (2013) points out, Higher Education (HE) systems have in common that individuals enter, progress as students, leave as graduates and go on to lives with social, economic and political dimensions. The way that individuals are prepared by HE for their post graduation lives, as well as individual experience of the graduate transition, is therefore of interest to a range of stakeholders. Much of this interest has centered on employability.

The dominant approach to employability is still based on the possession or acquisition by the graduate of a set of skills, qualities or attributes.

Employability

Lowden, Hall, Elliot and Lewin (2011) distinguish between a narrow approach to employability focusing on skills and attributes, and a broader more inclusive approach embracing values, intellectual rigour and engagement (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011). However despite attempts to broaden the notion of skills, Holmes (2013), in offering three competing perspectives on graduate employability, concludes that this 'possession' (of skills etc.) approach has little value. It suffers from an excess of loosely based and ill-defined terms and difficulties in objective measurement. Crucially it is unable to explain differences in employment outcomes between graduates of different demographic groups.

Social position

Holmes goes on to consider the power of social position to determine post graduation progress. This *can* account for demography-related outcome differences. He concludes however that the social positioning approach is a '*counsel of despair*' (p 538) and that HE *'…is merely one stage… within the biographical trajectories of students and graduates'* (p 548).

Identity

Holmes then discusses graduate employability as a process and focuses on the development of identity. For most students HE coincides with the late adolescence to early adulthood transition and with developments in identity and vocation. Arnett (2000) refers to this as emerging adulthood, an in-between period where identity alternatives can be considered in careers, relationships, philosophy of life etc. Dahlgren, Handal, Szkudlarek and Bayer (2007) found that students developed discipline-based identities. Johnsson and Hager (2008) suggest that learning for professional practice is also about seeking and identifying connections to forms of identity (Billett and Somerville, 2004). They suggest that graduates are at a stage of life where they are in search of occupational identities (Kram, 1988) or of broader social identity (Delanty, 2003). The need for a broader identity is underlined by Nyström's (2009a) point that student identity is all pervading so that on graduation there is a life-wide vacuum to fill.

Nyström (2009b) suggests that identity is central for professional development since work is important for the individual's sense of self (Billett, 2007) and that students' potential future

profession contributes to their 'sense of being'. She goes on to differentiate three forms of professional identity; non-differentiated, compartmentalised and integrated. These emerge sequentially and represent different relationships between professional, personal and private life. Initially graduates adopt a work identity that is as all defining as the student identity, but adjust to the demands of a private life involving for example life-partner relationships and parenthood. Holden and Hamblett's (2007) case studies are also records of a search for self, the forming of identity and becoming. Abrandt Dahlgren, Hult, Dahlgren, Hård af Segerstad and Johansson (2006) cite Bauman (1991) who claims that people are no longer firmly rooted in one location or social system, but are socially displaced. There is therefore a need to establish a stable identity to differentiate between the inner self and the outer world, and that this needs the affirmation of social approval. Wenger (1998) also suggests that identity is neither a coherent unity nor is it simply fragmented. He describes identity formation in a community of practice as a nexus of multi-membership, identities are at the same time one and multiple.

Making meaning and the experience of time

A key feature is the 'Dream', a projection of our ideal life that we are always becoming in relation to (Tennant and Pogson, 1995). This links to Heidegger's idea of temporality (1962); the experience of time is at the heart of what it means to exist. We project forward our imagined future possibilities, we are what we are to become, a key point in the making of the meaning of self and graduation as we engage in *selving* (Heidegger, 1962). We create our existence as we live it and in order to live it. We have to make meaning, Heidegger argues, because of the temporality-related idea of *being-towards-death*. Our finite existence is inescapable and this brings with it anxiety and a need to create meaning. For Heidegger life is not intrinsically meaningful, we must create meaning so as to face the limits of our existence. It also accords with Giddens (1991) who argues that as traditional social patterns loosen and choices widen the construction of self is increasingly a 'identity project', a term also associated with Harré (1983) '…*to refer to efforts to achieve self-directed development and expression of self* ' (Stevens and Wetherell, 1996, p.345).

Ontology

Thus ontology, learning to become, should be a key element in HE from a number of perspectives. Work on ontology by Barnett and by Dall'Alba links identity to professional development. Dall'Alba (2009) argues that ontology is central to becoming a professional. Benner (1984) makes the same point in her account of development from novice to expert

in nursing; knowing is not enough, becoming, inhabiting the professional role, walking the walk, is also essential. Both Dall'Alba (2009) and Barnett (2009) argue for the reconfiguration of professional education as a process of becoming. Learning to become a professional involves the integration of knowing, acting, and being and Dall'Alba argues that when education focuses only on the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills, it falls short of facilitating their integration into professional ways of being. A focus on knowledge and skills '… *is insufficient for skillful practice and for the transformation of the self that is integral to achieving such practice'* (Dall'Alba, p34).

In a similar vein Su and Feng (2008) draw on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. This is practical judgment or wisdom grounded in being-in-the-world, rather like the Heideggerian idea of *dasien* (1962). Phronesis must include action (Aristotle, 1985). Su and Feng argue that phronesis focuses on process as well as outcome and engagement in action. Phronesis;

> '…*makes an ontological turn in the practice of HE, away from learning for the sake of the subject discipline itself to learning for oneself and the world, from the advocacy of instrumentalization and fragmentation to the exploration of integration and creation, and hence from rigid, fixed knowing to dynamic acting and being' (Barnett, 2004; Dall'Alba and Barnacle, 2007).* (Su and Feng, 2008, pp. 4-5).

Situated learning in communities of practice

Situated learning is proposed by Lave and Wenger as a model of learning in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, 2002, Wenger 1998). They argue that learning is a social process in a social and organisational context and takes place through 'legitimate peripheral participation' through which the learner moves towards full participation in the practices of a community. Learning is not solely in the learner's head. Legitimate peripheral participation is concerned with the relationships between new entrants and old hands in the community of practice, and with their activities, identities, knowledge and practices and with the artefacts that are produced. Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers, and recovering alcoholics, but suggest that the processes by which participants in these communities learn can be generalized to other groups. Situated learning implies that without vocational experience students may learn not how to be a professional, but how to be a student. Becoming a student is important for first year undergraduates but as a course progresses the transformative power of work experience at an appropriate level, perhaps through a work placement, becomes more important as graduation nears. In work students may find themselves truly and legitimately participating

in professional life with profound ontological consequences for their sense of who they are. This links to debate about the function of HE, and what students gain from participating in it.

Summary – HE is more than knowledge and skills

In summary to become professionals students must do more than acquire knowledge and skills and Heidegger, Barnett, Su and Feng, Dall'Alba, and Benner variously articulate the transformative potential of HE in ontological terms. Being and becoming in the early adult graduate transition is not exclusively about occupational identity but it is a key element. Lave and Wenger describe a process of acculturation through participation in a work community of practice.

Thus the research questions below are raised to which we take a phenomenological approach aiming to add to our understanding of HE in general and the graduate transition in BSc Psychology specifically.

1. Do interviews with those in the graduate transition offer evidence that ontology is central to the educational transformation that Barnett and others argue that HE should provide?

2. Is a period of professional level work experience, such as an integrated sandwich placement year, important in the process of becoming?

3. How do individuals experience the transition from being a student to becoming a graduate professional?

To answer these questions, two longitudinal semi-structured individual interview studies with BSc Psychology students and graduates from a university in the English West Midlands are reported.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were recruited in June 2012 and were BSc Psychology students from a UK university who were either about to complete their second year of study and start a sandwich placement year or about to graduate. Volunteers were sought by emailing the two cohorts with information about the proposed research and a request for participants. Graduating volunteers already known to the interviewer were preferred as it was thought that pre-existing relationships would facilitate the research. Placement volunteers were selected according to convenience of placement location.

In the placement study four students (three women; Rada, Ella and Marie, and one man, Dave, all pseudonyms) aged 19-21 were interviewed near the start of their placements and again near the end. Marie worked as an Honorary Research Assistant; the other three were Honorary Assistant Clinical Psychologists. In the graduate study five people were interviewed shortly before or after graduation and again two years later. Participants were all women (pseudonyms Nadia, Louise, Amina, Suzie, Toyah), four had taken a placement year, three were from ethnic minorities, all were interested in professional, particularly clinical psychology. Four were awarded 2.1 degrees and one a 2.2.

Research based on as few as nine participants and 18 interviews is not unusual in the phenomenological and qualitative traditions where concern is with meaning and how it arises through experience and with description and relationship rather than causality (Langdridge, 2007). Indeed Holden and Hamblett's 2007 paper in this journal reported data from five individuals and 20 interviews over the course of a year aiming to '...*address matters of concern through the eyes of the graduate respondents*.' (p517)

Procedures.

Interview schedules to guide the in-depth semi-structured interviews were drawn up based on previous research on employability and work placements (e.g. Reddy and Moores, 2006, 2012) tutorial experience and qualitative exemplars (e.g. Smith, 1995). Interviews took place in workplaces and homes and in the researcher's office. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim in an orthographic style (Gibson, 2010). Participants completed consent forms and were debriefed at the end of the study. The research was approved by the university ethics committee and conducted in accordance with the university's Research Integrity Code of Conduct.

Measures

Interviews were guided by a schedule derived from tutorial work with undergraduates and designed to explore the lived experience respectively of work placements and the graduate transition as a whole.

Analysis

Interview recordings were listened to several times enabling reflection on the structure and the emotional tone of the interviews. Transcripts were read and re-read, emerging themes

and links between sections of text were noted. Transcripts were cross-referenced as themes were firmed up, ordered and linked to quotes. Placement student interviews were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Graduate interview transcripts received individual Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), chosen because of its concern with meaning and how it arises through experience, and with description and relationship rather than causality (Langdridge, 2007). Analysis drew on Langdridge, Shaw (2010) and Smith (2008). First interview graduate transcripts were analysed case-by-case before turning to second interviews.

Results

The results are the themes identified in the interview analyses and are presented in two groups, placement students and graduates. Placement student results emerged from a thematic analysis and they are structured in line with the research aims in table 1 below. Gradate results are the product of a more in-depth interpretative phenomenological analysis and are presented on a case-by-case basis and are summarized in table 2.

Table 1: Placement student themes

Aim 1. Do interviews with those in the graduate transition offer evidence that ontology is central to the educational transformation that Barnett and others argue that HE should provide?

1. Coherence, sophistication and fluency of interviewees
2. Personal development, competence
3. Connecting work and university

Aim 2. Is a period of professional level work experience, such as an integrated sandwich placement year, important in the process of becoming?

4. Situated learning (also aim three)
5. Broadened or crystalized career outlook
6. Supervision

Aim 3. **How do individuals experience the transition from being a student to becoming a graduate professional?**

7. Situated learning (also aim two)
8. Break from education
9. The challenge of placement

Aim 1. Do interviews with those in the graduate transition offer evidence that ontology is central to the educational transformation that Barnett and others argue that HE should provide?

Theme 1: Coherence, sophistication and fluency of interviewees.

Interviewees were impressively coherent, analytic and reasoned and placement student interview transcripts are studded with claims of enhanced confidence, independence and maturity. These are evidenced by example and by the fluency and sophistication on display. For example Ella asserts that after being on placement for most of the year;

> *You can rely on me to get things done, I'm pro-active, I'm organised, I can be trusted, you can depend on me and I will take the work on and get it done well. I'm confident… I can clearly express what I'm thinking or, if I have any concerns, I can clearly bring them to the table. I'm more analytical… more punctual... (Ella)*

The point with the example for this theme is Ella's sophistication and fluency rather than the content of her assertion, the content belongs with the next theme.

Theme 2: Personal development, competence

As with theme one, interviews abound with claims of enhanced confidence, independence personal development, increasing competence and maturity

> *…it's … changed how I view people and how I involve myself with people… before, I was more shy and reserved …it's helped me to develop assertiveness and confidence … I'm… a stronger version of myself.* (Dave)

Ella identifies personal development benefits.

> *…it's made me more independent ...more focused …it's a great opportunity for me to prove to people that I can work and I can be a good colleague…* (Ella)

Asked what she has got to offer an employer, Ella offers a sophisticated set of personal development outcomes rather than simple competencies. Rada's communication, confidence, organisational skills and time management have similarly improved.

> *…I've learned to… do things on time and even if I'm running out of time I'm able to work under pressure… being more adaptive …and quick, being efficient … and communication and confidence skills …probably my writing abilities as well.* (Rada)

10

It seems clear that in the interviewees' eyes they have changed in significant ways, they have 'become' rather than simply learned things and this becoming is transformative and important to them.

Theme 3: Connecting work and university

Interviewees found few connections between their placement work and their academic work and this suggests that if participants are transformed in some way on placement, and themes one and two suggest that they feel that they are, it is powered by their experience of work.

> *I think the only relation I probably had was with the writing. ..It's just a different kind of experience. (Rada)*

Aim 2. Is a period of professional level work experience, such as an integrated sandwich placement year, important in the process of becoming?

Theme 4: Situated learning - legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice

Interviewees built relationships at multiple levels. Ella made professional connections through sharing an office with clinical trainees and Rada worked with others at several different levels. This prompted skills development and changes in her sense of self as others responded to her as a professional.

> *… clients saw me as a professional because I was running the sessions with my supervisor and the other co-workers. So because they saw me as a professional… I, .., accepted that role... (Rada)*

By her second interview Ella is now an insider. Being treated as professional and as a colleague changes Ella's view of herself.

> *…I look quite young… but people were talking to me in quite a professional way, expecting me to do things... That made me feel older and more mature… (Ella)*

Rada exemplifies legitimate peripheral participation and she enjoys her new status.

> *…sometimes I forgot I was a student … the clients …see me as a professional so I... fulfill that role... (Rada 2: 413-34)*

Similarly Ella experienced being treated as a legitimate participant.

> *…when I started …in my head it was kind of like I was a pupil…. But then… you realise …that they're looking at you as a colleague and you do feel … on the same level as them.. (Ella)*

Overall interviewees were surprised and delighted to find themselves accepted. However Rada ruefully notes that work is full-time and this 'learning to labour' aspect can be a shock. To be accepted students needed to find a role that enabled them to participate and while this clearly happened for the interviewees placements occasionally fail.

Theme 5: Broadened or crystallized career outlook

Ella notes that her career ideas broadened after initially being quite naïve. She reports finding out about other professions and about the business side of her organisation and is more flexible about her career aim; a move away from the quest for the single 'right' career that perhaps obsesses younger students.

> *I started wanting to do clinical psychology. …still something I want to do but I'm thinking about educational psychology or even teaching or nursing... So, yes it has shifted… it keeps shifting actually.* (Ella)

> *I was quite naïve when I went into the job... and that has opened my eyes to a whole load of other careers …* (Ella)

Rada is now open to clinical work.

> *… I didn't even want to do a placement …it's all, kind of, worked out ... I'm much more open now to clinical work and occupational….* (Rada)

For Marie her experience has crystalized her career ideas.

> *…it's made me think, 'Yes, I could do a PhD'. It's hard work but I'm capable and my supervisor agrees.* (Marie)

Interviewees in general report moving on from identifying '*the* career' and being more open minded about their career options. Some have clarified their aims and ambitions.

Theme 6: Supervision

Supervision was important to all the placement interviewees. Ella's supervisor was an inspiration to her and Rada received more mentoring and tutoring on placement than at university. Her supervisor coached her writing and scholarship and Ella emphasised the quality, structured nature and sheer quantity of interaction that she enjoyed with her supervisor. Rada commented:

> *…we were able to… speak to each other easily. She was approachable … very friendly … we always had supervision sessions every week, so if there was anything I wanted to tell her about, I was able to..* (Rada)

Aim 3. How do individuals experience the transition from being a student to becoming a graduate professional?

Theme 7: Situated learning (also in aim one)

This theme is illustrated above under aim one but also seems important in individual experience of the graduate transition even though these students will return to university for the nine months of their final year. By their second interviews placement student felt themselves to be legitimate participants in professional communities of practice.

Theme 8: Break from education

Interviewees noted that a placement year gave them a break from education. This was welcomed by some, for example Marie will return with renewed enthusiasm but will also be glad to finish and move on;

> *I'm looking forward to the new modules… in the final year. …But then …I just want to get it over with and get out there in the world.* (Marie)

Theme 9: The challenge of placement

Interviewees found the experience of placement quite challenging and this was apparent for some in the first interview and admitted by others only in the second interview. Dave talked of being terrified and feeling out of his depth when he started work and Rada was not alone in finding the full-length working day with a nine a.m. start five days a week daunting at first. Another challenge was managing financially, including fitting in part-time shifts in pubs and restaurants, especially as most students from other courses would be on paid placements as Ella notes;

> *…what's challenging is that I was unpaid… coming from a university where a lot of the courses are business orientated, most of your friends would have a paid placement…* (Ella)

Graduate interviews

Gradate interviews received interpretative phenomenological analysis and are presented in brief on a case-by-case basis exploring individual experience of becoming a professional.

Table 2: Key themes for individual graduates

Nadia: Clinical ambitions, expectations and fate
Louise: BSc not worthwhile, initial disappointment
Amina: Learning at work, assimilating transition
Suzie: Inspired by vocation on placement
Toyah: Paradise lost, a narrative of becoming

Nadia

Nadia was a home-based student from a South Asian background and graduated with a very good degree. Her graduate transition was dominated by her employment status and her progress towards becoming a professional psychologist. However family and community expectations impinged on her career aims. In part this is common to all, graduation prompting questions of the '*…and what are you going to do with your life?*' variety, but is also gender and culture specific.

Her dominant theme was 'placement experience'. This was liberating, empowering and toxic all at once. It was the most important and challenging part of her degree and prompted painful reflection as well as ambition. Nadia was conflicted about her desire to live independently and pursue her choice of professional career, and by her loyalty to parental and community values. Nadia wanted to become professionally qualified before marriage but acknowledged that she might not have time to reach her goal before her '*fate*' closed in. By the second interview Nadia had experience both of professional life and independent living and was concerned with the double-edge of support and control that the opportunity of returning home to study for a professional qualification offered. Nadia's transition thus encompasses tastes of professional life and personal independence as well as the bitterness of rejected applications and low status work. Ultimately she felt that she is in the hands of fate.

Louise

Louise, from a white British background, took a clinical placement. She was interested in a clinical career and achieved a good degree. Her first interview was dominated by disappointment at not being *'snapped up'* by an employer, as she had been for her placement. She felt betrayed by a system that had not eased her way into becoming a professional or delivered her chosen career. This caused her to re-assess the choices she had made and the value of her degree. Bitterness was not far below the surface.

14

Louise was in a different position in her second interview. She was no longer '*agitated*' and had grown in stature. She revealed leadership potential and entrepreneurial ambition. She was relaxed, brisk, on a clear path to becoming a professional and had moved on from the initial transition crisis. She was reconciled to a change in career aim to occupational psychology and had completed a qualifying MSc. She had hardened her view that her BSc was of little value and contrasted it unfavourably with the more vocational MSc.

Amina

Amina, a home-based student from a South Asian background did not take a placement year but had a semi-professional part-time job throughout her course. She achieved a very good degree and began teacher training.

Amina emphasized the importance of her work experience in developing as a professional and thought that HE should prepare students for professional life. Amina thought that her work was at least as important as her course as a source of learning and development, suggesting that psychology programmes might use part-time work experience as a source of learning.

Amina was planned, purposeful and hard working. She was like others in wanting a more vocational education but also enjoyed the range of choice in HE, benefitting from opportunities that were not necessarily aimed at her. Amina was teaching by her second interview. She was frank about her expectations of marriage and children and the gendered role that this would entail. She celebrated success and adulthood but also mourned a lost stage of life. Amina's story is one of transition as work-in-progress and already partly assimilated.

Suzie

Suzie, a home-based student from an ethnic minority, was passionately committed to clinical psychology. Her highly successful clinical placement year was inspiring and a wake-up call about how competitive entry to clinical training would be. She worked very hard in her final year and achieved a good degree.

The salient feature of Suzie's first interview was the depth of her commitment to a clinical career and the extent to which she had already become a 'legitimate peripheral participant' in that community of practice. She had clinical skills, maturity, a proactive approach and a sense of respect for her colleagues as well as rigorous honesty, clarity and realism. Her

passion for her career came from identifying with the caring nature of the role and compassion for people in distress. She had already become a professional in many respects.

Her second interview, when about to start clinical training, confirmed that she had found her vocation. Suzie was still in transition, she still felt like a student but of a different kind. She no longer wanted just to be a Clinical Psychologist but also a clinical supervisor. Other issues connect with other interviewees, particularly the issue of supervisor power and the power that the competition for entry to the profession may exert.

Toyah

Toyah, a campus-based student with a disability from a white British background, had taken a successful clinical placement year. The notion of paradise lost seemed apt for her first interview. The weaknesses of her approach to academic work had been exposed, she did little reading, did not write well and left without the good degree required to become a Clinical Psychologist. In leaving university she had lost what she felt to be an inspiring community of successful people and friends, lost an independent life and returned to live with her parents, lost the licence to dream of a future that came with being a student. Of all the interviewees Toyah described her university experience in the most positive terms, and seemed to have lost the most.

At her second interview Toyah was more at ease and sounded analytic, reflective and aware, much more a young professional than a slightly lost former student. Her ability to reflect and evaluate her experience was impressive and she took a broad view of her education as a developmental process. Vocationally it had not led her directly to a career but she had found a way of becoming a professional that fitted her circumstances. She had given up her unrealistic prestigious-career-as-identity ambition. She has also assimilated her experience into a coherent narrative about who she was becoming. There was comfort, awareness and acceptance of her identity and of her strengths and weaknesses and an embracing of her future. This included the idea of work-life balance and was much broader than a career-at-any-cost approach. It may be that the embodied constraint of her disability may lie behind this and her acceptance that she will work part-time, just as Amina and Nadia accept the reality of their constraints. These inform their vision of who they are becoming and prompt insight, awareness and maturity as well as some regret.

Discussion

Results are first summarized below and then discussed in relation to the literature reviewed above under three meta-level headings (career focus, power, identity) that bring the results of both sets of interviews together. Thereafter how ontological development may be promoted is discussed, followed by limitations, conclusions, and implications for practice.

Summary: placement students

All interviewees felt treated as professionals and situated learning makes sense of their experience. All were participants in communities of practice such that colleagues saw them as legitimate actors and insiders. This sense of participation and belonging relates to the more sophisticated thinking about careers and identity that the interviews reveal and to their personal development. Interview transcripts are full of claims of greater confidence, independence and maturity and these are well evidenced. All interviewees advocated work experience but struggled to reconcile it with university learning. Work experience appears to be transformative, university education less so. Marie for example felt that her work had transformed her approach to academic work and to life itself. Her experience is less of education preparing her for work and more of work transforming her approach to education. Ella's supervisor was an inspiration to her and offered the personal apprenticeship relationship that is thought to be so important in promoting engagement and growth in HE (Chickering and Gamson, 1987, 2002) but is so hard to provide in mass HE.

Summary: Graduates

All except Amina saw their future professional identity tied to their discipline, suggesting that professional psychology, especially clinical psychology, dominates undergraduate career aspiration. Work experience was important for all and transformational for Suzie and Nadia. Despite the progress achieved by Suzie, Nadia and Louise, professional psychology is an unrealistic aim for most psychology graduates. In 2014-15 over two-thirds of this university's year thee psychology cohort were on placement as Honorary Assistant Clinical Psychologists. The availability of these unpaid clinical placements may mislead students into thinking that graduate opportunities are similarly available – they are not. A placement can be a unique opportunity to get ahead but still leaves many hurdles to face. Students may also, falsely and unreasonably, see the psychology professions as the only valid outcomes for a psychology degree.

The non-vocational model of general academic grounding seemed little understood and the graduates interviewed thought that BSc Psychology should prepare them for professional life. Despite this it is hard to engage students in careers and personal development work and undergraduates generally focus on their grades. Grades are important for university entry but graduate academic differentiation is limited, most achieve first or second-class honours with upper second degrees predominating. Thus work experience and extra-curricular activity become sources of distinction and differentiation, again emphasising the difference between learning to become a professional and learning to become a student. The expectation of a career in professional Psychology fed dissatisfaction when it did not materialize at graduation.

Career focus

All interviewees focused on their careers. Emphasis on HE as a route to a high-status career has accompanied a drift towards more vocational courses (Trapp, Banister, Ellis et al, 2011) although there may also have been a move towards more academic vocational education (Burke, 2015). Interviewees regarded their placement work as a highly significant learning experience. Its benefits include being a legitimate participant, thus becoming a professional in an adult professional world, a broadened career outlook, and significant personal development. Work is generally transformative as Johnsson and Hager (2008) make clear in their study of young orchestral musicians.

For Dall'Alba (2009), Barnett (2009), Su and Feng (2008), Thompson (2005), Dall'Alba and others, HE should transform the student and ontology is central to this transformation. Johnsson and Hager (2008) argue that learning is embodied and organic rather than a transfer of knowledge and skills or stages of competency and illustrate this in showing how different the world of the professional orchestra is to that of music education. Skill in playing and musical knowledge is only part of what is required. They cite Bokeno and Gantt (2000) in suggesting that the relationships formed at work are the site of learning. They argue that we learn through social participation, through relationships that cultivate, disseminate and maintain learning in communities of practice. This is supported by the placement interviews where relationships and participation are key features. This suggests that only vocational HE with integrated work experience may be truly transformative. Work placements offer the ontological opportunity to learn, grow and become, to act and to be through work, and this is captured by the idea of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and by phronesis (Su and Feng, 2008).

Power

Power is a theme for Nadia and for Suzie in their second interviews and is evident in the placement interviews. Holden and Hamblett (2007) suggest that each of their five graduate case studies can be read as a struggle to assimilate conventions and a search for power. The search for self is a search for a place in a work community. This requires negotiation with power and the acquisition of power. This is clearly the case for Louise who relishes leadership and chafes in a more junior role as she works towards professional status. It is also the case for Marie who found a niche on placement that gave her a supervisory role. Suzie is uncomfortable with the power of her supervisor to influence her identity by schooling her in new models of psychotherapy. This power is not manifest simply in her being required to take on new views, but by the supervisor's experience, knowledge and authority which enables her to reveal and validate new perspectives on practice and new truths that cannot easily be ignored. Suzie's discomfort is ontological in that she feels that being imbued with an alternative model means to her that she has become a 'straw in the wind'. Her identity is therefore less constructed by herself through reflection and choice, but more driven by the influence of the supervisor, not only as an individual but as a representative of the community of practice. Becoming part of the community may mean giving up some autonomy to that community. A similar process of socialization and acculturation can be seen in the placement interviews.

Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth and Rose (2013) also talk about power in arguing that work placements do not simply ease the transition into the labour market, but are where inequalities are reproduced. They show how students' progression in the arts is mediated through practices that privilege those able to bring financial resources, professional contacts and cultural capital to bear. Progress towards Clinical Psychology is no doubt similarly hindered or smoothed, but higher pay may now be found in management rather than the traditional professions. Those without the capital to compete for the psychology professions may find emerging graduate opportunities of the sort identified by Purcell, Elias, Atfield et al (2013).

Identity

Dahlgren, Handal et al (2007) found that students develop discipline-based identities and this is evident in the graduate interviews. Nyström (2009a) argues that student identity is broad, covering occupational and social roles thus leaving a big gap when it is lost. The graduates all felt the loss of student identity supporting the contention that new graduates

seek occupational identities (Kram, 1988) and a broader social identity (Delanty, 2003). Nyström (2009b) sees forms of professional identity emerging sequentially. Initially a non-differentiated work identity as all-defining as the student identity but this changes as professional life becomes assimilated and work/life distinctions emerge. Overall, identity is a complex and multi-headed concept that interacts with most of the other themes. Interviewees' sense of their own identities seems to change along the lines suggested by Nyström.

Promoting ontological development

Becoming a professional needs to be seen in conjunction with

- Ontology,
- The development from novice to expert
- A search for self, power and role in a community of practice (Holden and Hamblett, 2007; Wenger 1998),
- The integration of knowing and acting into professional ways of being (Dall'Alba, 2009; Benner, 1984)
- Judgment and wisdom grounded in acting and being in a professional world (Su and Feng, 2008; Heidegger, 1962).

However it is difficult to identify what can be done through teaching alone to promote ontological development and facilitate the graduate transition to professional life, especially during a non-vocational BSc. It is difficult to teach reflection or to involve students in personal development work. Finlay (2002) notes how demanding honest reflection can be. Johnsson and Hager (2008) note that musicians must learn to subjugate themselves to a greater whole, rather than compete with each other in virtuosity, speed and volume, but this experiential process is difficult for educators to provide. Griggs, Holden, Lawless and Rae (2018) agree that students may resist reflective learning but, despite noting a general lack of evidence that teaching about reflection enhances reflective practice in later professional work, found in their study of Masters graduates in Human Resource Management/Development '…*some evidence that students were able to translate their learning into something meaningful for their practice*' (p1172). These were however Masters graduates of a vocational programme.

In Burke's (2015) terms, all undergraduates may aspire to vocational greatness, but far too many simply expect greatness to be thrust upon them, as Louise initially expected to

happen. It is a paradox that students are focused on their vocation but have difficulty seeing

the route to it as one of self-discovery, a journey inwards, rather than largely as a matter of

consumer choice. However work experience seems to have the power to bring ontological

development about.

Heidegger offers some insights into how ontological development can be promoted.

Heidegger (Thomson, 2005) distinguishes genuine education (or *bildung*) from received

education in which students see everything as resources to be ordered and optimised

(Thomson, 2005, pp.160-3) to the exclusion of becoming. To get beyond this is to transcend

enframing - which to Heidegger represents the potential danger to forget our own essence

as beings capable of revealing the world in different ways and finding new ways of being.

Enframing causes humans to see themselves exclusively as beings that order things and see

everything as commodities. Heidegger concluded that technology is fundamentally

enframing (Scrivener, 2014). This contrast between becoming and enframing is challenging

because it suggests that education aiming at ontological development may be incompatible

with the employability agenda. However broader employability is not simply utilitarian, it is

more than seeing the self as a resource to be ordered and optimized because developing as

a professional inevitably requires us to go beyond this. Johnsson and Hager's work on

becoming a professional musician illustrates this well (2008). Vocational education with

integrated work experience may add ontological growth to employability.

To learn to become, students need to be strategic and to order things and use them in self-

construction. This facilitates a sort of 'becoming' but true ontological education means going

to a deeper level of truth. To do this requires reflection, self-awareness and openness to

seeing things not only as objects of use. Getting students to be strategic is hard enough says

Burke (2015), getting them to be open to ontological development is harder still, but

professional level vocational work experience, immersion in a community of practice, has

the potential to break the chains.

Limitations and further research

This research is limited in scale and scope and confined to participants from a single

university. It has the usual strengths and weaknesses of qualitative work (e.g. breadth

sacrificed for depth), although reference to Tracy's eight 'big-tent' criteria for good

qualitative research (2010) suggests that it meets these criteria. Further research to explore

experience of the graduate transition, learning at work and the value that participants place

on their psychology degree would be of interest. It would also be interesting to know more about the role of work placements in social mobility and the about the extent to which recruitment to the psychology professions, especially clinical psychology, reproduces inequality.

Conclusions and implications for practice

This research suggests that BSc Psychology students and graduates value their work experience over other aspects of their degree. They are keen to become professionals, expect their psychology degree to help them to achieve this and are disappointed and confused if it does not clearly do so. Becoming a professional requires ontological development and the evidence here suggests that professional work experience enables such development through situational learning and may be the most effective means of bringing it about. This research suggests that ontological development, employability and scholarship in BSc Psychology may all be served by a stronger vocational emphasis and professional level work experience. Undergraduate vocational education in psychology is not straightforward however. There are far more undergraduates than professional psychology outcomes. Nonetheless Psychology is a STEM subject and a broad arena contributing to many areas of employment beyond those in the life and health sciences as the idea of psychological literacy explores (Halpern, 2009, Cranney and Dunn, 2011, McGovern, Corey, Cranney et al., 2009).

A number of questions and implications arise for BSc Psychology programme teams, for students, applicants and their advisors and for employers. For BSc Psychology programme teams, given that learning to become a professional involves adding ontological development to knowledge and skills, that students expect their degree to prepare them to become professionals and that work experience is important for ontological development, three questions arise. What will they do to: 1) Embed professional work experience into BSc Psychology and to promote ontological development? 2) Make BSc Psychology more vocational? 3) Meaningfully link learning at work to learning at university?

 The implications for students, applicants and their advisors are that they should seek BSc Psychology programmes that: 1) Explicitly help students to become professionals. 2) Include activities that promote ontological development. 3) Embed professional work experience into the course. 4) Are more vocational. 5) Clearly link learning at work to learning at university.

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The implications for employers are that they should: 1) Take undergraduates on long-term work placements to allow them to participate in and learn from communities of practice. 2) Offer them the inspiring personal apprenticeship relationships that are so important for promoting engagement and growth.

Acknowledgement

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Table 1: Placement student themes

Aim 1. Do interviews with those in the graduate transition offer evidence that ontology is central to the educational transformation that Barnett and others argue that HE should provide?

1. Coherence, sophistication and fluency of interviewees
2. Personal development, competence
3. Connecting work and university

Aim 2. Is a period of professional level work experience, such as an integrated sandwich placement year, important in the process of becoming?

4. Situated learning (also aim three)
5. Broadened or crystalized career outlook
6. Supervision

Aim 3. **How do individuals experience the transition from being a student to becoming a graduate professional?**

7. Situated learning (also aim two)
8. Break from education
9. The challenge of placement

Table 2: Key themes for individual graduates

Nadia: Clinical ambitions, expectations and fate
Louise: BSc not worthwhile, initial disappointment
Amina: Learning at work, assimilating transition
Suzie: Inspired by vocation on placement
Toyah: Paradise lost, a narrative of becoming