

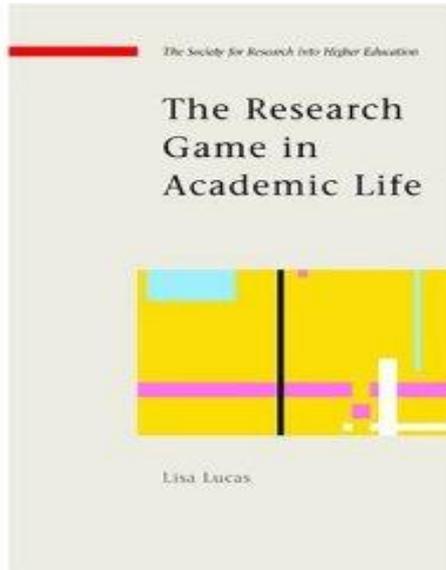


# Ethnographic Journeys in Higher Education

URGE WP 2 Research Seminar: 'Methodologies: combining ethnography and political economy'

# Socio-Political Context of Academic Work

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Mediation of research policies with institutional processes: management of research, academic work and identity

Bourdieu (1988)

- Forms of capital (symbolic, cultural, social and material)
- Sites of struggle over meaning and value attached to academic work
  - Submission to RAE
  - Research active/Non-research active

# What is Ethnography?

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- ▶ “...a longer period of fieldwork in which the researcher tries to get close to the community (organization, group) being studied, relies on their accounts as well as on observations of a rich variety of naturally occurring events (as well as on other materials, e.g. documents or material artifacts) and has an interest in cultural issues (meanings, symbols, ideas, assumptions)”.  
(Alvesson, 2003: 171)



# Ethnographic Research

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- ▶ Types of Ethnography

- ▶ Multi-sited Ethnography (Marcus, 1995)
- ▶ Virtual Ethnography (Hemmi et al, 2009)
- ▶ Ethnographic Discourse Analysis (Jones, 2009)
- ▶ Self-Ethnography/Auto-Ethnography (Alvesson, 2003)
- ▶ Fictional Ethnography (Tierney, 1993; Sparkes, 2007)

- ▶ Methodological Issues

- ▶ Value of Ethnographies



# Ethnographic work in Higher Education

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- ▶ Mapping Areas of Research
  - ▶ Ethnography of Student Life, Student Cultures and Student Learning
  - ▶ Ethnographic Explorations of University and Disciplinary Organisation and Cultures
  - ▶ Ethnography and Higher Education Governance and Policy
- ▶ “It is imperative that we turn our critical lens on the very institutions where many of us work and see that the forces of globalism are not only operating on the institutions we inhabit, they are transforming the way we produce knowledge and infiltrating our very consciousness. It is critical that we understand these processes (Shumar, 2004)



# Student Life, Student Cultures and Student Learning

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- ▶ “...the students have no idea what the professors spend their time doing...two sophomore friends once admitted to me that they had always privately thought that ‘tenure’ meant that a faculty member had been around for ‘ten years’...” (Moffatt, 1989: 25)
- ▶ Moffat (1989) ‘Coming of Age in New Jersey’
- ▶ Nathan (2005) ‘My Freshman Year’
- ▶ Holland and Eisenhart (1990) ‘Educated in Romance: women, achievement and college culture’



# Nathan (2005) My Freshman Year

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- ▶ Nathan was a Professor but chose to enroll as a Freshman and live in student dorms for one year as part of an ethnographic study.
- ▶ Attended classes and essentially lived the life of a student during this period, was known as a fellow student to those she was researching.
- ▶ “I found out quite unwittingly that if I walked like a duck and quacked like a duck then people thought I was a duck.”
- ▶ “My fellow students began sharing opinions and gossip with me that I would never hear as a Professor.”



# Nathan (2005) 'My Freshman Year'

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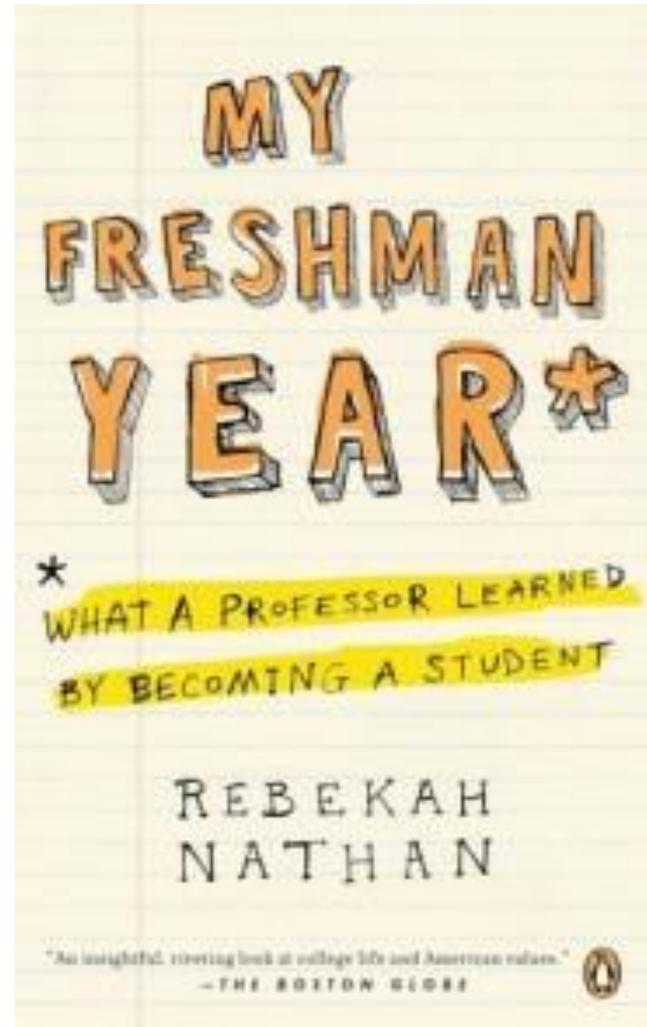
- ▶ She collected a wide variety of data sources
  - ▶ Formal interviews and focus groups
  - ▶ Informal conversations
  - ▶ Observations in class, dorms and other areas of institutional life
  - ▶ Artifacts such as posters, notes, graffiti etc
- ▶ She claims a high degree of 'familiarity' with the students and 'authenticity' in terms of representing their experiences.
- ▶ She was able to provide an understanding of student life in relation to their academic life, social life within and beyond the dormitories and their social networks and community involvement.



# Nathan (2005) 'My Freshman Year'

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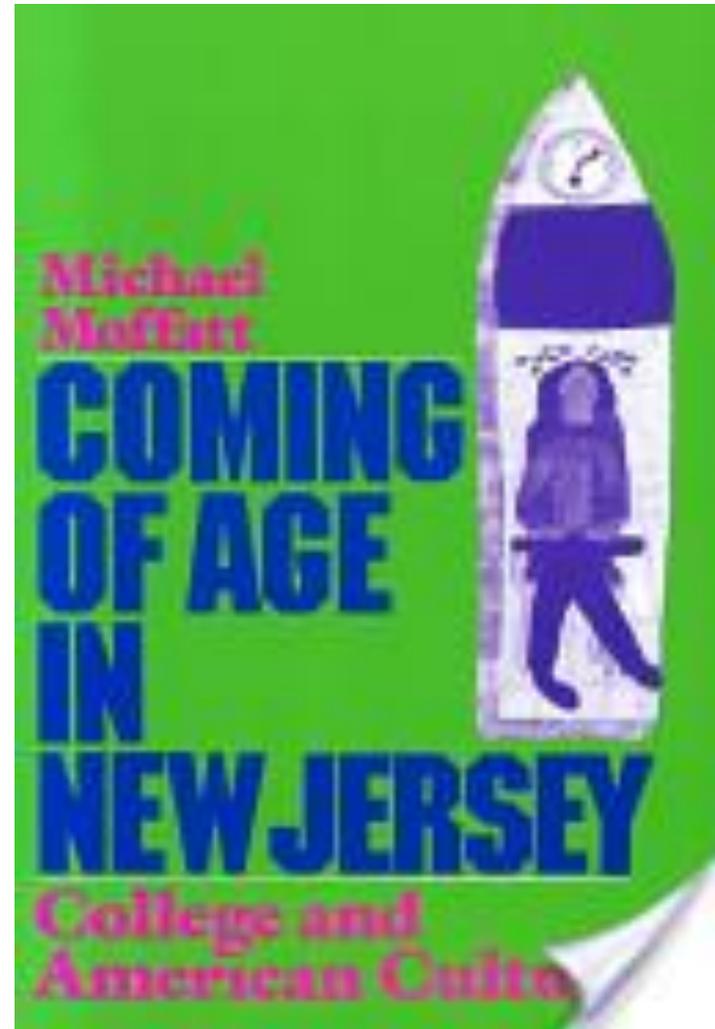
- ▶ “(the) undergraduate world view as I came to understand it, linked intellectual demands with in-class domains and other formal areas of college life...‘Real’ college culture remained beyond the reach of university institutions and personnel, and centred on the small, ego-based networks of friends that defined one’s personal and social world. Academic and intellectual pursuits thus had a curiously distant relation to college life.”



# Counter-evidence to 'undergraduate cynical' (Moffat, 1989)

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- ▶ "I had just finished testing Ray on a series of vocabulary terms when he began questioning me on the past imperfect tense. 'Forget that,' I responded, 'she says it's not on the test.' What he said next shocked me. 'Is that the only reason you want to learn this material...for the test? Don't you want to speak French better? Come on do it.' I was mortified really and caught between my two roles. He was right of course, but not from the standpoint of public student culture, which I had learned to imitate.'



# Social Reproduction?

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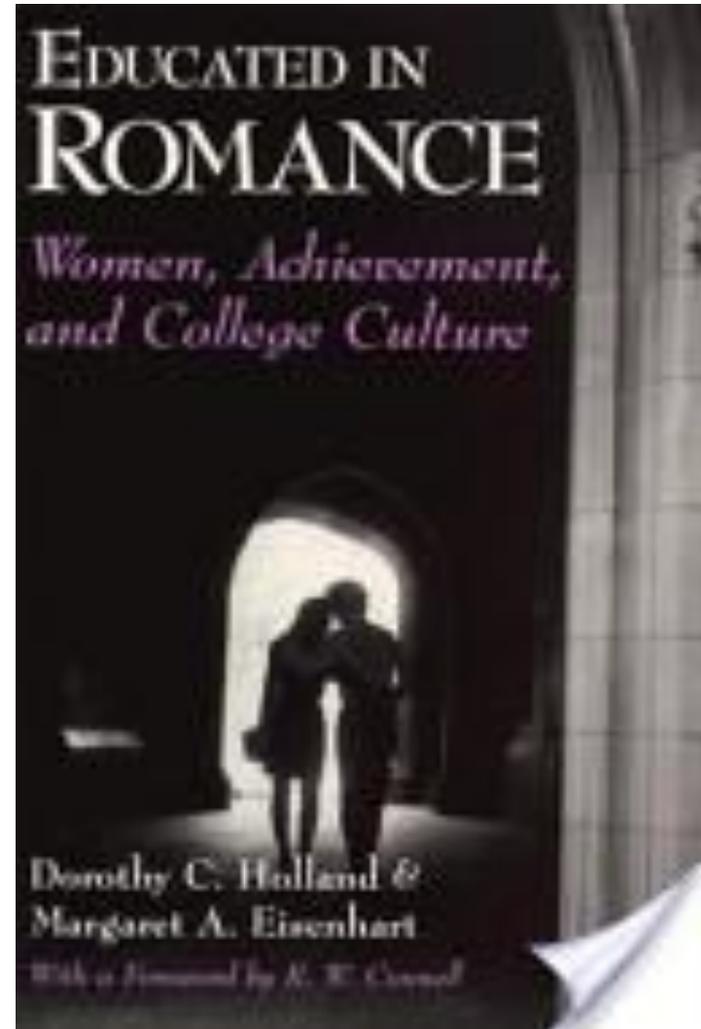
- ▶ These ethnographic studies offer an understanding of the rites of passage into society and culture and how these are mirrored within values present in student life, which in turn play a key role in social reproduction.
- ▶ Due to the intensive nature of the research, and the ability to build rapport and enter more personal domains of people's lives, a richer more nuanced picture of social domains and cultures and people's experiences of them beyond the social scripts can be accessed.



# Holland and Eisenhart (1990) Educated in Romance

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- ▶ In-depth study of white and black women at two US colleges, following them into the transition to work.
- ▶ The significance of academic success and achievement took second place to the prestige awarded by patriarchal judgment of attractiveness and thus romantic success based on male interest.



# 'New' Ethnographies within Learning and Teaching

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- ▶ 'Virtual' Ethnographies – use of new technologies that “can capture the various emotions, experiences and insights that students are feeling in particular personal and social spaces.”  
(Cashmore et al, 2010)
- ▶ Cashmore et al (2010) – using free form video diaries alongside focus groups.
- ▶ Hemmi et al (2009) – traditional collection of data via participant observation of classrooms and in parallel data collected from a distance learning course using Wikis, Facebook and Second Life.



# University and Disciplinary Organisation and Cultures

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- ▶ Bourdieu (1988) Homo Academicus – “A Book for Burning”
- ▶ Alvesson (2003) and the problem of ‘organizational loyalty’ and the issue of not “exposing backstage conditions”
- ▶ Difficulty of over familiarity and the potentially impossible task of making the “familiar strange”.



# Tierney (1988) – Organisational Culture

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- ▶ Management of academic culture involves the “management of meaning and the management of social integration.”
- ▶ Framework of organisational culture
  - ▶ Environment
  - ▶ Mission
  - ▶ Socialisation
  - ▶ Information
  - ▶ Strategy
- ▶ “The president’s use of space sets an example emulated by others. His open-door policy, for example, permeates the institution. Administrators either work in open space areas in full view of one another or the doors to their offices are physically open, inviting visits with colleagues, guests or more importantly students.”



# Shumar (1997) College for Sale

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- ▶ Universities are forced to “see themselves as a business providing a product to the market.”
- ▶ Commodification and the impact on intellectuals and university life and the work force in the university sector.



# Shumar (1997) College for Sale

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- ▶ Problematising the notion of 'being there' in anthropological research.
- ▶ "an ethnographer not only comes to a deep knowledge and appreciation of a group of people, but s/he invents that group for the purpose of considering it and sharing the subsequent information"



# Alvesson (2003)

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- ▶ Self-ethnography – drawing attention to one's own cultural context.
- ▶ 'Closeness' of the researcher ensures a degree of understanding.
- ▶ 'Multiple cultural configurations' and "blind spots" makes studying other departments very difficult.
- ▶ "Blind spots" and "omission of 'taboo' subjects also a problem in one's own institution.
- ▶ Perennial perplexities of...accounts relating to...
  - ▶ Closeness/distance
  - ▶ Authentic/sanitized



# Sparkes (2007) Embodiment, academics and the audit culture

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- ▶ 'Methodology of the Heart' (Pelias, 2004)
- ▶ Embodied struggles of an academic at a university that is permeated by an audit culture.
- ▶ Informal interviews and personal experiences – “the constructive process is inspired by partial happenings, fragmented memories, echoes of conversations, whispers in corridors, fleeting glimpses of myriad reflections seen through broken glass, and multiple layers of fiction and narrative imaginings.”



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