'The student experience' and the remaking of contemporary studenthood: A critical intervention

Maike Pötschulat, Marie Moran, Paul Jones

Abstract:
'The student experience' is a formulation that will be familiar to many reading this article; increasingly the term has come to stand in for an imprecise set of values and practices around higher education study. Despite the fuzziness that characterises its use, 'student experience talk' has gained traction in education policy and rankings, academic research, and amongst students themselves. After initially drawing from Raymond Williams to situate 'the student experience' as a keyword across policy, marketing and educational domains, we analyse contemporary usage of the term in: (1) students' own accounts of their engagements with the city in which they study; and (2) academic social science. A membership category when used by undergraduate students, the term serves to obfuscate a market logic in which achieving the student experience is an aspirational endeavour linking disparate place-based consumption practices in their university city. Drawing on the Bourdieusian distinction between categories of practice and categories of analysis, we argue that the contemporary deployment of 'the student experience' across popular and policy spaces does not mean that academics should import it uncritically into their analysis. On the contrary: the reification of this category of practice is precisely what has enabled the scramble for its attainment and management. Rather than allowing the embedding and normalisation of terms such as 'the student experience', the role of critical social science should be to unpack these muddled categories to avoid calling into being and reproducing what they seem to only describe.

Introduction
The notion of 'the student experience' is widely used to describe and make sense of the norms and expectations attached to contemporary studenthood, but this use has implications for how we come to understand a complex set of practices. As this article will document, higher education policy, university rankings, promotional material and academic literature all refer to the student experience as an index of *something* that needs to be borne in mind, safeguarded, or improved. Meanwhile, students' own accounts of studenthood are filled with 'student experience talk'; their use of the term to describe selective urban practices and sites diverges from institutional uses concerned with inter-university competition and recruitment. Academic uses largely take 'the student experience' at face value, in the process muddling measures of student satisfaction, socialisation outside the university and pedagogy. Whereas the term is used to describe disparate aspects of the UK university system and the status of students therein, there are subtle – and as we shall see, significant – differences in usage across fields of university policy and practice, student discourses and academic research that this article addresses.

In unpacking a fuzzy term, we argue that the concept of student experience is used to do practical things in specific contexts. These include, variously, facilitating the neoliberalisation of higher education, the commodification of student practices in cities, and, in academic research, the collapsing of nuanced and varied practices into a single, imprecise concept. In this article we suggest that sociologists should adopt a critical position towards 'the student experience', both to avoid mirroring – thereby naturalising – partial and problematic accounts of the sets of arrangements that characterise higher education; and because its use limits what it is we know about contemporary universities and students. Effectively, we aim to contribute to a critique of the term that is attentive to the consequences of its practical deployment across a range of sites, and its sociological inadequacy with respect to capturing the disparate practices of contemporary undergraduate students vis-a-vis their city of study.

Analysing use of 'the student experience' across multiple domains of practice, we show how the term is put to work by various actors to mobilise different, but particular, visions of studenthood that extend beyond the strictly 'educational' world of lecture halls and into the urban environment. As a shorthand that has come to stand in – amongst other things – for a disparate range of students' practices, 'the student experience' promises to unlock some of the unspoken but significant ways in which contemporary university life in the UK is framed and made sense of. Paradoxically though, sociological attempts to analyse the changing university environment in the UK increasingly rests upon this terminology in analysis; in what follows, we argue that this has serious consequences for the state of academic enquiry in this field. We believe that the challenge facing sociologists is to identify, unpack and analyse 'student experience talk' across a range of domains – a representational element that can in and of itself become an object of study (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, made this argument concerning 'identity talk').

This article thus has clear, interrelated practical and theoretical elements. In practical terms we explore these discourses as they exist within government policy documents, promotional university material and students' own vocabularies, in the latter case exploring directly the meanings students have conferred upon the category of student experience through a range of interviews conducted in urban, student-centred contexts. Throughout, we challenge the notion that something as self-evident as 'the student experience' pre-exists these performative constructions, and in so doing, hope to uncover some of the political exigencies and ambitions simultaneously marshalled and concealed by its contemporary use. Rather than simply naming something that *is* already in the world, we show that student experience talk is entangled with sets of social and spatial practices – including highly commercialised ones – in urban contexts, that this blanket term does little to illuminate. Theoretically, we draw, in the initial stages of the article, on cultural materialist understandings of language to explore the practical imbrication of 'the student experience' with the world it is supposed only innocently to describe; and later, on Bourdieusian sociology to finesse our argument on the dangers of importing everyday policy, marketing and discursive categories uncritically into sociological research.

The article is in three main parts. Firstly, we establish 'student experience' as a 'keyword' in Raymond Williams's (1976/1983) sense: as a politically loaded word intimately related to the production of social phenomena it seems only to describe. This section unpacks the meanings of 'experience', exploring how this keyword animates the closely associated category of student experience, illustrating this argument with analysis of the life of the category in UK higher education policy, and commercialised domains of practice. Developing lines of enquiry suggested by keyword analysis, we go on to explore the uses of the category in two key contexts: students' self-understandings and social scientific research. In the second section, we draw from a qualitative research project whose fieldwork focused on the urban practices and sense-making of undergraduate students enrolled at a Redbrick university in the North of England, in the process exploring the uses they made of the category of 'student experience'. In the third section, we analyse the (problematic) ways in which this terminology is embedded in social scientific research, in such a way to stand proxy for more precise analysis of elements of universities, and the associated practices of students. Despite its normalisation in policy and educational landscapes, and its deployment by students seeking to bring legibility to their disparate lives while at university, we argue that the fuzziness of student experience makes it ill equipped as a sociological concept. Drawing on Bourdieusian analysis (from Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) of tensions between discourse emerging from practice on the one hand, and social analysis on the other, we conclude that – far from offering illumination – deployment of the category 'the student experience' hides more than it reveals, when the task of critical social science should be to reveal what is hidden.

'The student experience' as a contemporary keyword

"Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs is . . . a practical material activity; it is indeed, literally, a means of production." (Williams, 1977, p. 38)

The word 'experience' has a long and complex history. One of Raymond Williams's original 'keywords' (1983), his analysis provides a useful starting point for our excavation of the term 'student experience'. For Williams, a keyword is one whose problems of meaning are intimately bound up with the socio-political problems it is used to discuss. The ready familiarity of a keyword across a range of contexts can mask its complicated relation to the social and political actualities it seems only to describe, but whose material reality is affected by such. Accordingly, the orientation of *Keywords* should be distinguished from both idealist conceptions of language, which attribute to words a disproportionate and unwarranted power to 'construct' reality, and realist conceptions, which tend to assume the stable priority of the linguistic referent to its representation, and therefore the limited capacity of words to merely reflect or describe an autonomous social reality (McGuigan & Moran, 2014; Moran, 2015).

In contrast to both approaches, the 'cultural materialist' approach of *Keywords* remains attentive to the social and material conditions of language production and development, while also recognising the power of language to express and shape an engagement with the social and political order. Language, as Williams (1977, p. 38) argued, is a 'practical, material activity'; keywords reveal not only differences of perspective and understanding, but the power relations manifest in differing capacities of groups to promote the meanings, uses and senses that best reflect or naturalise their interests and preferred social arrangements. As such, 'the complexity is not finally in the word but in the problems which its variations of use significantly indicate' (Williams, 1983, p. 92).

A practical conclusion of this cultural materialist approach is that keywords need to be understood in historical-spatial context, as variations of use over time and space reflect wider social developments. Specifically, keywords provide a record in language of changing social and political pressures and motivations, of different ways of thinking about what is possible, normal, sensible, worthwhile, or desirable. Linguistic shifts cannot be dissociated from the real relationships and sets of practices in which they arise, and must be considered alongside 'the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change' (Williams, 1983, p. 22). It is this social emphasis that makes *Keywords* not simply a 'glossary of culture and society', but rather a tool for analysis. So, while never suggesting that resolving the complexities of a keyword amounts to the resolution of the real-world conflicts with which it is bound up, Williams's analysis paves the way for critical engagement with and insight into the nature of the discursively mediated social problem at stake. The fertility of this methodological approach has recently been realised in a welcome revival of 'Keywords' analyses, to which this article further contributes (Garrett, 2018; Leary, 2018; MacCabe & Yanacek, 2018; Moran, 2015, 2018, 2020; Parker, 2017).

Before examining the meanings of 'student experience' specifically, it is useful to explore the category of 'experience' that informs it.[1] Turning to Williams's own *Keywords* entry for 'experience' (1983, pp. 126–129),[2] we are reminded that 'experience' and 'experiment' have the same root in the shared sense of trialling or testing something. Distinguishing from 'experience past', which refers to 'knowledge gathered from past events', Williams emphasises 'experience present' as 'a particular kind of consciousness', a 'full and active "awareness"'. Far from a limited cognitive act or appreciation of

[1] We have chosen to focus on the concept of 'experience' in the discursive analysis of the term 'student experience', since it is this word that does the specific, political work that concerns us, and also that differentiates the term from cognate concepts such as 'student life'. While a focus on the etymology of 'student' may well be interesting in a different context, we feel it is not illuminating for our purposes here.

[2] The references which follow are all drawn from this three page entry.

events, Williams observes that experience, 'in this major tendency, is then the fullest, most open, most active kind of consciousness, and it includes feeling as well as thought'.

The emphasis on active consciousness that accompanies these uses was also given significant attention in the phenomenology of Husserl (1913/2001), whose focus on the 'intentionality' of conscious experience prioritised the active meaning and content of an experience for the subject, over the object of that experience. What is significant for our purposes, however, is how developing philosophical treatments of experience nonetheless transcended specialist disciplinary domains to become meaningful and significant within lay discourse and understanding too. For Williams it is within everyday life that 'experience' comes to be understood as 'being consciously the subject of a state or condition [applied particularly to] inner, personal, or religious experience'; animated by notions of wholeness in the sense of a complete saturation of involvement, immediacy and 'unquestionable authenticity [such that] experiences are offered not only as truths, but as the most authentic kinds of truths'.

Tellingly, though unsurprisingly, Williams doesn't grapple with the modern process of the commodification of experience in his exposition (though it is noted in 'recent developments' in *Keywords for Today* [MacCabe & Yanacek, 2018]). It is now possible to 'buy' an experience, whether a holiday, beauty treatment or adventure-event, where the emphasis is less on the activity than on the pure intensity of being and sense of immediacy and authenticity that accompanies it. Indeed, a business-studies literature has emerged addressing the subject of 'experience economies', which seeks to teach marketers how to frame otherwise ordinary or pre-existing activities as commodifiable 'experiences' (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). It is in this broader context that the category of 'the student experience' has emerged in popular, policy and academic discourse.

Lines of development intrinsic to the university environment also paved the way for contemporary deployments of 'student experience'. In particular, in the 1970s and 1980s there emerged an emphasis in the educational literature on students' learning experiences (Biggs, 1993; Marton & Säljö, 1976), which was followed up in the 1990s with the introduction of student learning as a central concept in reports and quality assurance policies (see the Browne Report, 2010, for example; also Callender et al., 2014; Sabri, 2013). As the idea that students and their satisfaction should be at the heart of higher education systems gained traction, student evaluations of their teaching and learning multiplied, and have hitherto been used extensively within an environment that is increasingly subject to internal and external modes of measurement and assessment.

But it wasn't until the 2000s that the deployment of the concept of 'student experience' really took off, primarily in British higher education contexts. In keeping with the keyword analysis, it is important to note that this usage of student experience has a culturally specific nature, and is by definition not universal.[3] First deployed in a policy setting in 2003, and proliferating since 2009, 'the student experience' has since come to feature as a staple component of the policy and strategic planning documents of both individual universities and of the sector more generally (Sabri, 2011; e.g. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009; Department for Education and Skills, 2003; House of Commons, 2009; Universities UK, 2018). Showing no signs of waning, a review of the Russell Group university websites in 2020 revealed that 16 of the 24 universities offered information on curricular and non-curricular activities for prospective and current students under the banner of student experience, while an alternative (but overlapping) group of 16 deployed the term in reference to the administration and organisation of university structures. Here we found evidence of a wide

[3] While there is some evidence of its use in other English speaking contexts, including Ireland, Australia and the US, and some evidence of potentially cognate concepts being deployed, including 'student life' and 'student engagement', these sites and alternative phrases are beyond the empirical scope of our analysis, and further, beyond the scope of a keywords study by definition.

range of strategies, committees, offices and even departments and directorates for 'student experience', as well as part- and full-time administrative and academic jobs such as student experience officer, manager, director, chair and even a Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Student Experience.[4]

These university marketing and policy uses have been accompanied by a plethora of measures introduced to assess university performance across a range of criteria, including 'student experience'. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), along with the by-now normalised – but sometimes partially boycotted – National Student Survey (NSS), Key Indicator Statistics (KiS), TESTA (Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment), The Times Good University Guide, QS World University Rankings, and the myriad other ways of ranking within the higher education sector, all rest, among other things, upon measuring and rating 'student experience' or its proxies, often ostensibly teaching quality, university facilities and student support. These initiatives have helped create rankings and comparisons among institutions, and have been criticised as tools that conceive students as consumers (Naidoo et al., 2011; Sabri, 2013).

Frequently underpinned by methodologically questionable student satisfaction surveys (Callender et al., 2014; Sabri, 2013), 'student experience' is vague enough to encompass appraisal of activities not educational per se, but that concern student 'social life' or 'community atmosphere' more generally (Times Higher Education, 2017). Crucially, such uses are inflected and augmented by other uses of the term as it appears in university marketing, student accommodation adverts, online discussion fora, student clubs and promotions of nightlife and retail (see below). As the categories associated with policy recommendations and official ranking exercises have become bound up with the politics of funding, student fees, hierarchies of subjects, departments and institutions, academic and student practice, and the neoliberalisation of the sector in general (Chatterton, 2010; McGettigan, 2013), the potential slippages and expansiveness of the term 'the student experience' should not be viewed as neutral or without consequences.

In these ancillary uses, then, we see an extended use of the term across a range of university-related, but not narrowly university-specific, contexts. Private accommodation firms emphasise it in their marketing, promising 'the perfect student experience' (Liberty Living, 2018) or 'getting the most out of your student experience' (Unite Students, 2018). Liberty Living even have a 'Student Experience programme' with advice on 'community building', health and wellness, and budgeting. Meanwhile, nightclub and events promoters explicitly use the term in their advertising of student nights, as do many newspaper and city-guides to student life, which invariably include pictures of nightclubs to accompany their list of two-for-one-drinks and other promotions (e.g. UNiDAYS, 2015). In such cases, and in contrast to its use in university policy documentation, 'student experience' seems to refer almost exclusively to students' lives *beyond* the university. The sense of experience as something exciting, immediate and authentic, as originally noted by Williams, clearly animates each usage.

Taking the policy and marketing uses together then, we see that while what the 'student experience' as a category is supposed to include is highly contingent, expansive and vague, it is typically suggestive of disparate practices and environments which in combination allude to something like 'the real deal' or 'the full package'. Of course, students have *always* done more than study for exams, and understood themselves, each other and their actions in a way that surpasses their registration at a university, but only recently has this been construed as 'the student experience'. What has happened in this transition? And how can sociological analysis of this help us better understand recent transformations in higher education in their broader social and political context? To begin to answer these questions, we now look at two other sites of deployment of the term beyond the marketing and policy uses outlined: undergraduate students' own accounts; and academic research in social sciences.

[4] The actual number of universities with these types of structures in place is likely to be higher, due to limited access to internal communication on university websites.

Practising the student experience

"[The student experience] is just like being around loads of people your own age in the same way maybe like a festival and have fun and not have a job like not have responsibilities." (Tom, interview participant)

How do students understand and negotiate the norms and expectations attached to contemporary studenthood, and what role does the category of 'the student experience' play in their sense making? Some answers to this question were provided by a study which set out to examine how students understand their relationship to the urban environment during their time at university (Pötschulat, 2018).[5] The shaping of cities by student populations has recently received substantial academic attention, including in studies of 'studentification' and the corporate creation of student nightlife clusters in cities (Brookfield, 2019; Chatterton, 2010; Chatterton & Hollands, 2004; Hubbard, 2008; Smith, 2005). Yet little is known about how students understand the urban environment while simultaneously navigating a new phase in their lives. Developing sociological understanding of the socio-spatial implications of this new status was the main objective of the research from which we now draw. In what follows we analyse this project's findings with respect to students' urban sense-making against the backdrop of the keywords perspective discussed above.

Deploying a range of methods that aimed to get as close as possible to the socio-spatial experiences of the research participants, autophotography, photo-elicitation and walking interviews were conducted with 20 participants enrolled as undergraduates at a northern Redbrick university. For the autophotography component of the research project, students were asked to take pictures of places in the city that were meaningful for their everyday life, with these images forming the basis of semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews. Recognising the importance of place for social action and sense-making (Gieryn, 2000), *in situ* semi-structured walking interviews explored participants' spatial practices and the meanings they attached to urban areas. These two methods gave rich and novel data on how students view their own urban practices.

In short, the research found that the category of 'student experience' did much work in students' own narratives of studenthood. Revealing of the catch-all nature of the term, participants would, for example, mention that they preferred certain urban sites because 'that's just part of the student experience'. While the research was generally concerned with how contemporary studenthood was understood by participants to involve a wide variety of practices beyond education, including leisure, residential set-ups and other student community norms, what emerged as a particularly interesting finding was how only *some* of these practices in selective places in the city were construed by participants as part of 'the student experience'. Distinct from, though overlapping with, the policy and marketing uses discussed, exploring these narratives provides a unique insight into the work to which the category of the student experience is put by its main subjects – the students themselves.

Students are typically exposed to the notion of 'student experience' before entering university, through reports of friends and relatives, and media representations (Chatterton, 1999). Such accounts – as well as other representations of student life (for instance at Welcome Weeks and Freshers' Fairs) – shaped participants' ideas about the practices and spaces that are included in the notion of studenthood. These understandings were solidified as they progressed through university. The students had clear and shared ideas about the ways of being and acting that are constitutive of 'the student experience'. While theoretically the category should encompass all sorts of activities, spaces and indeed experiences, participants understood it to imply a singular, normative category: '*the*

[5] This study was carried out by one of the authors as part of her doctoral research, though the data were analysed from a different perspective in that project.

student experience' referred to specific practices and places with which they *should* engage. This rendering is exclusive or redolent of distinction (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013). The possibility that an idealised student experience might rest upon particular class backgrounds, 'races', ages and sexualities was not explicitly considered by participating students; instead the term was routinely used as an aspirational category bound up with partial conceptions of value.

Although students struggled to articulate a precise definition of 'the student experience' when asked, they nonetheless settled on the notion that being a student involves more than just attending university and working towards a degree. Thus, while participants occasionally referred to its educational aspects, they tended to emphasise a range of urban practices that extended beyond the university campus and into the city. We suggest, tentatively, that students' understandings of the student experience is most pronounced in urban contexts because the highly differentiated and branded spaces of cities (Chatterton, 2010) generate the spatial distinctions that 'the student experience' relies upon. Of note, the student experience was associated with a particular type of sociality: a particular group membership (with other students) that played out in particular urban places (overtly commercial ones). Referring to the social character of the student experience, one of the participants summarised the importance of sociality in the following way:

> I know it sounds stupid because obviously it's the whole reason why we are here, but I think studies take like a back seat . . . It's more like the social life and making friends and establish[ing] who you are. (Olivia)

Two sets of urban practices in particular were frequently mentioned in the interviews as constitutive of the social nature of the student experience: (1) those relating to residential circumstances, and (2) those relating to leisure activities. Students' residential patterns and impacts on neighbourhoods have been thoroughly researched, with the literature illuminating the multiple challenges posed in local neighbourhoods by large influxes of student populations (e.g. Rugg et al., 2002; Smith, 2005; Smith & Holt, 2007). In the research project drawn upon here, the autophotography project – that included participant-generated pictures of their residential areas – sparked particularly in-depth conversations from students concerning their residential set-ups and related sense-making. The participants suggested that to achieve the student experience the main determinant of a residential decision is the sociable character of the housing arrangement and area, rather than the price or other qualities of the home and neighbourhood. Of course, housing and similar residential 'choices' derive from particular classed, gendered and racialized expectations and opportunities, but these factors were obscured by the flattening rhetoric of 'student experience'.

Leisure activities were perceived by the students as another integral part of the student experience and the participants provided detailed accounts of their meaning-making around nightlife practices and spaces all in the context of acting out the student experience (see Chatterton, 1999, 2010; Chatterton & Hollands, 2004, for more detailed accounts of such). The participants stated a preference for student-targeted spaces that reflected their aspiration to be around other students. The desired separation between themselves and a generalised 'local population' was emphasised when explaining their urban nightlife choices. This common sentiment was summarised by one participant who identified 'going out' as a central aspect of the student experience, saying: 'So you just flood wherever the flood is rolling. You know, student night . . . if something is busy you tend to go there, rather than going somewhere you'd rather go to because it's not as busy' (Marc). Predominantly, this brought students to themed student nights put on by clubs and bars that are part of larger national club chain clusters in UK cities.

Only students who felt excluded from achieving *the* student experience demonstrated any awareness of the restrictive, mono-cultural nature of the practices and spaces that defined it. For these participants, difficulties arose because they felt they did not fit into the category of the 'normal

student', whether because of their age, body, gender, class, race, sexuality or otherwise; they then evaluated this perceived deficit in relation to their opportunities for achieving the aspirational category, compounding their fears of missing out on or being excluded from the student community. There was a direct relation to the spatial character of the student experience as well in the sense that these participants typically avoided 'student spaces and areas' and were more likely to connect with more diverse groups via their practices and the spaces they visited. Achieving 'the student experience' is here revealed as important because it is associated with valuable forms of community access and group membership that play out in commercial and residential urban spaces but also extend onto the campus to provide a feeling of belonging there too.

Relatedly, failure to play by the implicit rules of the normative nature of the student experience means that the individual runs the risk of being excluded from the group and perceived as the 'wrong' type of student. This general sentiment amongst some of the participants was summarised by one student (Christina), who felt her interest in community and religious work marked her out as atypical: 'I'm very aware that I'm not like the norm of the university student experience'. Further, Christina's lack of involvement in student nights meant that she struggled to feel part of a student community, a perceived deficit that she was cognizant of. Alternative interests – in Christina's case, religious ones – coupled with membership of particular social categories served to exclude some students not only from 'the student experience', but also, relatedly, from their student peer group.

Ultimately, the student experience was primarily understood by participants in social terms, with the practices that form part of it, including residential and leisure activities, acting as spatialised markers of group membership. Perceptions of what an idealised student (white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class in her/his late teens/early twenties) would be, do and have were essential in students' sense-making and legitimation of their own situations and actions. Crucially, when used by student-participants, 'student experience' confers distinction from non-students, as well as a distinction from each other; because of this socialised/ising logic, it is not just non-student populations who are 'othered', but anyone not engaged in the same practices and spaces (regardless of formal student status).

Notably, since all social practices are enacted in space, there is a profound spatial element to this process in the sense that it is not just the practices alone but also the urban spaces in which they are enacted that serve as markers of distinction. The observation that the urban environment is a vital part of how the student experience is understood and enacted is further emphasised by the inclusion, in the students' accounts, of only certain areas of the city as spaces that cater to the student experience. This was especially evident in the walking interviews in the city centre revealing the spatial logic of their understanding of the city outside of the university campus; here mostly spaces for student living or areas of the city centre that hosted commercial clubs, bars and shops targeted at students were mentioned and discussed. Most participants struggled to understand that sites in between the 'student experience spaces' in which they socialised could be of relevance for other urban residents. This highly selective way of making sense of the urban environment is evident in the following observation from a student puzzled about the presence of a coffee chain franchise in an area that she only uses for nightlife: 'I think it's really random that they have got a Starbucks here because I don't know who would go here apart from [on] a night out. Well, I know I wouldn't . . .' (Julia). This partial view of the urban environment, and 'zoning' of certain areas according to typical student activities, reflects the urban sense-making caused by 'student experience' geographies. The student experience is enacted via spatial distinction processes in which places that the participants had not adopted as their own did not form part of their urban mental maps.

Academic attention has focused on the ways in which the decision to 'study and live locally' can make it difficult for local students to be integrated into the wider student community; the discussion of what

we are calling 'student experience geographies' with participants during the fieldwork confirms these earlier studies (Chatterton, 1999; Crozier et al., 2008; Holdsworth, 2006; Holton, 2015). For instance, a few participants who lived locally related to the urban space in more diverse ways than the students who had moved to the city to study, and offered more nuanced accounts of the city and its liminal spaces. Similarly, the few mature student participants who took part were aware of student experience geographies but did not feel themselves necessarily part of them. These findings show the workings of social categories which effectively block the path towards 'the student experience' but give access to a more multifaceted view of the city.

Most of the places where 'the student experience' takes place are heavily commercialised. For participants in this research, 'the student experience' does not just encourage particular (consumption) practices but also generates preferences in relation to the spaces in which they are enacted. Effectively, the city becomes a site in which the aspiration to achieve the socialising-logic of the student experience is realised, based on the understanding that it is entangled with right and wrong forms of place-based consumption. Crucially then, for the research participants the student experience extends far beyond the university campus and plays out unevenly in the urban environment. As such, only particular areas of the place of study become integrated into the participants' understanding of the student experience, whereas others don't feature at all.

Our argument is that, for students in this study, the student experience forms part of a social order that disguises inequalities based on class, gender, sexuality, 'race' and age; it is hierarchical and not everyone is inclined, or able, to achieve it. Ultimately, student experience terminology amongst students flattens out social categories and suppresses real material differences, giving the illusion that everyone is equally qualified to achieve its consumption-oriented but socially justified logic. In turn, this means that failure to play by its rules was interpreted by the participants as a personal flaw, rather than a structural issue. The consequence is a problematisation of the individual who supposedly does not fit into the community, in contrast with the coveted group membership that is obtained by successful pursuit and achievement of 'the student experience'.

'The student experience' as a category of analysis

'Give it a name' (things to do in Denver when you're dead)

The keyword approach deployed in the first part of this article charted the recent evolution and materialisation of the category of student experience across policy and marketing domains. The previous section on students' deployment of the category further demonstrated that student experience talk is used to legitimate and explain place-based consumption practices, in a way that flattens out and obscures social differences and divisions.

These are not the only spaces in which the student experience is made 'real'; as well as featuring in policy, marketing and student domains, the term is also routinely put to use in the context of academic research on higher education (e.g. Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Andersson et al., 2012; Chatterton, 2010; Holdsworth, 2006; Holton & Riley, 2013; Smith & Holt, 2007). But what do academics intend when using it? Is 'the student experience' accepted at face value as something that exists, offering itself up for analysis? Or is the term deployed analytically, and if so, what conceptual or explanatory work does it do?

In their influential Bourdieu-inspired critique of the uses and abuses of 'identity' in academic literature, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) draw a distinction between a *category of practice* and a *category of analysis*. For them, a category of practice is a category 'of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors', while a category of analysis is an

'experience distant [category] used by social analysts' (2000, p. 4).[6] Mapping onto cognate distinctions between the everyday '*sens pratique*' (Bourdieu, 1980) and the more remote scholastic knowledge, these categories call up what Bourdieu understood as 'two radically different kinds of knowledgeability, or modes of relating to the world, namely the practical and the theoretical modes respectively' (Mesny, 2002, p. 60). Whereas *categories of analysis* are deployed in social scientific analysis to illuminate the practical social phenomena under investigation, *categories of practice* are used with less intended or actual precision by a range of actors outside academic research as they navigate and make sense of their world.

As it is deployed in policy, marketing and students' own accounts, 'the student experience' operates as a category of practice. As per the previous section addressing student participants' deployment of the term, 'student experience' has a useful shorthand affordance in 'lay accounts', as it simplifies a complex and variant set of social and spatial practices between students and others. Indeed, the term proved useful to students seeking to describe to an academic sociologist the amorphous and fragmented nature of contemporary studenthood. Paradoxically, the messy character of participants' social action vis-a-vis university study invites proxy formulations; 'student experience' helps those involved in doing it to make sense of an otherwise insensible situation. Although having none of the rigour or precision that should characterise carefully considered concepts in sociology, the term functions as an effective 'etcetera principle', something purposefully imprecise used with awareness that 'no context can ever be the whole context, and no inventory . . . complete' (Chambers, 1992, p. 1). Despite its use as a shorthand in some contexts, however, the deployment of 'the student experience' as a category of practice also brings semantic imprecision and fuzziness.

Wary of such imprecision and ambiguity – in their case, in discussions of identity – Brubaker and Cooper decry the uncritical importation of categories of practice into social scientific analysis, arguing that this reifies and reproduces rather than illuminates the issues being explored (see also Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Jones & Krzyżanowski, 2008; Moran, 2015; Williams, 1983). Social scientists, they argue, should instead seek to explain the 'power and pathos' of such lay categories, which requires avoidance of 'unintentionally reproducing or reinforcing such reification by uncritically adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, pp. 2–5). Their position suggests we should make the prominence and proliferation of discourses of 'student experience' the subject of critical sociological analysis, at the same time exercising utmost caution when deploying the term as a category of analysis. The term lacks the precision required of sociological conceptualisation, its elasticity actually inviting expansiveness and ambiguity, allowing it to function as a Trojan Horse, smuggling in sets of other practices and values that may or may not have much to do with studying at university.

The recommended circumspection is not shared by many social scientists in the field, with the category 'student experience' often imported uncritically for academic use. This is evident in two dominant approaches in the field. Firstly, there is a body of research that takes the category at face value, thereby making the key mistake Brubaker and Cooper identify. Pedagogical literature addressing learning outcomes often uses 'student experience' as a synonym for student satisfaction (e.g. Biasutti, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2007), or equates it with students' feedback on their courses. This reproduces some of the slippages in the policy literature, where limited measures of student satisfaction are taken to stand in for an overall 'student experience' that is read as extending beyond satisfaction with courses. But even in more critically inclined literature, the term is routinely used rather loosely, in a catch-all way that reproduces some of the problems inherent in its practical deployments. As noted earlier, the 'student' elements of higher education are dispersed and involve many distinct practices – including vis-a-vis the broader urban fabric and housing – and the promise

[6] Although Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 4) introduce the distinction, saying they 'follow Bourdieu' in so doing, they do not offer any citations for the terminology.

of capturing widely variant contexts in a single concept is tempting. Such analyses, however, run the risk of positioning 'the student experience' as a 'mere place-holder . . . signalling a stance rather than words conveying a meaning' (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 11), allowing any assumptions and taken forgranteds 'smuggled in' by the use of this concept to go unclarified. By bundling together – but leaving obscured – elements that are analytically distinct, the term leaves readers deriving different meanings from findings that rest upon its use.

Ill-defined and elastic boundaries make 'student experience' a poor category of analysis; at best, it is not altogether clear what academics mean when they use it in their research; and at worst, it collapses different phenomena into a single, hard-to-read category. When used with analytic intent by academic social scientists, 'student experience' is suggestive of a definitive, common experience, which is in danger of flattening out the many lifeworld differences and inequalities associated with gender (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013), geographic location (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018), class (Reay et al., 2010), ethnicity (Crozier et al., 2008), and many other social divisions. Despite no standardised student experience existing, the very deployment of the term – replete with a definitive article prefix – is a standardising one (Sabri, 2011). Again, this reflects the unselfconscious deployment of the term as a category of practice, resulting in a 'normative "student" experience' (Holdsworth, 2006, p. 496) in which differences are obliterated. To speak of a singular, definitive 'experience' is inevitably to overgeneralise the experiences of some at the expense of others, and overgeneralised use begs the fundamental *sociological* question, 'Whose student experience?'

In literature that takes the concept of student experience at face value, it is not simply the imprecision of the term that is problematic. Rather, the market logic that such imprecision enables, and the smuggling in of assumptions about student satisfaction and related issues, makes for a powerful conceptual tool in the contemporary neoliberal academy (Collini, 2017; Sabri, 2011, 2013). Of particular note is that its uncritical deployment in this literature naturalises the emphasis on measurement that underscores its policy uses, creating an idealised standard to which both the students' and academics' 'performance' seem never to quite measure up. By sedimenting a consumerist, competitive way of describing the relationship between academics and students, between research and teaching, and between university campuses and the city, deployment of the term makes the commodification and marketisation of education further possible.

The growing commitment to 'efficiencies' and competition in higher education has meant that the original emphasis on learner engagement could easily be absorbed into a broader quasi-hegemonic view of the student as a rational consumer with preferences that should be met with market mechanisms. The notion of student experience can provide a perfect vehicle for both enabling and disguising some of these while, for example, foregrounding evaluation of learning technology (Gilbert et al., 2007) or ways to engage with ranked outcomes of student satisfaction (Biggs, 1993; Callender et al., 2014). So, a general tendency across this literature is to use student experience as something sufficiently stable to be measured, improved and ranked, thus giving credibility to student satisfaction surveys rather than adopting a more critical-analytic stance to such 'fact totems' (Sabri, 2013).

The second body of academic literature does not so much take the category at face value, but nor does it always interrogate its meaning fully; its existence is somewhat taken for granted despite 'the student experience' being placed in scare quotes to reflect its contested nature (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Chatterton, 2010; Smith & Holt, 2007). Even in these *en passant* uses, in otherwise critical accounts, there is the sense that some term is better than none to capture the diverse, student-centred elements of higher education. Interestingly – and given the aforementioned work done by the term in promoting competition between universities and cities, and a student-centred logic of consumption – it may be more useful to eschew use of the term as a proxy altogether (or, if using, to subject it to a high threshold of definition and enquiry). As was argued in our 'keywords' analysis,

practical things can be done with language, and student experience obscures the practices at stake rather than illuminating them.

One clear exception to these tendencies is provided by Dana Sabri (2011), who positions deployment of the term as an object of study, as do we. Sabri illuminates the ways in which 'the student experience' 'homogenises students and deprives them of agency at the same time as apparently giving them "voice"' (Sabri, 2011, p. 657). However, Sabri's analysis accepts the notion that 'the student experience' resides within the university, and is primarily constructed within the domain of educational policy. As our article shows, 'the phantom of the "normal" student' (Andersson et al., 2012, p. 504) has long since left the university campus and is now haunting all manner of spaces in the city. Far from being solely constructed and contained within policy-making, 'student experience' now animates a whole range of consumerist practices associated with contemporary studenthood.

Stated bluntly, the deployment of the category of student experience across popular and policy domains does not mean that academics should import it uncritically into their analysis. On the contrary: it is the reification of this category of practice that enables a scramble for its attainment and management. Critical sociology rests on precision with respect to the object of study; what is being invoked when 'the student experience' becomes part of the research landscape is not sharply articulated, despite apostrophisation and footnoting. When used in social scientific analysis with categorical intent, the term artificially groups together a set of people, places and practices contingent on a (false) premise that they share common characteristics. 'Student experience' provides a poor tool of analysis for critical social scientists who should be concerned to unpack – rather than reproduce – contemporary university-speak. When used in academic research, 'student experience' obfuscates what it purports to illuminate.

Conclusion

A keywords analysis (Williams, 1983) reveals hidden political interests behind the familiar words of our everyday vocabulary. If a task of critical social science is to denaturalise assumptions concerning the way the world is, and to provide a different way of thinking about what is possible, then 'the student experience' is a category ill-suited for this task. In fact – and running the argument the other way – despite promising a clarification, the category does not survive contact with a denaturalisation or critical scrutiny that are hallmarks of sociological analysis. While the elasticity of the meaning of language across sites is not in and of itself a research finding (Williams, 1977, 1983), as linguistic shifts have an inextricable relationship to social order, it is an error to detach 'student experience' from its context of usage. This line of enquiry is pertinent, we have argued, when seeking to understand the use of the term in both academic social science and undergraduate students' accounts of their relationship to the city in which they study.

In terms of academic social science, where the term is used with implied analytical intent, the lack of coherence and cohesion make 'the student experience' poorly suited to this task. Despite some of the uses of the term in the research literature being rather fleeting, nonetheless uncritical use of the term to do conceptual work limits what we know about students' practices in and around the university. Specifically, slippage between its use as a category of practice and a category of analysis denies sociologists the necessary analytic precision to unpack the entanglements between the myriad practices that could be said to characterise higher education, and students' position therein, in the current context.

Analysis of students' usage of the term provides insight into some of these practices. Deployed as a category of practice by undergraduates, the student experience describes a specific urban way of life, and provides students with a particular way of making sense of their status. As shown, the category is interpreted by students to contain a fixed set of ideas about what it means to be a student and where

these practices should be enacted. Learning what it means to be a student is a socialised process that plays out in – and shapes – urban space most evidently. The social logic assigned to the category by students disguises its commercial nature and the reality that most of its components revolve around various urban consumption practices. In applying the frame of 'the student experience', students come to feel that buying a particular product or service in the city is secondary to the forms of group membership and access to a community it provides. In its essence, then, viewed as a contemporary keyword, we see that it disguises social differences and inequalities, encourages market interactions between students, urban space and service providers therein, and, in this process, legitimises a fairly rigid set of ideas about where and how to consume.

As sociologists who teach and research in universities, we argue that moving beyond the reductive discourse of 'the student experience' reveals something of the political nature of the relations that underpin the contemporary sector. An overarching contention here has been that student experience is a category often deployed as part of a family of terms to describe the contemporary higher education landscape, but that is little interrogated. It has certain affordances and appropriations, but the sociological inadequacy of this concept means that its use is better understood as a political intervention rather than a description (Hacking, 1983). Usage of the term often obscures inequalities, smuggles in a market logic and calls into being what is purportedly only described. In other words, use of the category 'student experience' should be understood as of itself political, as a device with which to frame the world by drawing disparate things together, making some things more possible and others less so. We must take care that the language we use in our analysis does not naturalise the 'real-politik', consumerist motivations and privatisation of higher education that we should rather seek to reveal and challenge.

References

Abrahams, J., & Ingram, N. (2013). The chameleon habitus: Exploring local students' negotiations of multiple fields. *Sociological Research Online*, *18*(21).

Andersson, J., Sadgrove, J., & Valentine, G. (2012). Consuming campus: Geographies of encounter at a British university. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *13*(5), 501–515.

Biasutti, M. (2011). The student experience of a collaborative e-learning university module. *Computers & Education*, *57*(3), 1865–1875.

Biggs, J. (1993). What do inventories of students' learning processes really measure? A theoretical review and clarification. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *63*(1), 3–19.

Bourdieu, P. (1980). *Le sens pratique*. Minuit.

Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Polity.

Brookfield, K. (2019). Studentification as contested heterotopias: Findings from Southampton. *Area*, *51*(2), 350–359.

Browne, J. (2010). *Securing a sustainable future for higher education*. Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-browne-report-higher-education-funding-and-student-finance (last accessed 16 July 2020).

Brubaker, R., & Cooper, F. (2000). Beyond 'identity'. *Theory and Society*, *29*(1), 1–47.

Callender, C., Ramsden, P., & Griggs, J. (2014). *Review of the National Student Survey*. Higher Education Funding Council. www.natcen.ac.uk/media/457944/nss-review-summary.pdf (accessed 23 March 2019).

Chambers, R. (1992). The etcetera principle: Narrative and the paradigmatic. In F. G. Henry (Ed.), *Discontinuity and fragmentation* (pp. 1–24). Rodopi.

Chatterton, P. (1999). University students and city centres – the formation of exclusive geographies: The case of Bristol, UK. *Geoforum*, *30*(2), 117–133.

Chatterton, P. (2010). The student city: An ongoing story of neoliberalism, gentrification, and commodification. *Environment and Planning A*, *42*(3), 509–514.

Chatterton, P., & Hollands, R. (2004). *Urban nightscapes: Youth cultures, pleasure spaces and corporate power*. Routledge.

Collini, S. (2017). *Speaking of Universities*. Verso.

Crozier, G., Reay, D., Clayton, J., Colliander, L., & Grinstead, J. (2008). Different strokes for different folks: Diverse students in diverse institutions – experiences of higher education. *Research Papers in Education*, *23*(2), 167–177.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. (2009). *Higher ambitions: The future of universities in a knowledge economy*.

Department for Education and Skills. (2003). *The future of higher education*. The Stationery Office.

Donnelly, M., & Gamsu, S. (2018). Regional structures of feeling? A spatially and socially differentiated analysis of UK student immobility. *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*, *39*(7), 1–21.

Garrett, P. M. (2018). *Welfare words*. Sage.

Gieryn, T. (2000). A space for place in sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *26*, 43–96.

Gilbert, J., Morton, S., & Rowley, J. (2007). E-learning: The student experience. *British Journal of Technical Education*, *38*(4), 560–573.

Hacking, I. (1983). *Representing and intervening*. Cambridge University Press.

Holdsworth, C. (2006). 'Don't you think you're missing out, living at home?' Student experiences and residential transitions. *The Sociological Review*, *54*(3), 495–519.

Holton, M. (2015). Learning the rules of the 'student game': Transforming the 'student habitus' through [im]mobility. *Environment and Planning A*, *47*(1), 1–16.

Holton, M., & Riley, M. (2013). Student geographies: Exploring the diverse geographies of students and higher education. *Geography Compass*, *7*(1), 61–74.

House of Commons. (2009). *Students and university: Eleventh report of session 2008–09 volume I*. The Stationery Office.

Hubbard, P. (2008). Regulating the social impacts of studentification: A Loughborough case study. *Environment and Planning A*, *40*(2), 323–341.

Husserl, E. (2001). *Logical investigations* (J. N. Findlay, Trans.). Routledge (Original work published 1913).

Jones, P., & Krzyzanowki, M. (2008). Identity, belonging and migration: Beyond constructing 'others'. In G. Delanty, R. Wodak & P. Jones (Eds.), *Belonging, identity and migration* (pp. 38–53). Liverpool University Press.

Leary, J. P. (2018). *Keywords: The new language of capitalism*. Haymarket Books.

Liberty Living. (2018). *Private student accommodation in Liverpool*. www.libertyliving.co.uk/student-accommodation/liverpool/ (accessed 23 March 2019).

MacCabe, C., & Yanacek, H. (2018). *Keywords for today: A 21st century vocabulary*. Oxford University Press.

Marton, F., & Säljö, R. (1976). On qualitative differences in learning: I – outcomes and process. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *46*(1), 4–11.

McGettigan, A. (2013). *The great university gamble*. Pluto Press.

McGuigan, J., & Moran, M. (2014). Raymond Williams and sociology. *The Sociological Review*, *62*(1), 167–188.

Mesny, A. (2002). A view on Bourdieu's legacy: Sens pratique v. hysteresis. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, *27*(1), 59–67.

Moran, M. (2015). *Identity and capitalism*. Sage.

Moran, M. (2018). Identity and identity politics: A cultural materialist history. *Historical Materialism*, *26*(2), 21–45.

Moran, M. (2020). (Un)troubling identity politics: A cultural materialist intervention. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *23*(2), 258–277.

Naidoo, R., Shankar, A., & Veer, E. (2011). The consumerist turn in higher education: Policy aspirations and outcomes. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *27*(11–12), 1142–1162.

Parker, I. (2017). *Revolutionary keywords for a new left*. Zero Books.

Pine, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1998). Welcome to the experience economy. *Harvard Business Review*, *76*, 97–105.

Pötschulat, M. (2018). *Constructing the 'student experience': Placing university students in the entrepreneurial city* [PhD Thesis, University of Liverpool].

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

Rugg, J., Rhodes, D., & Jones, A. (2002). Studying a niche market: UK students and the private rented sector. *Housing Studies*, *17*(2), 289–303.

Sabri, D. (2011). What's wrong with 'the student experience'? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *32*(5), 657–667.

Sabri, D. (2013). Student evaluations of teaching as 'fact totems': The case of the UK National

Student Survey. *Sociological Research Online*, *18*(4).

Smith, D. (2005). 'Studentification': The gentrification factory? In R. Atkinson & G. Bridge (Eds.), *Gentrification in a global context: The new urban colonialism* (pp. 72–89). Routledge.

Smith, D., & Holt, L. (2007). Studentification and apprentice gentrifiers within Britain's provincial towns and cities: Extending the meaning of gentrification. *Environment and Planning A*, *39*(1), 142–161.

Sundbo, J., & Sorensen, F. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook on the experience economy*. Edward Elgar.

Times Higher Education. (2017). *Student experience survey 2017: Best UK universities for student social life*. www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/student-experience-survey-2017-best-uk-universities-student-social-life (last accessed 16 July 2020).

UNiDAYS. (2015). *Top 10 UK student nights out*. www.myunidays.com/GB/en-GB/blog/article/top-10-uk-student-nights-out (accessed 23 March 2019).

Unite Students. (2018). *Student accommodation in Portsmouth*. www.unitestudents.com/portsmouth (accessed 23 March 2019).

Universities UK. (2018). *Student experience*. www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/Pages/student-experience.aspx (accessed 23 March 2019).

Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford University Press.

Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (2nd ed.). Fontana (Original work published 1976).