

Spatial Disparities in Emotional Responses to Education: Feelings of ‘Guilt’ amongst Student-Parents

Abstract

This article explores the emotional responses to higher education of students with dependent children, and draws on 68 in-depth interviews conducted with student-parents in universities in the UK and Denmark. By focussing on one specific emotion – guilt – it contends that emotions are important in helping to understand the way in which particular groups of students engage with education, and the barriers they often face. Moreover, by considering four different higher education contexts (across two European nations), it suggests that emotional responses are spatially differentiated, and mediated by national policies and norms as well as the social characteristics of students.

Keywords: higher education, student-parents, emotions, gender

Introduction

This article explores the emotional responses to higher education (HE) of students with dependent children. By focussing on one specific emotion – guilt – it contends that emotions are important in helping to understand the way in which particular groups of students engage with education, and the barriers they often face. Moreover, by considering four different higher education contexts (across two European nations), it suggests that emotional responses are spatially differentiated, and mediated by national policies and norms as well as the social characteristics of students.

Historically, educational institutions have had an uneasy relationship with emotions. Following the Enlightenment tradition, schools and universities have often been concerned only with educating the mind, while side-lining the body. Their focus has thus, traditionally, been on reason, rather than emotion (Gillies, 2011). Boler (1999) argues that this privileging of the rational over the affective has acted as a means of social control, with women excluded from the ideal of reason on the basis of their supposed association with emotion and nature. Analyses of contemporary higher education have, however, suggested that recent years have witnessed a significant shift in the place of emotions within the academy. Indeed, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) argue that higher education has become ‘therapeutised’, evidenced through: a concern with emotionally vulnerable students and staff; the rise of degree-level therapy and counselling courses (which, they argue, serve to legitimise therapeutic approaches in wider society); and an emphasis on therapeutic teacher training, which has influenced the nature of learning at university. Such changes, they suggest, are not confined to higher education, or even education more generally, but have permeated many areas of social policy – underpinned by a desire on the part of policymakers to promote ‘positive psychology’ (see also Rose and Abi-Rached’s (2013) work that has demonstrated the dominance of psychology and other ‘brain sciences’ within social policy in the second half of the twentieth century). Ecclestone (2011) contends that ‘There is a widespread political and public consensus in a growing number of countries that the state should intervene to develop and measure emotional well-being and to address rising levels of emotional vulnerability’ (p.91). This consensus, she maintains, is the latest manifestation of a long-running tendency within public policy to psychologise deep-seated social and political problems and present them as individual traits that can be remedied through specific interventions. In this way, individualistic solutions are offered in response to complex social and cultural concerns.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) suggest that therapeutic assumptions and interventions have become increasingly accepted by society at large because of the ways in which ideas about the nature of the self have changed over the past 40 years. In particular, they argue that the human subject has become diminished as a result of: ethical demoralisation (i.e. notions of responsibility, right and wrong having been lost); philosophical doubts about the possibility of human progress, and an associated crisis in confidence in intellectual values; and political erosion of the subject – in which, in the absence of collective political struggles, the self becomes the political.

While many scholars have been sympathetic to arguments about the individualisation and psychologisation of social problems (e.g. Gillies, 2011), Ecclestone and Hayes' wider analysis of the place of emotions with higher education has had a more critical reception. Clegg (2013), for example, has taken issue with their assertion that any recognition of the affective has the effect of infantilising students and leads to the therapeuticisation of higher education. Moreover, others have pointed out that there is a long history of feminist scholarship that has argued for the role of emotions within higher education to be made more visible, exploring the impact of 'passionate attachments' on pedagogy, and questioning the traditional binary split between emotion and reason (Hey and Leathwood, 2009). Indeed, Hey and Leathwood (2009) argue that the therapeuticisation thesis 'strikes us as yet another version of [the] resistance to understanding the depth as well as the contradictory nature of affects on institutions and the complicated forms of subjectivity produced therein' (p.111-112).

Moreover, empirical research within the higher education sector has provided compelling evidence of the ways in which the affective is an integral part of all pedagogical encounters. Beard et al.'s (2007) case study of undergraduate leisure studies students demonstrates how the students' emotions changed over the course of a year and had a clear impact on their

learning. They conclude that ‘student success is heavily dependent on aspects of social integration which involve the affective dimensions of their engagement with higher education’ (p.236).

Others have contended that, despite arguments made about the rise of a therapeutic culture in higher education, emotions are still often expunged and/or managed in particular ways, which serve the interests of those who hold power (Clegg, 2013). Clegg (2013) argues that within many contemporary British universities, students ‘confront a situation where the recognition of emotion is denied and in which the need for support ignores the historical advantage of those from privileged backgrounds’ (p.76). For example, the social nature of learning is often downplayed; instead, emphasis is placed on an ideal of the independent, autonomous learner – confident, and unencumbered by self-doubt (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003) – and abstracted from the context of his or her private life (Marandet and Wainwright, 2009). This construction of the rational, non-emotional learner can be alienating for some students, particularly women and/or those from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds (Read et al., 2003). Moreover, as Clegg (2013) notes, while kindness on the part of university staff towards students and their concerns is acknowledged as significant for intellectual flourishing, ‘kindness and care are not considered as public virtues but rather as private feminised ones existing outside the dominant logic of higher education’ (p.79). Indeed, the ‘emotional labour’, typically undertaken by female academics rather than their male colleagues, is often overlooked and unrewarded within higher education institutions (Deem et al., 2007). Emotions are also sometimes managed in more directive ways – for example, in relation to creating what are deemed to be ‘employable’ graduate subjects with a range of ‘soft skills’ considered necessary for the labour market (Hey and Leathwood, 2009), and encouraging

staff to regulate their own emotions and embody the values and behaviours their higher education institution (HEI) seeks to project (Clegg, 2013).

This paper seeks to contribute to this literature on the place of emotions within higher education through exploring the experiences of one particular group: students with dependent children. By focussing on feelings of guilt, in particular, it contends that emotions are indeed significant for learning. Moreover, it emphasises that such emotions are socially patterned and spatially differentiated. This argument is made by drawing on data from two different European nations – the UK and Denmark – and, within each of them, from HEIs with different market positions.

Research methods

This paper is based upon a cross-national study of the experiences of higher education students with dependent children (hereafter referred to as ‘student-parents’ or ‘student-mothers’ and ‘student-fathers’). During the 2010-11 academic year, 68 in-depth interviews were conducted with student-parents in the UK and in Denmark. These two countries were chosen as they provide contrasting ‘welfare regimes’ (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Gaille and Paugam, 2000) and higher education systems. The UK is an example of a neo-liberal state, in which emphasis is placed on market supply of many welfare services and state involvement is typically through the provision of means-tested benefits to those on the lowest incomes. Its higher education system is hierarchical, with considerable differences in status between institutions, and students make a significant financial contribution to their own education (at the time of the research, home students typically paid £3,000 per year in tuition fees and international student paid around £10,000 per year). Denmark has a much less status-

differentiated higher education system and funding is through grants and loans. In addition, it has a 'social democratic' welfare regime, in which services are commonly provided on a universal (rather than selective) basis, and high value is accorded to achieving social equality (see also Brooks, 2012).

Within both countries, data were collected at two higher education institutions with contrasting histories, market positions and geographical locations. These are referred to in this article as 'Newer' and 'Older' within each country. Within the UK, 'Older' is a high status institution, which usually ranks highly in international league tables. It draws its student body from across the UK, as well as internationally, and tends to have a relatively small number of 'non-traditional' students. In contrast, 'Newer' is a much less prestigious institution, which does not rank highly in international league tables and has a relatively high proportion of non-traditional students. Within Denmark, 'Older' is one of the biggest universities in Denmark and offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, while 'Newer' gained university status relatively recently and offers mainly applied and professionally-oriented undergraduate programmes. Different types of HEI within the same country were chosen to help explore the extent to which organisational culture and norms affect the experiences of student-parents, above and beyond national policy. It should be noted, however, that 'Older' and 'Newer' universities should not be assumed to be representative of all 'old' and 'new' universities, respectively. There are important differences between different types of 'older' and 'newer' universities, particularly within the UK.

Within each of the four HEIs, relevant policy documents were collected and analysed, and a small number of staff with responsibility for student welfare were interviewed. In-depth,

individual interviews were then conducted with up to 20 student-parents at each institution. These asked about the students' motivation for enrolling on a degree programme, and their experiences since embarking on their studies – both within the higher education institution and in other spheres of life (particularly at home). During the interviews, respondents were not asked explicitly whether or not they had experienced any feelings of guilt. Nevertheless, they were asked a number of questions about how they felt about their studies and about their home life, which provided plenty of opportunity for them to discuss their emotions – positive and negative. In both Denmark and the UK, interviews were conducted in English (although the Danish interviews were conducted by a researcher who was also fluent in Danish and had Danish citizenship). Some salient characteristics of the 68 interviewees are provided in Table 1. As the table demonstrates, there are some notable differences between respondents at the four institutions, which have some bearing on the arguments that are developed later in the paper. In common with universities generally in both countries (National Union of Students, 2009), none of the four institutions in the sample collected data on student-parents. It is therefore not possible to say with any certainty whether the characteristics evident in Table 1 are an accurate reflection of the wider population of student-parents at each university. Nevertheless, data from the staff interviews suggested that the characteristics of the achieved sample are likely to be broadly representative of the student-parent bodies at the four research sites. All interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and thematically coded. Patterns across the data collected at each site were first explored; comparisons were then made *between* sites. The remainder of the article focuses, firstly, on evidence from the two UK institutions, before comparing this with the rather different evidence from the Danish HEIs.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Guilt and UK student-parents

The extant literature indicates that students within UK higher education, who are also parents of dependent children, experience a range of emotions with respect to their studies. Many of these are positive. Quinn (2003), for example, has argued that for some student-mothers, the university can be experienced as a site of safety, happiness and self-fulfilment, in which they are able to escape the more confining roles that they are expected to take on within domestic spaces. Studying for a degree can also be understood as part of constructing a positive role model for one's children (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Reay et al., 2002) and thus is likely to be associated with feelings of pride and perhaps happiness. Such emotions were also evident in the current study – from respondents at both UK Newer and UK Older. However, the emotion that was referred to most commonly was that of guilt. This was typically discussed in relation to respondents' relationships with their children: many believed that the time they spent on studying was time that would otherwise have been devoted to childcare, and their children may well be suffering as a result. This is illustrated in the following two quotations, from Emily and Daisy:

At home she sometimes says 'Oh mummy, are you doing your work?' And I say, 'Yes I'm doing my work.' She's like, 'And then can we go to the park?' And I'm just like, 'OK'. It makes me feel quite guilty really a lot of the time, because I've got to do, you know spend so much time on the work and I feel like it's not fair on her.

(Emily, BA in English, UK Newer)

I felt so guilty, I've cried because I've felt so guilty, I was like, 'Oh this is so horrible, I shouldn't leave her like this' It was more for myself that I felt guilty, I felt really

bad leaving her in the mornings or having to wake her when she was sleeping to take her to my mum's, you know those sorts of things! (Daisy, BA in English Literature, UK Newer)

For a smaller number of respondents, guilt was felt in relation to their studies, rather than their children, primarily because they believed they were not spending sufficient time on their degree programme:

Normally I try to take Fridays off and weekends, and during evenings, every evening I try to do something and that's why it's difficult because if I don't do something in one evening I feel really guilty. (Abigail, PhD in Health Sciences, UK Newer)

[I] always feel guilty that I don't work enough, I really always feel guilty.... I don't know, I wish I would be able to work more. (Sandrine, PhD in Medical Statistics, UK Older)

For others, guilt was felt in relation to both children and study, as the quotations below from Esma and Benjamin indicate:

Yeah, yeah, I think emotionally, sort of balancing the guilt of doing something that I wanted to do in my PhD and having to leave my children to be able to do that. And at the same time my, the older one of my two was under three, so there's twenty two months between our boys, so I had two very young children and I was carrying on with my PhD and balancing everything else..... I think the biggest impact probably comes down to feelings of guilt, because I feel guilty when I'm with my children and

I'm not working on my PhD and I feel guilty when I'm working on my PhD and I'm not with the children. (Esma, PhD in Gender Studies, UK Newer)

I'd get a bit stressed thinking either I'm not doing the work that I'm supposed to be getting on with, that I really need to get on with, or 'Oh God, it's going to be thousands of pounds worth of therapists for my sons!' (Benjamin, Postgraduate Certificate in Secondary Education, UK Newer)

Student-mothers and intensive mothering

As the quotations above suggest, guilt was not experienced equally across the UK sample of student-parents. Although it was a common theme amongst many of the student-mothers, guilt was mentioned by only one of the ten student-fathers.

Previous work on women students with dependent children has indicated that guilt is commonly felt by this group. Indeed, Longhurst et al. (2012) argue that the majority of the single student-mothers in their sample in New Zealand had felt guilt during their studies. This was primarily because they believed they were not caring adequately for their children, and were continually juggling multiple demands. For these women, guilt was associated with 'a sense of transgression, defeat, indignity and alienation for taking time away to study' (p.303). Similarly, in their study of student-mothers in the UK, Marandet and Wainwright (2010) also describe the guilt many of their respondents reported, in relation to feeling that they were not spending enough time with their families. Longhurst et al. (2012) argue that drawing on emotional discourses, and particularly the concept of guilt, enables student-parents to construct more worthy subject positions for themselves. Specifically, they contend that

disclosing guilt enabled their respondents to present as ‘a caring and concerned parent making the most of an adverse situation’ (p.305). In many ways, such disclosures are similar to those reported by British mothers in relation to combining paid work with caring responsibilities for children (e.g. Miller, 2012).

The guilt experienced by the student-mothers at the two British universities in this research can be related to the strong normative constructions of mothering within the UK. The ‘intensive mothering’ promoted by the media, the state and other significant social actors can be seen as at odds with a decision to pursue a degree programme. Intensive mothering is understood as a gendered model that encourages women to spend a significant amount of time, energy and money raising their children (Lynch, 2008), and which typically requires a considerable degree of maternal self-sacrifice (Braun et al., 2008). Wall (2010) argues that the roots of this particular approach to mothering lie in Bowlby’s ‘attachment theory’, developed in the 1950s. She suggests that throughout the second half of the twentieth century motherhood continued to intensify, with secure maternal attachment and ample stimulation in the early years seen as critical for a child’s emotional and psychological health. In the early 1990s, however, she maintains that such attachments took on a new significance, coming to be seen as closely related to intellectual development. The emphasis on intensive parenting also draws on other dominant discursive regimes, namely ‘a neo-liberal rationality, which emphasises individual responsibility and self-management over the social support of families’ and a ‘cultural preoccupation with planning and control of the many aspects of one’s life in order to ensure future success’ (Wall, 2010, p.255). Within this social landscape, parents – and particularly mothers – are expected not only to ‘be there’ for their children, but also to facilitate their participation in a wide range of structured activities – what Lareau (2003) describes as ‘concerted cultivation’. Such exhortations often operate in an uneasy tension

with other aspects of a 'good mothering' discourse, which emphasise the importance of economic independence, paid work, and ensuring that one remains employable within a changing labour market.

Within the UK, specific approaches to parenting, and mothering in particular, have been promoted by the state. Indeed, as Gillies (2005) notes, in the early twenty-first century, childrearing was repositioned as a public rather than a private concern, with the state taking on responsibility for inculcating the practice of good parenting – for example, through setting up organisations such as the National Family and Parenting Institute. Similar commitments continue in contemporary society, evident in initiatives to encourage parents to take up parenting classes (Cullen et al., 2013) and the importance attributed to parenting practices in key government documents (Brooks, 2013c). Education policy, in particular, has constructed a normative parent, who is expected to be closely involved in his or her child's education, facilitate and support homework, monitor progress, 'police' schools, and actively intervene with teachers when necessary (Gewirtz, 2001). The neo-liberal discourses of choice, individualism and competition that underpin such constructions have precipitated a shift towards what Reay (2008) calls 'amoral familism' (p.1075) in which the interests of the family override collective responsibilities and egalitarian imperatives. However, even the mother who takes on the neo-liberal subject position is not necessarily immune from criticism: 'pushy mothers' have been criticised within both media and academic accounts for helping to perpetuate social and educational inequalities (Power, 2010).

By placing responsibility for poor cognitive, social and educational outcomes on the shoulders of mothers, it is argued that they are set up for failure (Wall, 2010). Indeed, evidence suggests that, as a result of these particular expectations, many mothers not only

fear that they may not be doing enough for the children, but also feel guilt – for not doing all that they could, or for wanting some time for themselves (ibid.). Such emotions are inevitably heightened for those trying to juggle studying alongside mothering.

Social patterning of guilt

Student-parents are a diverse group. Previous research has indicated that there are considerable differences by: gender, particularly in relation to motivation to embark upon a degree; family status, with single parents tending to struggle more than others; employment status, with those in paid work feeling a weaker sense of belonging to the university than students without jobs; and level of study, with undergraduates often having more difficulty in balancing competing demands than postgraduates with more flexible timetables (National Union of Students, 2009; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Brooks, 2013a). The age of dependent children can also have a significant bearing on experiences: for example, childcare is likely to be less of a problem for those with school-aged children. Similar diversity was evident in this study in relation to feelings of guilt – particularly with respect to gender, institution attended and social class – each of which will now be discussed.

As noted above, feelings of guilt were much more common amongst the student-mothers in the sample than the student-fathers. Indeed, only one of the student-fathers (Benjamin, UK Newer) acknowledged having felt guilty about combining study with his parental responsibilities. Moreover, in Benjamin's case, while he felt guilty at not being around more for his children, his main source of guilt appeared to be in relation to his previous 'breadwinner' role, and the reduction in his contribution to family finances:

It really was my vocation rather than any family finance considerations that I was doing it for. And that adds a little bit of guilt attached to it, because I could have earned more doing something different that I didn't like there is this guilt that you know we haven't had fantastically expensive summer holidays because I want to do something that's vocational rather than financially rewarding, well I'm a dad, that's got a bit of guilt attached to it.

In many ways, these gender differences are very similar to those reported in relation to men and women's discussions of paid work. As Miller (2012) contends, 'Women articulate work and caring decisions in narratives which convey a sense of "guilt", whilst men are able to talk more freely and acceptably about career progression and the importance of work to their identity and new family' (p.39). These differences, she suggests, are evidence of enduring normative ideas which continue to pattern men's and women's lives. Moreover, while discourses of 'good mothering' focus on 'being there' and intensive involvement in children's lives, 'good father' discourses are less morally inflected, place less emphasis on intensive involvement, and emphasise work and economic provision. While Benjamin believed that his student status had compromised his ability to provide economically for his family, in most other cases, the student-fathers saw their degree as helping to improve their employment prospects and thus, in at least the medium-term, increase their financial contribution to their family. This may explain why they did not feel guilt about pursuing their degrees.

Feelings of guilt (or their absence) also appeared to be patterned by the institution the students attended. As the quotations in earlier parts of this paper indicate, guilt was much more commonly mentioned by student-parents at UK Newer than by their counterparts at UK

Older. Only one student at UK Older acknowledged that she had felt guilt, compared to 14 at UK Newer. There are a number of possible explanations for this difference. Firstly, the sample of UK Older students included considerably more men than the sample at UK Newer (see Table 1) and, as noted above, there are notable differences between discourses of ‘good mothering’ and ‘good fathering’. Secondly, the larger number of international students at UK Older (see Table 1) may be significant – as perhaps those who had lived most of their life outside the UK were less susceptible to ‘intensive parenting’ discourses and/or had taken the significant decision to move abroad for higher education only after feeling completely sure of their choice (Brooks, 2013b). Thirdly, the greater independent financial support accessed by the UK Older students (see Table 1) may have reduced the need to juggle childcare and study in the same way as the UK Newer students, who were often self-funding. Finally, the prestige associated with attending the highly-regarded UK Older may have mitigated any ambivalence felt at not being in paid work (for the student-fathers) or not ‘being there’ for longer (for the student-mothers).

The institutional differences may also be linked to the class composition of the sample. Although not all respondents fitted this categorisation, in general, those attending UK Older had more privileged backgrounds, more successful educational histories, and access to greater financial resources. As a considerable body of previous research has indicated, emotions experienced in relation to education are often differentiated along class lines. Working class students (and their parents) have been shown to feel more anxiety, fear, shame and unease in relation to education than their middle class counterparts (Reay, 2005; Walkerdine et al. 2001) – even amongst those who progress to higher education (Reay et al., 2002). Working class HE students face greater risks of failure and more uncertain rewards (Archer et al., 2003), which can compound emotions such as anxiety and guilt, particularly

when combined with assumptions (implicit in social policy and popular culture) that working class families are at risk of practising inadequate parenting (Braun et al., 2008; Lawler, 2005).

In her research on the ways in which social class is played out in multi-ethnic urban schooling, Reay (2008) argues that the strong emotional responses from her participants, particularly anxiety and a sense of defensiveness, were related to the degree of risk involved in what they perceived to be non-normative choices for 'people like us'. In line with Reay's thesis, the data above suggest that guilt was felt when student-parents felt that they were making non-normative choices. However, unlike Reay's respondents, these choices were not delineated along only class lines. Indeed, gender was the most significant factor, with dominant constructions of the 'intensive mother' generating guilt among student-mothers. Student-fathers were largely exempt from the same social pressures, and in only one case acknowledged any feelings of guilt for pursuing a degree alongside their parental responsibilities.

Impact of feelings of guilt

As Beard et al. (2007) argue, emotions are not finite things, with some being good for learning, and others being bad. Indeed, as Longhurst et al.'s (2012) study demonstrates, feelings of guilt, in particular, can have paradoxical effects. For some of the single student-mothers in their research, it provoked 'a desire to learn more, to engage in debate and discussion, and to become critical thinkers capable of questioning hegemonic norms, including norms around mothering' (p.307). In this way, the authors contend, guilt had the effect of destabilising normative constructions of single mothers and motivating the students

to occupy new spaces. For other respondents, however, feelings of guilt served to reiterate hegemonic norms – for example, through choosing to focus on their children’s needs and conform to the image of an attentive, physically-present ‘good’ mother. In Longhurst et al.’s study, the guilt discussed by the authors refers primarily to the guilt of being a single mother, rather than that associated with being a student-parent *per se*. The data from the current study suggest that no respondent who experienced guilt as a result of being a student-parent understood it in positive terms. While many experienced more positive emotions (particularly pride) in addition to guilt, none spoke of guilt itself having ‘transformative’ affects, as was the case for some of those interviewed by Longhurst and her colleagues. Instead, most implied that it was a negative consequence of juggling both study and childcare (and, in some cases, paid work as well). For example, for Benjamin (UK Newer) it had had a direct impact on his ability to focus on his degree; he noted that: ‘You can’t really study when you’re feeling guilty’.

In her analysis of the place of emotions within education, Boler (1999) argues that they are disciplined as a means of maintaining social control – through the individualising techniques of what she calls ‘pastoral power’. She contends that these techniques include: the increased governance of relations between individuals (for example, promoting competition); peer policing, which has the effect of promoting a desire for conformity; and surveillance, or at least the fear of being surveyed. The ways in which the respondents in this study spoke about their guilt suggests that most of those who had felt this emotion had indeed individualised it, viewing it as something that had arisen from their own decision to enter HE while bringing up young children, and which they themselves had to manage – often by devoting all their available time to study or childcare, and forgoing any other interests. Given the differences – by gender and, to some extent, by institution and social class – in the reported feelings of

guilt, discussed above, the evidence from this study tends to support Clegg's (2013) contention that 'affect is simultaneously erased and managed in ways that serve to bolster privilege in the academy' (p.72). The individualisation of feelings of guilt makes it less likely that critical questions will be asked by students of their partners and other family members – for example, in relation to expectations that student-mothers will retain main responsibility for childcare and domestic chores when they embark upon a degree course (Edwards, 1993; Moreau and Kerner, 2013). It also makes it less likely that the wider HE system will be subjected to critical scrutiny for failing to accommodate the needs of students with dependent children, and/or to offer adequate financial, practical and emotional support to help them juggle their multiple responsibilities.

Spatial differentiation: the evidence from Denmark

Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in much of the work on mothering and student-mothers discussed earlier in this paper is an assumption that experiences are common across nation-states (or at least across those of the Global North). For example, in her work on 'intensive mothering', Wall (2010) reports on an empirical study conducted in Canada, but draws on literature from the US, UK and Germany – and suggests that similar discursive regimes operate across the Western world. Similarly, Longhurst et al.'s (2012) research on single mothers' experiences of higher education in New Zealand draws comparisons between the narratives of their respondents and those of similar groups in the UK and US. Nevertheless, in contrast to these studies, the current research with student-parents in the UK and Denmark revealed significant differences across national borders.

Feelings of guilt were much less common amongst the Danish students than amongst their British counterparts. Indeed, while 15 of the student-parents studying in the UK stated that they had felt guilt at some point during their degree programme (and almost 60 per cent of those with British nationality), none of the Danish students talked about feeling guilty in relation to their own studies. Two respondents at Danish Older did discuss the emotion of guilt, but this was not with reference to their current degree. Birgitte explained that her partner sometimes felt guilty because he was required to travel for his work and would therefore not always be around to support her and their child:

He was extremely supportive during the last semester, extremely, because he didn't start travel[ing] at that time. He was making dinner every night and taking the kid to kindergarten every day, yeah. And now when he's travelling he has filled my freezer with food! And he's a really good support He feels a little bit guilty about leaving us for a long time, so that's, it's his way of making up for it! (Birgitte, MA in Health Studies, Danish Older)

Inga explained how her current life as a student was considerably less stressful than when she was in paid employment, and that she no longer felt guilty in relation to her son:

Mm, when I was working I was more stressed, because there were long hours where we had to put the children in daycare, and they had long hours in the daycare, so I always had a bad conscience that they would be for long hours in daycare So you always have this bad guilt with that, of course you should be working, you should have a career, just work to paying the rent, and then that you have to put the children in daycare all the time And I feel that at the university I get more, the family life

and the work is more balanced because I can do my work in the evening. And of course it makes me more effective...because I can focus on my work and be 100 per cent on my work, instead of thinking, 'Oh I have to pick up, oh it's late, oh my deadline'. (Inga, PhD in Educational Studies, Danish Older)

The notable absence of guilt on the part of the Danish student-parents suggests that emotions are differentiated, not only by social characteristics such as gender and social class, as discussed above, by also spatially – in this case, by nation state. As discussed previously, Reay (2008) has argued that emotional responses to education (such as anxiety and defensiveness) often follow from making what is felt to be a non-normative choice. The significant differences in normative behaviour between the UK and Denmark, in relevant areas, would suggest that this thesis may help to explain the differences in feelings of guilt across the two national contexts. Within Denmark, the level of female employment is high and it is common for mothers to return to full-time work when their children are young (Bonoli and Reber, 2010). As a result, there is little societal disapproval of mothers working outside the home. Indeed, the 2006 European Social Survey indicated the proportion of the population that approved of a woman with children under three having a full-time job was higher in Denmark than in any other European nation (at over 70 per cent) (Saraceno, 2011). Moreover, despite dominant discourses that reiterate the importance of 'intensive mothering' elsewhere in Europe and beyond, within Denmark many still believe that the state plays an important role in childrearing, evidenced through the large number of state-subsidised nurseries across the country (Bonoli and Reber, 2010; Ranch, 2007). Indeed, as Saraceno (2011) notes with respect to Denmark, 'the wide coverage of services for children aged three to school age indicates that for this age bracket some kind of formal, non-family care and education is framed as a normal, even necessary, experience and resource for growing up,

irrespective of the parents' working status' (p.82). Within this context, it seems likely that student-mothers feel much less pressure to be physically present throughout the day for their children, and thus do not experience feelings of guilt when they choose to study for a degree. Indeed, as Inga's narrative above suggests, if student-mothers see the alternative to studying as being in paid employment (rather than being at home with their children), it is likely that they will believe that, if anything, their children are benefitting from their current situation. Within the UK, however, few student-mothers saw the alternative to studying as being in full-time employment; thus, the comparisons they drew were different.

Differences in gender relations within the two nations may also help to explain the variations in emotional response. As the quotation from Birgitte, above, indicates, she expected support from her partner during her studies, and he felt guilty when he was not always able to be physically present and provided support in other ways. In her narrative, and those of many of the other Danish student-mothers, male partners appeared to view studying as an intrinsically worthwhile activity, and were supportive of it in a variety of practical ways (such as stocking the freezer, in the case of Birgitte's partner). Often this support also included taking responsibility for childcare – a practice that was rarely seen amongst the partners of the British student-mothers. This accords with other studies that have shown that while, in all countries, women do more domestic and caring work, men in Nordic nations are much more involved in childcare than their peers in the UK and other European countries (Hearn and Pringle, 2006; Miller, 2012). Thus, within a context in which male partners are willing, able and expected to share childcare, it is perhaps unsurprising that student-mothers do not feel guilt at combining study with raising a family.

Conclusion

By drawing on the narratives of higher education students with dependent children studying in the UK and in Denmark, this paper has provided evidence of the way in which the production of one particular emotion (guilt) is inextricably linked to social locations and spatial contexts. It has argued that feelings of guilt, on the part of student-parents, are influenced by a number of social characteristics, most notably, gender: of those studying at UK universities, the student-mothers were much more likely to report having felt guilty about combining study and childcare than the student-fathers. It has also shown that there are important variations by space – between the two UK universities in the sample (possibly explained by differences in their intake by gender, social class and status as a home or international student) and between British student-parents and those in Denmark (likely to be explained by different social norms with respect to female employment, gender relations and the role of the state in the provision of childcare). While emotion is often theorised as a private, natural and individual experience (Clegg, 2013), this paper has underlined the socially-constructed nature of emotional responses. By emphasising the spatial differentiation of feelings of guilt, it has suggested that such emotions are ‘collaboratively constructed and historically situated’ (Boler, 1999, p.6) and closely related to dominant political and policy structures (Nussbaum, 2013). Intensive mothering is culturally dominant in the UK while, in contrast, a parent-worker model prevails in Scandinavia.

The research has indicated that British student-mothers are particularly likely to feel guilt. This is closely linked to assumptions that, irrespective of the demands of studying, they will carry the main responsibility for caring, while student-fathers and the male partners of UK student-mothers remain largely absolved from childcare. Student-mothers are caught between two policy imperatives: the first, evident in the discourse of lifelong learning, is to ‘invest in

themselves' to ensure that they become (or remain) employable neo-liberal subjects (Roberts, 2013); the second is to ensure that they are 'good' mothers – by stimulating their children, 'being there' for them, and becoming an active participant in their education (Brooks, 2013c; Wall, 2010). These policy imperatives are clearly in tension. It is thus unsurprising that they lead to the feelings of guilt described by many of the British student-mothers interviewed for this research. Given the negative impact such feelings of guilt are likely to have on students (in terms of their wellbeing if not their academic progress), and the likelihood that they will deter some women from entering higher education entirely, it is important that the public nature of such feelings – and their clear links to socially-constructed national norms – is made visible. In this way, as Boler (1999) contends, the emotional sphere can perhaps shift from being seen as a privately experienced phenomenon to a site of power and resistance.

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