**Introduction**

Since the introduction of university tuition fees directly paid by students in 2001, academic discussion has occurred about the emerging status of students as consumers of higher education (HE) (see for example Morley: 2003; Kaye, Bickel and Birtwhistle: 2006; Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion: 2009). Although such discourse provides a necessary analysis of policy and its practice in institutions, little attention has been paid to how students see themselves and their learning in relation to fee paying. There is a need to explore whether students embrace or reject consumer status. In terms of HE, the concept of the consumer is associated with someone entitled to purchase or possess a particular product (a degree) or service (access to staff and resources). This student-as-consumer is constructed through government policies; media representations of students; and universities themselves, through, for example, marketing departments (see Williams 2010). However, I argue that consumer identity is not constructed as an automatic result of fee-paying. In a marketised HE sector, within a neo-liberal economy, it is entirely plausible that students may act as consumers without paying tuition fees (Becher and Trowler, 2001: 8) or that paying fees may lead students to become engaged with their learning. Alternatively, fee-paying may have no discernible impact upon how a student perceives of their status. I argue that students decide, within the context of the social, cultural, political and economic systems we inhabit, whether or not to position themselves as consumers. This notion of choice implies that students are capable of exercising a degree of agency in relation to their own identity and how they relate to their studies.

My purpose with this paper is not to explore the identity of the new student-consumer (if such a person exists) but rather to explore the question of method. I want to consider which methodologies may be most useful in determining whether students embrace or reject consumer status. The issue of how students perceive of themselves raises two intertwined methodological problems. The first concerns the nature of truth in research and whether it is possible for truth to exist within interview data. The second problem concerns the notion of agency, or, more precisely, the notion of students as agents, actors within the world and acting upon the world. This is important because consumer status can be experienced as infantilising by some as they are pushed into a prolonged period of dependency upon family members or denied a role as political change agents beyond the confines of immediate consumer demands (for a fuller discussion see Williams 2010). It is therefore important to find a methodology which respects interviewees as self-determining subjects and not as ‘de-centred subjects’ (Hollway and Jefferson: 2000) and that stresses their agency as opposed to their ‘subjectivity’ (Merrill and West: 2009: 58). The problem then, and the focus for this paper, is how to resolve issues of truth and agency. I want to adopt approaches that allow me to meet interviewees as agents who actively construct themselves as consumers for economic and social advantage – or, alternatively and more frequently, actively construct themselves in opposition to this discourse. At the same time I need a methodology that allows me to recognise that such agents may not have access to the whole truth, or may consciously choose not to tell me the truth.

**Truth**

The processes by which student identity is formed are complex. Theories of social construction tend to focus upon language; although I would argue that consumer status goes beyond language and has a material basis particularly in government policies and institutional approaches. Put simply, if national or institutional policy, university departments or individual lecturers treat students as consumers they are more likely to perceive of themselves in this way, but this is far from inevitable. I agree with Fairclough that ‘although aspects of the social world such as social institutions are ultimately socially constructed, once constructed, they are realities’ (2003: 8). This is in-keeping with Sayer’s (1997) theory of ‘weak social-constructionism’; social reality exists and is more than language alone, however, language plays a part in interpreting reality and constructing social orders. In relation to students this implies that the construction of a consumer identity is a product of more than language alone and once constructed the student-as-consumer becomes a reality; meeting institutions, lecturers and fellow students as a consumer with associated demands and expectations. This new reality then has an impact upon the way those involved in HE relate to one another. Language is used by students to interpret (and re-construct) their experiences and consequently their identity. An analysis of the language used by students in relation to learning and fee paying provides a useful starting point for exploring the process of constructing a student-as-consumer identity.

Very few of the students I interviewed self-identified as a consumer of HE and many were actually strongly opposed to this idea. Yet, the behaviour and thought processes they reported, such as calculating the cost per seminar, call into question their rejection of the label. For example, two comments made by the same student include:

One time we had a questionnaire come round, they said to us: ‘you as customers of the university’ and we’re thinking, we’re not customers! [ …] I don’t want to be rewarded for paying for something. [female, UK, 19]

When my friend said she didn’t want to go to her lecture I was like, ‘well when you go home, find out how much it is and divide that by how many lectures you have and every hour that you miss is that much money thrown down the drain’. [ibid]

The ‘truth’ here is arguably located not in how the student identifies herself (not a customer) but in the behaviour she describes (calculating the cost per lecture). But it is important to ask where this leaves the student’s rejection of the label of customer. It would perhaps be all too easy to suggest that the student is being less than honest with herself or simply telling me what she thinks I want to hear. I would argue that despite her behaviour suggesting otherwise, there is a truth in the rejection of the consumer label: the truth is that the student does not want to be thought of, or to see herself, in this way: ‘I don’t want to be rewarded for paying for something’. This correlates with views the same student expresses about learning:

I enjoy a challenge more than coming in and just listening to [pause] I know that next year’s going to be, but I just wish that this year it would be a little more challenging. [ibid]

So the statement about not wanting to be rewarded for paying for something appears to be more ‘truthful’ when seen in the context of a student seeking genuine intellectual challenge. There is clearly a truth in the stories students tell; this might be the truth about how they would like to be thought of by others or how they think of themselves. What becomes important is why this is the perception of themselves that they seek to present. My interpretation perhaps becomes more akin to ‘mythcourse analysis’ (Haw: 2010) an analysis of the truth as presented, rather than a deeper, perhaps more psychological truth unrecognisable to and unacknowledged by the interviewee as agent. This recognises the truth in the portrayal or construction of the self the interviewee as agent consciously chooses to adopt. Taking as a starting point how students choose to present themselves and how they define their own relationship to learning and fee-paying enables me to explore how students think they should feel about their own identity and how they wish to be perceived by others.

**Interviews**

I decided to focus the interviews around two issues: fee-paying and learning, so as to allow the students to tell their own stories on issues of consumption and participation. As a pilot project, the interviews I conducted were necessarily on a small scale. I interviewed just ten students from within one department of a pre-1992 university in the South East of England. The students all chose to participate and I interviewed all who volunteered. This is an important point which needs to be borne in mind throughout the following analysis: these were students who wanted to be interviewed and were aware of the topic of my research prior to volunteering. These students had a particular story they wished to tell in relation to their own identity and experiences as a student; my research provided them with a suitable outlet for their story. It is also important that these students self-selected on the basis of having an interest in the topic of students as consumers. I felt as if the interviewees valued my motives for conducting the research and sought ‘to respond in appropriate depth’ (Massarik, 1981: 203). At best, I felt as if the interviews did become ‘a conversation between two engaged people’ (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002: 210). Rather than seeing self-selection as problematic and unrepresentative then, as the focus of my analysis is to acknowledge truth in the story constructed and to consider why that story is important to the person telling it, I needed to interview people with such a story to tell. I think that as long as the interviews are analysed with a view to the fact that these are people with a motivation to tell a particular story, then there is little danger. A lack of wider representation only becomes an issue if I make claims for the data to be representative of students as a whole: I make no such claims.

In order to elicit stories, I decided to carry out loosely structured, depth interviews (Massarik, 1981: 203; Gerson and Horowitz, 2002: 206) each one lasting for about one hour. I wanted to take the lead from the interviewees about the issues that they thought were important in relation to fee paying and learning. I did not want my questions to frame the nature of the responses and this has been proven to be successful now the interviews have been completed (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 38). I could not have predicted the range of stories to emerge from the interviews as topics students thought important to discuss in relation to the general theme of fee-paying and learning. Instead of structuring the interviews through questions as such, I adopted a biographical, semi-chronological approach to discussion with the interviewees with prompts to encourage them to explain in more detail things that seemed most relevant to the overall theme. This loose structure allowed for some points of commonality to emerge as well as a wide range of differing stories. For example, one unprompted comment all made was on the shock of finding oneself to be in a lecture theatre with two hundred other students:

You just feel like a face really in the lectures, you’re not anything else because the lectures are about 200 to 300 people. [female, UK, mature]

I didn’t expect it to be that big though. It’s huge; it’s two-hundred plus people in there. [male, UK, 23]

Through this flexible, conversational style of interview (Mason, 2002: 225) at times it became apparent that interviewees were discussing with me aspects of student life that they had not discussed with anyone else and were asking me questions to find out more about their peers:

I have an English loan, you don’t pay it back if you are not earning enough money. Do the English people pay that? They don’t pay for accommodation? [female, EU, 19]

That’s one of the questions I was wondering about, I wanted to ask you, other people seem to find this so… they almost become very stagnant, almost like a robot, they don’t know what to say to you [male, UK, 23]

In an indication of the extent to which our meeting was seen less like an interview and more like a discussion, the students clearly felt able to ask me questions. As such the interview became more of a ‘site of knowledge production’ with the ‘interviewee and interviewer as co-participants in the process’ (Mason, 2002: 227).

**Language**

For knowledge production to occur suggests a shared understanding in the language used, ‘that words mean the same to the interviewer and interviewees’ (Hollway and Jefferson: 2000). Although there were times in the interviews when meaning was not shared as the following exchange illustrates:

‘Yes, I did Psychology for A level…. But really, I wasn’t really there that much. I liked the social side of it.’

‘The social life?’

‘[laughs] No, social psychology. There was no social life. I was like an old grandfather there to everyone, I was about three years older than everyone.’ [male, UK, 23]

the conversational style made it possible to check and confirm intended meanings. Although the transparency of language has been widely discredited (Harrison, 2004: 172), some sense of shared understanding is vital for any dialogue to take place. Rather than assuming no shared meaning I prefer to work with Scott’s (1990) framework for investigating intended, received and content meaning which is similar to Fairclough’s (2003) separation of the process of meaning making into ‘the production of the text, the text itself and the reception of the text’ (2003: 10). For the interview dialogue to occur there needed to be at least some degree of consensus between intended and received meanings and the interview process allowed emerging conclusions to be fed back to the students to check for a correlation between intended and received meanings.

The focus for analysis is that there is truth to the students in the perception of themselves they present and that this truth is expressed through the language they use. It would be possible to interpret the interviews in such a way as to focus on a deeper, psychological truth in relation to the interviewee as ‘defended subject’. One theme that emerged strongly from the data was the issue of establishing independence and autonomy. This comes up in a discussion about fire alarms:

‘When we go outside and we’re trying to find out whether it’s a real fire, now we just assume it’s a fake one it goes off so often. People don’t even bother coming out any more. We ask the Campus Watch people what’s going on? What’s going on? It does kind of feel like they’re the teachers or something, they’re the adults looking after us little children.’ [female, UK, 20]

The tension here between appearing to live independently, yet at the same time experiencing a dependence upon university staff for information, is explicit. The language used here suggests the Campus Watch people are like ‘teachers’ in that they are in authority and have the information the students seek. Teachers are normally associated with schools rather than universities; this is the way the student ironically positions herself and her peers, as ‘us little children’.

Such an issue could be dealt with from a psycho-analytical perspective, for example, all except one of the interviewees mentions their father at some point during the interview:

‘My dad was living in South Africa until November and so he wasn’t there to do the claims and obviously since he’s moved he doesn’t have a job.’ [female, UK, 19]

‘My father told me that if you want to study in England, look at courses you like…… my father’s not stupid that send me here to do something and it’s not about my father it’s about me.’ [female, EU, 19]

‘My dad wasn’t so sure about Psychology because he thought it wasn’t necessarily something that could lead into a lot of money. He said “You’re going to spend three years and a lot of money, are you going to be able to find something afterwards?”’ [female, UK, 20]

Clearly relationships with parents are changing when young adults leave home for the first time and go to university. The first quotation suggests the push into independence that comes from no longer living in the parental home and having to fend for oneself practically and financially. The second two quotations hint at more complex issues with the interviewees trying to forge their own direction in life distinct from that which their father may have chosen for them. In the second quotation for example, we can look at the use of the verbs ‘told’ and ‘send’ suggesting a dominant father figure and contrast this with the student’s claim that ‘it’s not about my father, it’s about me’ and question whether the very fact that this needs to be stated calls into question its veracity. Yet I think that to follow this line of investigation would be unfair to the interviewees as the topic of the interview was not to do with family relationships. An analysis along these lines would involve reading into the interview transcripts themes which emerge only with the benefit of hindsight.

**Agency**

Issues concerning fee-paying and financial dependency are reflected in the discourse of emerging adulthood. For some interviewees, fee-paying seems to enhance a sense of dependency upon parents. This comment from one student is typical of many:

I mean even my accommodation, the maintenance loan didn’t even cover my accommodation, so my parents are making up that shortfall and then giving me an allowance. [female, UK, 20]

We can see here that despite having taken out the relevant loans many students are left in a position of financial dependency which can be experienced as infantilising: the phrase ‘giving me an allowance’ places the ‘me’ as passive object in the sentence (parents are the active subjects) whilst ‘an allowance’ has connotations of pocket money. Some students clearly feel uncomfortable with this:

I don’t like asking from my family because, well, it’s their money and my youngest sister stays with them as well, so it seems unfair taking money from them that they could be using on her when she’s got to go through it. [female, UK, 19]

The sense here of it being ‘their’ money and that the student would be ‘taking money from them’ suggests a desire for independence and control of her own financial affairs.

Sometimes the feeling of infantilisation is enhanced by the actual process of fee-paying. Students comment:

‘You get a letter from the student loans company saying that they’ve granted you this amount and that kind of thing so it doesn’t even, so when you look at the letter saying £3250, it doesn’t even mean that much. If it was sort of in my account first and then I spent it, it would feel like a lot more money. At the moment it’s easy to forget about it.’ [female, UK, 20]

And:

‘The only way you really know is by looking at the website to see how much the tuition fees are. It’s just a bit bizarre the fact that you don’t really know where it’s come from or what’s happening with it.’ [female, UK, 19]

Students know they are taking out loans to pay university fees and this could, arguably, enhance their sense of autonomy as they are responsible for taking out the loan and committed to paying it back. However the process by which money goes directly from the Student Loan Company to the university serves to distance the student from the fee-paying.

The presumed consumer status of students could also be responsible for institutions treating students in an increasingly infantilised way. If the relationship between the university and students is one of ‘customer’ and ‘service provider’ then universities may have to exercise a degree of ‘customer care’ (see Morley: 2003) . The President of Universities UK, Professor Rick Trainor, notes that:

Universities have a duty of care to our consumers, our students, and it’s in our interest that we tend to their concerns. (Lipsett, in *The Guardian*, 11/09/08)

Instead of universities challenging the idea that new (particularly intellectual) experiences are stressful and daunting, they often reinforce these notions through the proliferation of institutional mechanisms for providing emotional, practical and academic support (Ecclestone and Hayes: 2009). The intention seems to be that through such support services, students can access a tangible product and emerge satisfied from their experience of university. One example of this is the previously discussed description of what happens when the fire alarm goes off in the halls of residence. The students are left feeling that ‘they’re the adults looking after us little children’. This sense may be carried over into the seminar room where students may feel infantilised by lecturers who view them not as potential intellectual equals but as having a purely instrumental motivation in obtaining a degree outcome and securing future earnings potential even though in reality this may be far from the case. One student describes the frustration he felt at being treated in this way:

We have this study skills thing, they’re more oriented on this is how you have to do the essay, this is how you are supposed to study … and the PhD student that’s teaching us there seems more of like ‘you just have to write these papers because you’ve got to write these papers’ versus you have to write in this format for your learning. … they’re just like ‘to get a 2.1 you need to do this’ … coming and being like ‘oh you have to work through a ton of studies, you’re probably not going to like it’ so this makes people think they’re not going to like it and then they don’t like it because of that. [male, international, 21]

This instrumental focus can result in students being treated more like pupils in a school than students in a university, with registers, ‘punishments’ and an emphasis upon attendance and punctuality as opposed to engagement with the subject matter. One mature student described her feelings when a lecturer marked her absent from a seminar as a ‘punishment’ for being late:

‘Maybe she’s gone so academic; it was the emphasis upon ‘as a punishment’. I’m a forty-one year old mother of four …. Well there’s me, I’m like busting a gut to make sure I do get here, juggling everything else and because I was late and show a bit of respect I get punished.’ [female, UK, mature]

The emphasis here upon ‘I’m a forty-one year old mother of four’ shows this student’s need to emphasise her adult status in relation to an exchange that left her feeling angry, patronised and infantilised.

The student as fee-payer or consumer problematises emerging autonomy as the student may be placed into a prolonged period of financial dependency upon parents; the parents may then feel entitled to have a degree of influence over where and what their child studies; and universities may act as if they have a duty of care to their customers. This process of infantilisation may contribute to ‘the diminished self’ (Furedi, 2004) of many of today’s students. In order to exercise subjectivity, students must have some sense of themselves as actors or ‘agents’ in the world: resilient in the face of change, capable of influencing their environment and contributing to the society they inhabit. With a diminished sense of their subjectivity, students may not have such a firm belief in themselves as resilient, capable actors and instead might see themselves as vulnerable, fragile and in need of support. Individual subjectivity is eroded by the status of students as consumers, as Morley notes: ‘Whereas in the 1960s students were seen as change agents, radicals and transgressives, their identity at the beginning of the twenty-first century is described in the language of the market’ (2003: 83). Hayes also notes a change in how students are seen: ‘The changed conception of a student is not as an autonomous person embarking on the pursuit of knowledge, but as a vulnerable learner’ (2009: 127). Diminishing subjectivity is a complex social and cultural phenomenon and it is important to recognise that the marketisation of HE and the emergence of the student consumer provide only a small explanation as to why these trends occur. The presentation of university as stressful and students being in need of support is clearly something new. Some students may enter university with a sense of confronting a daunting and threatening experience and one that they may not be able to cope with (Ecclestone and Hayes: 2009).

As such, it becomes especially important to find a methodology for working with the students’ stories in a way that does not further infantilise interviewees but instead recognises students as agents, as capable of presenting a particular image of themselves to the world. For some researchers there appears to be an assumption that people do not always act as subjects (autonomous actors in and upon the world) in their own lives. This belief allows researchers to interpret into the interview data and reach conclusions unrecognised by the interview’s subject. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) tackle this explicitly:

So, why is it that we noticed what our interviewee did not? The answer is to be found in our theory of the defended subject in which the crucial motivation for investment in particular discourses is the need to defend oneself against feelings of anxiety. (2000: 59)

A defended subject, it appears, is psychologically unable, or unwilling, to recognise the truth of their own situation. Such a defended (or de-centred) subject becomes the ‘Other’ to the researcher, necessitating demonstrations of the researcher’s ‘otherness’ and consequent affinity with similarly de-centred subjects. For others, such as Merrill and West (2009) who claim to defend human agency against historical and social determinacy; there is a focus on (even a celebration of) the fragile self. West writes of how biographical researchers can ‘exploit our own feelings of marginality - of feeling like outsiders and being ignored’ (2009: 117). This point is explored by Heartfield: ‘Such affinity with others can only be truly carried out by some i.e. those who expose their vulnerabilities, their otherness’ (2006: 89). Such theorists emerge themselves from a social, cultural and political paradigm that ‘sees human agency not so much as overstated, but as missing the point altogether,’ (Mason:2002: 235). Mason goes on to argue that it is a ‘discursive turn’ in social theory, towards post-structuralism and post-modernism that has ‘claimed the death of the subject, and especially of the rational, unitary, self-governing subject who can account for their practices and reveal the logic of those practices in a research interview,’ (Mason:2002: 235). Heartfield argues the cause of the ‘death of the subject’ lies in the defeated political alternatives of Left and Right. I would argue that the subject is not dead but is certainly being challenged by both the discursive turn and the death of traditional politics. I think that in terms of higher education, subjectivity is being eroded through a therapeutic turn (Ecclestone and Hayes: 2009) that assumes vulnerability in students, or diminished expectations of what students are intellectually capable of achieving; an infantilisation that sees students increasingly dependent upon parents or universities relating to students through a ‘customer care’ relationship; and the student-as consumer model that can push students into an instrumental approach to their studies and universities into a focus upon satisfaction rather than challenge. The question now is how I can use discourse analysis in such a way as to respect and promote the agency of the students I interviewed.

**Discourse analysis**

The work of Wilson (2009) has been highly influential in my attempts to answer this question. Wilson writes of the necessity of ‘salvaging the self in the wake of post-structuralism’ (2009: 8) and the important contribution discourse analysis can play in this project: ‘discourse analysis is crucial to understanding, undermining and re-agentising the production of identity’ (ibid). Discourse analysis can aid this process through ‘systematically revealing the invisible’ (Wilson, 2009: 2) and of exposing political ideologies that have assumed the mantle of common sense. An example of this would be the way in which the students I interviewed talk about fee-paying as ‘an investment’: ‘When I looked at the money I thought, it’s an investment, three years down the line, hopefully when I’m qualified, the earnings potential is obviously greater,’ [female, UK, mature]. It could be argued that perceiving of higher education in terms of an investment with increased earnings potential as the reward is to ‘buy into’ the dominant political ideology propagated by New Labour and continued under the current coalition government. Discourse analysis can help me to explore the extent to which students adopt or reject such dominant discourses, through an examination of their perception of themselves and their relationship to HE.

Techniques of critical discourse analysis, such as those suggested by Scott (1990) and Fairclough (2000, 2003) can show how students interpret their experiences of paying fees. My intention to consider the texts in relation to intended, received and internal (content) meanings has already been indicated. This can only be achieved through an immersion in the interview data as a result of many careful and detailed readings. Such a process allows for the emergence of ‘analytic categories and concepts’ (Gerson and Horowitz, 2002: 217) through a process of ‘moving back and forth between data and concepts’ (ibid). Some themes to emerge from my interview data included a focus on employability and securing value for money (which could be said to conform to dominant ideologies) yet also a sense of interest, even passion for their chosen subject and dissatisfaction at being taught as if their only interest was in passing exams (which could perhaps challenge current perceptions of students). After identifying common themes (or categories) from amongst the data more detailed coding and classifying is required.

Fairclough (1998) outlines a procedure for critical discourse analysis with ten questions to ask of a text, (1998: 10) which focus upon the experiential, relational, expressive and connective values of the discourse. Questions to consider include: What metaphors are used? (1998: 110). What types of process or participant predominate? (1998: 118). Are nominalisations used? (1998: 124). Which pronouns are used and how are they used? (1998: 127). Such techniques can pick up important areas for analysis through an emphasis upon the grammatical and semantic constructions adopted by interviewees. By approaching the interview transcripts in this way we can look ‘at the images chosen by students themselves as they come to terms with, and find metaphors for, their experience of learning,’ (Haggis, 2004: 181). We can illustrate this by looking more closely at the way one student talks about learning and fee-paying:

I will have a class in the future and there will be knowledge that no one else will give me and if I don’t attend I will lose. [female, EU, 19]

The use of the noun ‘knowledge’ in this quotation is interesting: in this context knowledge becomes an almost tangible object, something which can be ‘given’ (presumably by a powerful teacher-figure as ‘no one else’ can give this knowledge. The role of the student is to ‘attend’ the class and receive the knowledge: this results in a very passive relationship to learning. The consequence of not attending is to ‘lose’ another interesting choice of word which suggests that learning is somehow a competition or a race, that there are a finite number of winners who can possess the knowledge product. This suggests learning is ‘an individual possession, something which can be acquired’ (Harrison, 2004: 176). The logic of this view of knowledge is reflected in the same student’s attitude to fee-paying:

It would be good if no one was paying but I think you must give something to give you back something so important such as knowledge, so I think it deserves so much money. [female, EU, 19]

When knowledge is viewed as an object to be possessed (it), and one which can give you a competitive advantage over others, then the idea of paying for such an object becomes entirely rational: ‘it deserves so much money’.

One potential danger in taking a thematic approach to discourse analysis is that the issues can appear to be oversimplified. I can easily draw out the theme of ‘education as an investment’ from the interview transcripts, for example. However, this loses a more nuanced approach which can only emerge from within and not between accounts (Haggis, 2004: 195). One student says of her chosen subject:

I’ve found it interesting since I was about fifteen or something and it’s been a long time and I just, everything about it, all the studies. Just learning about people that’s what I find the interesting bit. I think my motivation isn’t so much about money but it’s at the back of my mind, I’m always conscious about that. It’s more the fact that I want to learn. I think maybe a bit of both like obviously it helps to have an interest in the subject as well but they kind of treat you, like sort of say, you need to know this, not rather, kind of, you probably want to know this it’s interesting, kind of I’ve not heard anyone say this would be really interesting but instead just you should look at this and you kind of need to know this. [female, UK, 20]

What the student expresses here is a conflicting view between being motivated to study to reap a financial reward on her investment or because she is interested in the subject and ‘wants to learn’. It appears that the push towards an instrumental approach comes not from government policy or the act of fee-paying alone, but instead from the attitude of lecturers who put a focus on what students ‘need’ to know rather than what would be interesting to know. This conflict has been reflected in the student’s own family: her father had expressed concern that there wouldn’t be many well-paid jobs for someone with a degree in psychology and yet this student rejected her father’s advice to study a subject in which she had a natural interest. She now finds herself re-playing such conflicts with the lecturers in her chosen subject: she is keen for someone to treat her as if she has an interest in the subject yet people act in such a way that suggests they presume her motivations are purely instrumental. Such a reading only really emerges from an analysis of the internal content meaning of the text.

**Conclusions**

In exploring student identity I wanted to consider how students perceive of themselves and why they choose certain stories to tell themselves to explain their relationship to learning and fee-paying. With this in mind, I am locating ‘truth’ in how the students wish to be seen, I can then investigate why it is that students wish to be perceived in a particular way. Most of the students I interviewed appeared to juggle complex identities that both accept and reject elements of the dominant discourse of fee-paying as investment in one’s future employability. For example, they may reject the label of a consumer, and especially the idea that they have somehow ‘bought’ their degree; yet at the same time they may talk about education as an investment and simultaneously profess their love for their chosen subject. Institutional approaches, in particular forms of pedagogy, seem to determine the adoption or rejection of a consumer identity above and beyond the actual payment of fees.

Many students can experience consumer status as infantilising at a time in their lives when they are trying to establish their independence. They may well be forced into a position of financial dependence upon parents or be placed in a ‘customer care’ relationship with the university. The processes of fee-paying and the instrumentalism students are often assumed by lecturers to adopt as a result, can both further serve to infantilise students. Such infantilisation can be experienced as an attack upon subjectivity. Some methodological approaches to research assume a de-centred or diminished subject. Discourse analysis can provide a method for working with students in such a way as to ‘re-agentize’ students through an examination of how they present themselves in relation to dominant discourses which emerge from government policy, universities and the media.

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