

## **Carole Leathwood**

London Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

### **Gendered constructions of the (highly) educated subject: An examination of textual and visual representations in higher education policy discourse (0183)**

**Programme number: M12.1**

#### **Research Domain: Higher Education Policy**

This paper examines the ways in which the subject of higher education – the student, scholar, academic, intellectual – is constructed in a selection of visual and textual representations in the higher education policy field in the UK. Traditionally the autonomous intellectual scholar was constructed as a masculine subject – indeed women were excluded from higher education for centuries on the basis of a presumed lack of intellectual capability (see, e.g. Walkerdine 1994). Today, however, more women than men are enrolling on undergraduate degrees amid a moral panic about the underachievement of boys/men and the feminisation of the higher education sector (Leathwood and Read 2009). Through a feminist critical analysis of representations of the (highly) educated subject in a range of HE policy texts, the paper considers the ways in which contemporary constructions of intellectual subjectivity are gendered, classed and racialised.

#### Introduction

*I was told that desire for learning in women was against the will of God*

The realm of the intellect has long been constructed as the preserve of elite white men, with girls and women (as well as working class, minority ethnic and disabled subjects) who dare to make a claim to an academic identity often subjected to exclusion, ridicule or disbelief (Perry 1970; Hill Collins 1990; Miller 1992; Walkerdine 1994; Leathwood and Read 2009). For example, Moi's analysis of the reception of Simone de Beauvoir's work over a number of years reports the hostility, derision and condescension with which her work has been received, with the focus on her femininity rather than her intellectual contribution and the labelling of her as a 'false intellectual' (Moi 1994). In a similar vein, a newspaper columnist recently dismissed the intellectual and artistic merits of the 'bluestockings' with the comment: 'I suspect that if these women were thought brilliant in their day it was less for any achievement than that they were women pursuing activities not much expected of them' (Sewell 2008, p. 37). Educational research from the 1980s has highlighted gendered assumptions about academic achievement prevalent in schools, whereby girls who do well are assumed to be hard working (rather than intellectually highly competent), whereas boys tend to be seen as clever or 'bright' (though possibly lazy) even if they have not produced any work at all (Clarricoates 1989; Skelton and Francis 2002). As Moi (1994, p. 91) argued:

..true intellectuals are virile, wide-ranging, supple and inventive. School suits women because it is the place for serious and disciplined submission to the *doxa*; real intellectual creativity, however, is playful, unpredictable and transgressive, and as such necessarily male.

In higher education, widening participation and the move to a mass system over the last decade has coincided with frequent assertions of the lowering of standards and allegations of 'dumbing down'. It is also no coincidence that a moral panic about the assumed 'feminisation' of universities has also accompanied this 'dumbing down' discourse when women's levels of achievement are surpassing those of men (Leathwood and Read 2009).

Dominant discursive constructions of the highly educated subject – of the student, the scholar, the academic, the intellectual – have, therefore, tended to be highly gendered, classed and racialised. Even Said's esteemed discussion of the representations of the intellectual in the BBC Reith Lectures led him to assert a construction of an intellectual which, I suggest, is one that sits more comfortably with dominant constructions of masculinity than femininity. He presents the intellectual as an independent outsider, and asserts that 'this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma' (Said 1994, p. 11): 'the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant' (ibid, p. 12).

Despite the above, higher education is often assumed to be a gender neutral arena. In this paper, therefore, I am interested in the ways in which intellectual subjectivity is represented in the contemporary UK higher education policy field.

#### Theoretical approach and methodology

Feminist sociological and philosophical work on the gendering of the autonomous rational individual of Enlightenment thought, and particularly on the exclusion of women and Others from the realm of Reason, provides an important starting point for this analysis (see, e.g. Lloyd 1984; Pateman 1988; Lloyd 1993; Walkerdine 1994). In addition, feminist and post-structuralist theorisations of gendered subjectivity (e.g. Hey 1997; Walkerdine 2003), as well as work on the discursive analysis of textual and visual signifiers in representational practices (such as Wilton 1992; Rose 2001; Leathwood and Read 2009) and in critical policy analysis (Taylor 1997; Taylor, Rizvi et al. 1997) will inform the methodology.

This paper builds on a previous study of representations of gender in ministerial speeches, website images and videos publicly available on the UK government Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) website in February-March 2009 (Leathwood 2009). The images and videos in particular were illuminating for their signification of dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity, with men more likely to be portrayed as super active, physically strong, authoritative and important and women in contrast as communicative, social, anxious and vulnerable. The latter was particularly illustrated in a government video designed to allay the financial worries of potential students going to university. The video employed a classic horror movie genre, with a young woman

hunted/haunted by a vulture which disappeared in a classic Hollywood-style happy ending when she received her first pay check post-graduation.

### This study

This paper will report on a similar study being undertaken to explore the ways in which the subject of higher education – the student/scholar/academic/intellectual – is discursively constructed in a selection of visual and textual representations in the higher education policy field in the UK. The sources include ministerial speeches and website images of the new Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and media representations in the Times Higher Education. As an example of the latter, an article published in October 2008 (Gill 2008) with the title 'Keep it stupid, simple' which went on to ask 'Is dumbing down a reality on UK campuses?' was illustrated by three photographs: a young white woman who appears to be blowing a very big bubble with bubblegum; another young white woman with a facial stud below her lower lip who is reading a magazine with the headline 'Which way now?'; and two more young white women with their mouths wide open as though they are (joyfully?) screaming. The images convey a lack of seriousness and a sense of frivolity, and, I suggest, illustrate the ways in which 'dumbing down' and lack of intellectual 'rigour' are signified here as highly gendered and classed.

Through an examination of such visual and textual representations, the paper offers a critical analysis of discursive constructions of intellectual subjectivity and discusses the implications for policy and practice in the sector.

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