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A narrative inquiry perspective into coping mechanisms of international postgraduate students' transition experiences

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ABSTRACT

To research the transition experiences of a group of international postgraduate students, this study focused on the use of a methodology which, although gaining much popularity in recent years, is still under used in UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) contexts. Narrative inquiry is arguably the most suitable way of uncovering and understanding more deeply the complex and multi-layered experiences of individuals, focusing as it does on the study of 'lived experience – that is, lives and how they are lived'. Here, the focus was five Latin American postgraduate students. Little research to date has focused on this group of students in terms of transition and learning experiences using this refreshingly different methodology, whose use and aim is to 'paint a complex picture of the issue in focus. In this particular study this issue was to both understand how these five students coped with challenges inherent in their transition to the UK and their studies here as well as use such understanding to inform teaching practice.

KEYWORDS: Narrative inquiry, student experience, transition, postgraduate, international students

The context of this study

The research on which this article is based focused on the learning and transition experiences of five female postgraduate students who were studying for a one-year Master's degree at a UK university during 2012-13. All were Latin American as this was part of the study's key motive and focus: I was teaching a significant number of Latin American postgraduates and had discovered through a literature search that there was no literature focusing on transition or learning experiences of these students in the UK or using narrative inquiry as a methodology to do so. There were, conversely, many studies on East Asian students (e.g. Gu, 2011; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Zhou & Todman, 2009; Zhou et al., 2010) but none using narrative inquiry. This 'particular wonder' (Clandinin and Huber, 2010, p.10), then, is what led me to my 'research puzzle' (ibid.), namely to research whether the Latin American students' experiences (Corona et al., 2017) in any way mirrored those of East Asian students. But I also wanted to go beyond that and find out how they coped with both their specific experiences of transition and learning more generally. To do this, I needed to 'paint a complex picture of the issue in focus' (Benson, 2014, p.164), which narrative inquiry enables. The five participants were students of mine in classes which were undertaken voluntarily by them and for which there was no assessment, two key factors which arguably lessened any sense of 'power' which may have been created over them to participate in research with their teacher. All five had had varying lengths (i.e. 2-6 years) working in professional contexts prior to arriving in the UK and

commencing their studies, but only one had had any significant international exposure through working with UNESCO. Data collected over the academic year consisted primarily of three in-depth research ‘conversations’, each lasting between 60-90 minutes, in which I attempted to follow ‘participants down *their* trails’ (Riessman, 2008, p.24, emphasis in original), a more narrative style of interviewing which demands not ‘right’ data but rather ‘different’ data. I used the term ‘conversation’ in an attempt to lessen the formality of students talking to their teacher for her research, as well as allow for space in which I could enter into these conversations through reflexivity, a key concept in narrative inquiry, where I also shared experiences with them which resonated with me (Conle, 1996). Additional data was gathered in the form of a number of email exchanges and conversations which ‘just happen’ (Trahar, 2006, p.122), namely those which are unanticipated, such as conversations while walking back to my office from class. Once back in my office, I noted down these conversations along with my thoughts and reflections, and ensured that they were made visible throughout my research writing. This was a novel approach for me, not having used narrative inquiry in any previous research I had done.

Narrative inquiry: a brief overview

How to encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments in life? How to embody in language the mix of heightened awareness and felt experience?...You don’t do that with theories. You don’t do that with a system of ideas. You do it with a story. (Coles, 1989, p.128)

I first discovered narrative inquiry as a doctoral student a few years ago, and was immediately captivated by this exciting, innovative, different way of doing research, but the more I read and discovered about narrative inquiry the more indefinable it seemingly became; it is a complex methodology, characterised by its diversity. I also frequently wondered whether I would be able to make the move from being a novice narrative inquirer to a more proficient narrative inquirer, as it was so different to any research method I had heretofore encountered. Kim (2016, p.2) encouragingly writes that ‘it takes years to develop the maturity and experience that are required to be a good narrative researcher. I had to work at it. I am still working at it.’ Like Kim, I had to work at it and am very much still working at it. So it is my hope in what follows to try and uncover some of what I perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be the ‘mysteries’ of this complex methodology.

Narrative inquiry is burgeoning in a number of fields including Education, Psychology, Medicine and Law amongst others, and is also being used in my field of English Language Teaching. At its simplest it is ‘the study of experience as story’ (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p.479) and is a way of researching which focuses on the whole and the specific, not the fragmented and the general (Damgaci & Aydin, 2018; Rea et al, 2017; Riessman, 2010). Narrative inquiry foregrounds the telling of stories as a way of giving and exploring meanings of an individual’s experience. And yet it is still viewed by many as an ‘alternate and unconventional’ (Yip, 2013, p.123) methodology, although I prefer ‘complementary’ to ‘alternate’. Perhaps this is because it is ‘notoriously hard to define’ (Barkhuizen, 2013, p.2) and lacks a one-size-fits-all approach. Or perhaps this is because ‘the narrative text refuses the impulse to abstract and explain’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.744), thereby preventing the ticking of boxes or the neat categorisation of people’s experiences. This does not, however, make narrative inquiry a theoretical, particularly considering it is interdisciplinary in nature, firmly rooted in a variety of disciplines and philosophical traditions (e.g. Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Wilder et al., 2017). Rather, it allows a holistic focus on people, not just their language learning or educational background. It also helps us to understand the meanings of people’s experiences, ‘rather than be presented with the theoretical dilution of those meanings’ (Trahar,

2013, p.xiv). Because of its holistic nature and its in-depth approach to each participant, a narrative inquiry tends to focus on a small number of participants.

This blurring of boundaries regarding what defines narrative inquiry is not new, and neither is its concomitant slipperiness for those both conducting and bumping into such research, because narrative inquiry can be understood and implemented in diverse ways (Clandinin, 2013). Because of this blurring of both a definition and framework in which to conduct a narrative inquiry, Spector-Mersel (2010) calls for the expansion of narrative inquiry from its confinement as a methodology to also being a paradigm, claiming that there is a need to outline the core of what constitutes narrative inquiry and how to celebrate its hallmark of diversity. Much discussion has been had and is yet to be had along these lines, but for the purpose of this article, my own approach to narrative inquiry is in accordance with Clandinin & Connelly's (2000), that of holding a Deweyan view of experience as the philosophical basis of narrative inquiry. Experience, according to this view, then, is threefold: relational, continuous, and social (for a more in-depth discussion see Clandinin, 2013; Michou et al, 2016).

'Story' and 'narrative'

In this article I use these as distinct terms based on Frank's (2000) definition, namely that people tell stories; they do not tell narratives. Mostly in my study my participants did not 'tell stories' (in the sense of coherent structures with a beginning, middle and end); 'telling stories' was my task as the researcher, where I then wrote up their data as narratives that highlighted learning experiences more broadly and transition experiences more particularly. Through this I necessarily created a narrative construction (Barone, 2007), an initial recasting of data into a storied form, before analysing these constructions. I needed to lend 'narrative coherence to nonnarrative data in order to bring out or highlight meanings in relation to the research issue in focus' (Benson, 2014, p.163). But these were co-constructed as although I initially analysed and interpreted them, using Riessman's (2008) thematic and performance analysis, I emailed them to each participant to read and edit as necessary. I am conscious as I write this paragraph that the concrete steps and stages in my analysis are missing, but this is unintentional. It is, again, a complex issue which is not the focus of this particular article.

A working definition of the term 'narrative' I thus subscribe to is that of Lawler (2002, p.242) who writes that narratives are 'accounts which contain transformation (change over time), some kind of "action" and characters, all of which are brought together within an overall "plot" [and] are a central means with which people connect together past and present, self and other'. So a narrative includes the key elements of transformation (arguably a unique feature when compared with other forms of qualitative research), characters, plot and time. Expanding this slightly I also attended to Clandinin & Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space adding the dimensions of place and sociality. Narratives must also include personal, cultural and historical context (Cresswell, 2007) to avoid existing in some kind of segregated reality, and they are relational in that they emphasise, as does narrative inquiry as a methodology, the relationship between the researcher and the participant. In contrast to much qualitative and quantitative research, an underlying premise of narrative inquiry is that I, as the practitioner researcher, am not immune to the research and am to be present and reflexive in it as opposed to an objective or 'disembodied recorder of someone else's experience' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.81).

Postgraduate students' transition

There is much UK-based research into 'expected' transitions, for example from secondary school to university (e.g. Haggis & Pouget, 2002). The word 'transition' itself conjures up

multiple images for individuals – for those reading this article, for example, it will have particular and therefore personal meanings ranging from expected to unexpected, pleasant to painful. Regardless, it necessarily involves ‘discontinuities’ (Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2005, p.1) and is generally a process rather than a single event. My five research participants clearly mirrored these frequently destabilising discontinuities. Having come to the UK from familiar, high status professional contexts to being a student again in a different continent, country, culture and language gave me the opportunity to explore these experiences using a multi-layered approach which, arguably, only narrative inquiry enables and allows.

But research into postgraduates’ transition experiences in the UK is scarce. Tobbell, O’Donnell & Zammit (2010) claim that this is because of an (implicit) assumption by those in higher education that postgraduates by their very label have previously been successful in gaining an undergraduate degree and ‘essentially, the environment does not change’ (p.261). This in turn leads to them being viewed as ‘expert’ students (p.262) whose knowledge is not re-situated but instead continued, with the implication that there exists a universal understanding of academic environments (Houdyshell, 2017). Yet this notion of knowledge fails to consider that many students are not following the ‘traditional’ academic route from undergraduate straight to postgraduate study. Many – such as my five participants – have been working in professional contexts before starting postgraduate degrees (see also O’Donnell et al., 2009) and some are also starting postgraduate degrees in new disciplines. Additionally this notion and viewpoint do not allow for the fact that a significant number of postgraduates at many UK HEIs are international students (see UKCISA, 2016).

Transition is often simplistically problematised as to how it can be dealt with as opposed to what characterises it or how it affects a person’s identity (Lawson, 2010). In my research, an element of ‘overcoming’ for each of the five students was uncovered as this was specifically mentioned in many of the conversations we had and it would have been both amiss and disingenuous of me as the researcher to have omitted these experiences. Despite narrative inquirers not being atheoretical but instead recognising that ‘people and their stories do not always “fit” the theory’ (Trahar, 2013, p.xiv), it is nonetheless helpful to look briefly at how transition in educational contexts in the UK has been conceptualised and understood.

Psychological and sociocultural adjustment is a common focus in studies on postgraduate students’ transitions (e.g. Gu, 2011). These two dimensions of adjustment are based on Searle and Ward’s (1990) classification, psychological referring to ‘feelings of well-being and satisfaction’ and sociocultural being ‘concerned with the ability to “fit in” or negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture’ (Ward & Kennedy, 1993, p.131). Educational adjustment is a third dimension added by Zhou & Todman (2009) who studied patterns of adaptation amongst Chinese postgraduates coming to the UK. Their justification for this addition is that this aspect has been under researched.

Two further key theories of adjustment are culture shock (Pederson, 1995) and Lysgaard’s (1955) U-curve adjustment model. The former is where unfamiliar context and rules of behaviour can cause anxiety and potentially depression and the latter is a model commonly used to both describe and understand the transition to a particular culture over a period of time. Lysgaard’s model seeks to illustrate and explain how a person felt at various stages of their transition period. Positive emotions are felt in stage one; negative emotions in the middle stage ending with positive again in the third, final stage. What is problematic with this model, however, is that being one-dimensional it does not take into account that a person’s life is, in reality, far more complex and multi-layered (Brown & Holloway, 2008). A final phenomenon related to culture shock is learning shock, which acknowledges the ‘transition most learners undertake on entering new learning environments, especially in the university context’ (Davidson, 2009, p.1). Learning shock applies particularly to adults returning to study

after a period of time and has been highlighted in studies such as Gu's (2011), who looked at Chinese students in the UK managing academic life and its concomitant challenges.

In my doctoral research (James, 2014) I therefore conceptualised transition as a holistic and dynamic combination of psychological, sociocultural and educational adjustment, including culture shock, and how these all impact on identity and developing sense of self (Halpern, 2017). Here, my focus is on educational adjustment which necessarily includes psychological and sociocultural adjustment as well as culture shock. Brown & Holloway (2008) contend that it is difficult to separate psychological and sociocultural adjustment, making the final point that 'while generalisable patterns may be helpful in highlighting likely responses, it will continue to be essential to consider each student's individual needs and circumstances when deciding how international students might best be supported' (p.246). This links back to O'Donnell et al.'s (2009) finding that postgraduate students are a heterogeneous and not a homogenous group of people.

My five participants all fitted a normative pattern of educational adjustment, for example in grappling with and eventually understanding and navigating the dominant discourses in British universities of success and failure which much of the literature on transition to higher education mirrors (e.g. Lawson, 2010). They struggled with the speed and intensity of their degree course (see also Brown & Holloway, 2008; Burke, 2010), and in terms of psychological and sociocultural adjustment they also exhibited struggles with the demands of 'real' life e.g. less time for socialising and issues with housing, which was reflected in research by Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit (2010). Yet despite these similarities each of the five also had a unique and different transition experience. To that end, the second part of this article now focuses on extracts highlighting 'transition elements' extrapolated from the narratives regarding educational adjustment and in particular, how this was both experienced and managed.

Narrative extracts of educational adjustment: coping and 'budding transformation'

Much research has focused on the description of problems faced by international students, whether these be psychological, sociocultural and/or educational (e.g. Spencer-Oatey & Zhong, 2006). Some research has looked at how students dealt with those problems (e.g. Dawson & Conti-Bekkers, 2002; Prescott & Hellsten, 2005; Bartram, 2007), but research into how students eventually overcame transition problems they experienced and how they themselves changed over time as a result is rare, especially when researched through the lens of a narrative inquiry and in a UK HEI context. In her research on postgraduate transitions in the UK, Burke (2010) writes that 'deficit subjectivities' are reproduced and assumptions homogenised regarding students who are different, for example international students, and therefore problematic. 'This tends to exacerbate rather than disrupt inequalities at play in higher education and tends to focus the problem on individual students who are constructed in deficit terms' (1). Although her focus is on home students, this still echoes the findings of research with international students by Montgomery (2010) and Hellsten (2007). So in Montgomery's (2010, p.xv-xvi) words:

The importance of empirical research that systematically tells the stories of international students cannot be overemphasized. Individual stories of international students are crucial to developing a positive image that counteracts a deficit model that may sometimes be applied to international students.

So how did my five participants themselves cope with changes and challenges experienced in their unique transitions? It is important to remember that each had a 'double

transition' (Zhou et al., 2010) as they were not only moving from professional backgrounds to being students again but were also doing so in another country and culture different from their own. I realise that in providing narrative 'extracts' this will necessarily fragment the narrative and provide an incomplete picture of both the person and their experience. But keep in mind that even the 'complete' narratives are partial and fragmented because narratives simply do not exist in their entirety: 'narratives...neither begin nor end in the research setting: they are part of the fabric of the social world' (Lawler, 2002, p.243). Consequently they continue now that particular research journey has ended. And yet despite being fragmentary, they can and arguably do nevertheless impart much to us, the reader and the writer, about the individual and their world.

Family was a significant coping mechanism, as evidenced in all five narratives, although in different ways. By necessity I have only been able to illustrate this here using three narrative extracts (pseudonyms have been used in line with the ethical approval gained for the study).

Family: Lucile

Lucile, the youngest of my participants at 24, was a journalist and had worked for two years as a freelance journalist in Uruguay before coming to the UK. In one of our conversations I had directly asked her how she had coped with bumping up against other cultures and their inevitably different perspectives and interpretations. This was her response:

My role models in life are my great grandparents and my grandparents on my father's side and also my father. My paternal great grandparents were Jews from Egypt and Turkey; my grandfather was born in Uruguay. He was really poor and he had to leave school at seven [years] and start working in a jeweller's. Then when he married my grandmother they were poor and they created a shop which now is like the most well-known shop in Uruguay and has franchises all over the world. They've all really inspired me to work hard, to face difficulties rather than avoid them.

Her response somewhat 'proved' my own public narrative in thinking that she could cope because of her stable family background. This seemingly innocent assumption is one which I was previously unable to label, but I was later confronted with the realisation that I was harbouring a previously unlabelled public narrative, i.e. a narrative which is 'attached to cultural and institutional formations rather than the single individual' (Somers & Gibson 1994, as quoted in Lawler, 2002, p.251). I now recognise that my assumption about how Lucile coped originates from a 'particularly compelling' public narrative, namely 'that of childhood "development", in which later (adult) psychologies are inevitably rooted in earlier (childhood) events. Euroamericans almost inevitably look to childhood as the grounds of adulthood' (p.252). When her grandfather died halfway through her studies, Lucile's family were swift in encouraging her to both seek comfort in family she has living in the UK and also remind her that to continue with her studies would have been her grandfather's wish.

Family: Soledad & Pazz

At 29 Soledad was the oldest of my five participants and had had six years of work experience. She had been a lecturer in a private university in Chile for two years before being dismissed for being 'too political' – very left-wing in a very right-wing university – and had then worked for the government in a programme aimed at lifting people out of poverty. She had a good

relationship with her parents and had lived with them prior to coming to the UK but being in the UK deepened this relationship as she explains:

Being here has really improved my relationship with my parents. It was good before but it's even better now because absence really does make the heart grow fonder. My father is 64 and never used to say 'I love you'; he's of that generation where men don't tend to show emotion. But now he says it really often. I think it's his illness – he was diagnosed with an unusual form of cancer in 2009 and has had three operations and radiotherapy to treat it. He's better now, but just before I came to the UK he had a recurrence, and had to have his third operation. He has regular medical check-ups and it's really stressful for my mother, me and everyone who knows him well. Here in the UK I've been really aware of his condition; in the middle of my exams he had to go to the doctor for a check-up (my exam was the day after) so I've had all this stress about my dad. He's OK thankfully, but I had a lot of emotions to deal with and in fact that exam was terrible. His illness has made him more emotional; you have this sense that you can die and you need to be closer to those you love and you need to show that, too. So with my being away his emotional side has appeared. This has been a crucial point of my experience too. It has impacted my exams and my emotional stability too.

Soledad's worry and stress in this situation clearly has the capacity to cause 'resonance' (Conle, 1996) in both the researcher and the reader, reflecting the reflexivity so fundamental to a narrative inquiry. Her heightened awareness of her own reactions and emotions led her to spiritualise her experiences in this regard in a later conversation. Here, Soledad is most closely exhibiting elements of psychological adjustment, although to say she is exhibiting elements of all aspects of adjustment earlier outlined is to try and squeeze her into the theory; this particular extract shows that her emotional stability has been affected by her family, but this does not 'fit' neatly into psychological, sociocultural or educational adjustment, neither does it fit into culture shock or learning shock.

Pazz was 28 and had worked for five years in Chile for the government and also as a teacher in a private university before coming to the UK. Interestingly, her experience of family was somewhat different to the others, perhaps because she was newlywed and arrived in the UK with her husband just two months after they married. I asked her whether being married had made her transition to the UK (educationally or otherwise) easier, but this was her response:

Having him here has helped me a lot because I have someone to talk to at the end of each day. But it also makes it harder. Finding accommodation was more difficult with two of us and sometimes I worry about what he'll do for the next four years [she since went on to do a PhD]. But he is happy to stay in the UK because what he wants to do [i.e. his work interest] takes time to develop.

Friends: Soledad & Gloria

Another coping mechanism was friendships made. As well as her parents, Soledad's friends also helped her to cope, though this surfaced through her dislike of what she termed 'the academic ego'. Interestingly, another of my participants also referred to 'the academic ego' but in that case it was her own, not others, she was lamenting. Soledad elaborates on how she saw this ego being exhibited by classmates around her:

I've also come across this thing of the 'academic ego' which I hate. Most of my classmates...are only here for the academic experience. In conversation with my classmates I desperately wanted to talk about real issues, but they spent their time only talking about academic issues. That is just not for me. As a result I didn't feel any connection with anybody on my course except my Turkish friend. I felt that everyone around me was exhibiting this fake, superficial politeness...it began to infect me too... my classmates were all very nice but so distant. The Latino stereotype is that we're close and passionate about things, and I fit that stereotype. I feel it much more now I'm in the UK; maybe that's part of the disruption transition causes... I started to analyse people and create images of them – I think this was a throwback to my having studied Anthropology – and I was analysing them all the time because I wanted to work out how I could relate to people... All this analysing – sometimes subconsciously – and thinking of what to say/what not to say, what to do/what not to do, whether to joke or not because you may inadvertently offend someone, and then of course thinking in English is all exhausting; that's why I got so close to so many Chileans here; I feel comfortable with them and they speak Spanish so it was a natural gravitation towards each other. My Turkish friend is also someone with whom I feel more relaxed; we discovered that Turkish people are very similar to Latins, in the way we greet for one thing.

This noticing of the ego is clearly something she feels antipathy towards, even going so far as to use language associated with illness – ‘it began to infect me’ – and she attempts to explain this by comparing one country/continent stereotype with another. She finishes by deciding that it is the transition which is causing her to experience these things in this way and then continues on to thinking through why she is analysing, or perhaps over-analysing, again trying to make sense of the ‘disruption’ of her transition. Having lived and worked in a culture very different to my own, a Southeast Asian one, I can also relate to ‘all this analysing’ about whether or not what I was doing/saying was culturally appropriate or inappropriate and whether I was inadvertently causing offence. Gudykunst (1998) talks about knowing the rules of behaviour to be able to communicate effectively; evidently Soledad feels deficient in this area, as I did initially too.

Soledad was not the only participant who mentioned friends as a coping mechanism. Gloria, a 27-year old Ecuadorean who had worked for UNESCO in the areas of reproductive health, youth and family planning for five years prior to coming to the UK, said:

...at the beginning [i.e. of her time in the UK] I missed my family and friends but I consider myself to be very sociable, like my brother and sister – we got that from my dad... so I immediately found nice, interesting people and we stayed friends throughout the year. This was undoubtedly helped by halls organising all these social events (drinks and quiz nights) at the beginning of the year.

However, this quickly changes as she continues:

My first impressions were that it was good to get to know people from other courses but now I have different impressions! In the second term when many of us change courses, everybody has established their own mini cliques. So they don't become friends but more like classmates that you talk to for five minutes in group work, and that's it. So at the beginning you have this sense of community but at the end you feel like

everybody's on their own track. So it's been nice having different courses and they have been very interesting, but not for finding friendships.

Soledad also alluded to this 'individualistic' mentality above, but with regard to the literature, some recent, interesting UK-based research by Montgomery & McDowell (2009) highlights the area of social networks formed of international students supporting one another. Menzies & Baron's (2013) Australia-based study also showed that participation in student societies and other student-based support had a positive effect on students' transition experiences, as it did in Soledad's and, initially at least, Gloria's case.

This finding is not an overly surprising one but is nevertheless an illustration of a different approach to add to the scarce literature on international students' transition experiences.

Previous preparation: Gloria & Berenice

Another coping mechanism which was dwelt on in detail by Gloria was that of preparation. In addition to having worked for UNESCO she had also spent a year in the US as a teenager on her mother's wishes:

After her experience [i.e. Gloria's mother, who had spent a year in the US when she was in high school back in the 1960s] she said 'I want my kids to have a second language; I want them to do what I did and have that same opportunity.' So when we were little she bought us books and got us to watch TV shows and she put us in a bilingual English/Spanish school – a really good Catholic school. I also did what she'd done when I was in high school. I was so young and although it was something I wanted, in reality it was my mum's dream because she said I had to go.

But Gloria also recognises that although her English is really fluent, it is very different to academic English:

I grew up with English and used to read and write emails in English when I was working, but it's not the same as using English in academic study – in fact it's completely different.

She says it laid the groundwork for this time in London – this time it was *her* choice and she says she felt in her teenage years she was 'too young to appreciate stuff'. So subconsciously this foundation helped her to cope with her transition to the UK:

I found the transition of becoming a student again a fun as well as challenging one because it was a moment to redefine my life and my interests both as a student and as a person. In some senses, the transition experience didn't surprise me much. Before coming to London I prepared myself over a period of many months, applying for my scholarship and preparing for my English language exam. It's not a similar environment at all, but I just took it as part of the process of being here, and I feel I adapted myself very fast. I think I found it fairly easy because I've been wanting this for a long time. So when I arrived I thought 'now I'm here, I need to make the most of this.'

Berenice, from Colombia and in her mid-20s, had worked for three years as a research assistant at the university where she had studied her undergraduate degree. She had assumed

that her previous work experience would prepare her for studying in English but quickly realised that this was not the case:

I know that I put myself under a huge amount of internal pressure; I have very high standards... Through all of my previous educational success an image was created of 'you can do it.' I got the job of Research Assistant at my university because some of the teachers said 'you have to work with me.' Which is great but the problem is that I now realise I have a huge academic ego and it's dying. Part of my job involved teaching academic writing and I was really critical of my students' minor mistakes in Spanish but on arrival here I realised I was making the same mistakes in English! Despite having been really worried about studying in English I still thought 'I can do it!' But the gap between what I was expecting of myself and what I can really do is much bigger. This internal pressure feels like such an obstacle at the moment...

Both the above extracts clearly illustrate the different experiences Gloria and Berenice had regarding their transition to a new learning environment. Taylor (1994) explains preparation like Gloria's as psychological readiness; does self-confidence come into such positivity too I wonder? Conversely, Berenice exhibited something which has been pointed out by other researchers (e.g. Prescott & Hellsten, 2005), namely that expectation did not meet reality. Arguably all five of my participants prepared themselves prior to coming to the UK, in that four of them applied for and won scholarships. But Gloria was the only one who said that her transition was 'easy' and initially it seemed that nothing rocked this boat although this changed when she came to her second term and failed her essay. This distressed her considerably, causing a significant 'discontinuity' and leading her to question her ability to complete the degree and her whole decision for coming to the UK. But again, she coped with this by going to see her tutor and discussing why she had received a fail and his feedback encouraged her to keep going.

Ideologies: Soledad

A final coping mechanism emerging was Soledad's 'personality change' – her words – which helped her to cope with her transition and also started prior to her arrival in the UK. While the other four participants also experienced transformation over time (e.g. Gloria, who said *I've become more independent and more self-sufficient with my time and responsibilities* and Pazz who said *I feel like I've grown up a lot. I got married, I quit my job, I came here, I've been studying in a different place, in a different language*) they did not elaborate on it to the same extent.

Soledad had been in a relationship for six years but, she told me, when she won the scholarship to study in London and her boyfriend did not, their relationship ended. So she came to London alone, not together with her boyfriend as they had originally planned, and her father's recurring illness during her exams all contributed to her growing interest in feminism (as she labelled it) as a way of coping. I never did have the opportunity to ask whether she aligns herself with second-wave feminism, with its aim to obliterate sexism wherever it occurs or third-wave feminism, with its central issues of race, social class and sexuality but perhaps that is neither here nor there. Here is what she said:

One thing that has helped me throughout this year, is my growing interest in feminism. I felt I needed to re-connect with my feminine side and I needed to understand my emotional side. I'd never had either of these needs before, or at

least they were either more suppressed or more subconscious. I felt my feminine side had been crushed by my boyfriend of six years. I'd been really influenced by his approach to the world and felt I was becoming more masculine than feminine. For instance, when I saw someone crying I used to think 'she's hysterical'. Now I'd think 'she's crying; there must be a powerful reason for that'. I felt minimised by him in a lot of ways but when we broke up it was like a liberation... Both of these things (reconnection with my feminine side + understanding my emotional self) are helping me realise what's happening with me now. The transition from Chile to the UK is part of wanting this reconnection and understanding but I think it goes further back than that. The break up had a lot to do with it, but also a friend of mine in Chile helped me. She believes that women are cyclical in that they have moments when they feel sad, angry, happy, creative, and these are repetitive. I mean this must be true because happiness is not a constant thing, is it? In everything you need your opposite to know the state; you need sadness to be happy. All these opposites are present in our cycles, our life, and so it's this connection that I'm trying to make with this sense of myself, of my emotions, of my stages in life, or even of the wisdom I develop.

Anyway, I think the fact that I'm here by myself is a culmination of all these things and this process to deal with myself by myself... I believe this is part of my personality change during my transition. I've lost this fear about new things in that I'm not as afraid of new things as I was. I can face my fears on my own. I feel stronger.

Do our personalities change during periods of destabilisation, in this case transition? Arguably, yes. Here it seems that Soledad is exhibiting elements of psychological and sociocultural adjustment as well as identity transformation, which is how Tobbell, O'Donnell & Zammit (2010) understand and define transition in their study looking at shifting identities during transition to postgraduate study. Soledad's coping mechanism is to fall back on previous experiences such as her break up, her friend's interest in feminism and her own deepening interest and dependence on feminism. In the extract above she is seeking to make sense of those experiences through this particular prism.

Transition, then, necessarily involves discontinuities of many kinds but that is to focus on the negative and the expected, perhaps. From the above brief glimpses into the five participants' lives we have seen that through experiencing such discontinuities, families and friends, previous preparation and experiences as well as ideologies and spirituality have all combined in various ways and with varying emphases to form some coping mechanisms. These mechanisms, while broadly categorised as similar, are also unique, underlining that not only are the experiences unique and different from each other but also how they do not easily 'fit' the types of adjustment defined in the literature. At the very least they therefore provide us with initial and concrete evidence that for these five students, their experiences did echo, if not mirror, those of East Asian students and others more generally (e.g. Menzies & Baron, 2013). This insight can contribute to decision-making by universities on how best to support international students while simultaneously being aware that each student is a unique individual (Yigit & Tatch, 2017).

So what are we learning from narrative inquiry that we could not learn from other qualitative methods?

This is a difficult question to answer as ‘narrative studies often paint a complex picture of the issue in focus, rather than provide clear-cut results or findings’ (Benson, 2014, p.164), but I do not wish to evade the question as it is an important one. What *do* we learn from narrative inquiry that we would not learn from other methods of inquiry? It has helped me to research complex experiences and to look out at the world through someone else’s eyes; I have tried to understand my participants’ experiences rather than theorising and, as mentioned earlier, diluting them. People’s lives and experiences should not, and arguably cannot, be turned into ‘texts and concepts’ (Bochner, 1997, p.424), as much of academia is used to doing. This is not, of course, to negate the role and place of theory in research but narrative inquiry serves instead to complement other forms of research and add ‘colour and emotion’ (Speedy, 2010).

Narrative inquiry is an exciting, refreshing and very different way of doing research which impacts the researcher both personally and professionally, and I hope that this study will have captured the imagination of others who desire to carry out sustained critical reflection of their own teaching practice or a ‘research puzzle’ (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p.10) arising from their particular context. Arguably practitioners need to spend more time critically reflecting on their own practice so this is an ideal methodology which enables us to do just that. It is a complex and diverse methodology but it demands that we look beyond that to see that it is also a richly rewarding and relational one which does not allow either the researched or the researcher to emerge from the research unchanged (Clandinin, 2013).

Personally, I have gained a deeper understanding of what challenges these five Latin American students have experienced and what coping mechanisms they have implemented, using an innovative research methodology which involved ‘a more personal, collaborative, and interactive relationship’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.744) and which for us all was a novel, but in my case not a one-off, experience. It has helped me to continually reflect on and evaluate my teaching practice in the hope that ‘such constitutive reflective practices yield effective teaching and learning environments’ (Prescott & Hellsten, 2005, p.91). And it has enabled me to utilise, not obscure, the potential which students bring with them into the classroom.

More broadly, and arguably in the spirit of a narrative inquiry, it is not incumbent upon me to define how other people’s teaching practice is to be improved or indeed informed through my own ‘research puzzle’ and discoveries related to it. Instead, it is my hope that in this article, readers and practitioners will not only have viscerally experienced something of these students’ lives but will also have glimpsed that narrative studies both ‘lead us to look at issues in different ways or open up new avenues of inquiry’ (Benson, 2014, p.164) and ‘produce knowledge that deepens, enhances and enlightens our understanding of human experience’ (James, 2014, p.64). It is by researching, constructing, reading and listening to more of our students’ (whether international or home, postgraduate or undergraduate) personal and unique stories that we can begin to work our way through barriers of difference, distance and the tendency to perhaps ‘homogenise’ or even label groups of students, which arguably many UK HEI practitioners experience to some extent, towards a greater spirit of understanding, collaboration and openness (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This will enable us to both appreciate anew the wonderful and colourful diversity in our midst and the fact that our students can be taught, utilised in our classrooms and supported more as the unique individuals that they are.

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