

Student rent strikes: The constitution of activist-learner identities

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Abstract

Social movement research often foregrounds politics over education. In relation to identity, the emphasis is on who is participating and why, rather than identity-in-flux. Here, we focus on theories of identity and recognition to conceptualise the constituting and re-constituting of activist-learner identities within a social movement. In England during Covid-19 lockdowns, some university students were required to pay rent for accommodation they could not occupy, or with reduced amenities. We conducted semi-structured interviews with some of the many students who had responded collectively through rent strikes. The students' mutual understanding grew, engendering greater appreciation of their variously privileged and marginalised subjectivities. There was a strong sense of the rent strikes as part of a broader social movement against marketised higher education and linked to wider campaigns for social and climate justice. We explore how such collective experiences contribute to constituting and re-constituting activist-learner identities and transform possibilities for future activism.

Keywords

rent strikes, activist-learner, higher education, activism, identity, recognition, subjectification

Introduction

During Covid-19 lockdowns, some students in England were required to pay rent for accommodation they could not occupy, or which offered reduced amenities. Many students responded collectively through rent strikes. For some this was their first experience of activism whereas others were building on engagement in campaigns such as climate strikes. Through semi-structured interviews

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with strikers, we explored the messy and complex development of their activist identities, which we argue are also inherently learner identities. We took a grounded theory approach to analysis to foreground the voices of these students.

Students' finances were already increasingly fragile under England's neoliberal student fees regime. A 2020 report noted that annual rent for student accommodation, outside the even more expensive capital, cost 73% of the maximum student loan (Jones and Blakey, 2020: 26). The student rent strikes occurred during the coronavirus pandemic period of flux, of many and varied "reconfigurations." These rent strikes took place across many universities and were triggered by the government and higher education institutions' responses to the pandemic according to which students were required to pay rent for accommodation which they could not occupy or which offered significantly reduced amenities. The strike emerged from increasingly unaffordable material and financial constrictions and was a particular issue for first years as they are more likely to live in dedicated student accommodation (Wenham and Young, 2024).

Davies (2020a), writing during the pandemic, notes that, 'Such reconfigurations of our habituated entanglements can be confronting and confusing. Yet habituated, repeated acts of recognition run the risk of losing their vitality' (89). We agree that acts of recognition can stagnate when such acts become too settled, losing impact, meaning, weight, and effect. They fade. So, a time of instability, fluidity and change may shine a light on more rapid, striking reconfigurations of identity. In this paper, we argue that these "reconfigurations" led to the constitution of the activist-learner identities of the strikers.

Identity, subjectification, and recognition

Ideas of identity, subjectification and recognition inform our thinking and underpin our arguments here, so first we must make clear the thinkers we draw from and the ways in which we use these contested terms. Butler conceptualises identity categories "as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*," (2002: 187). Such identity categories are both continually "performatively constituted" (33) and re-constituted, and constructed through repetition in discourse. As such, whilst an identity category may seem to be fairly settled, largely stable for a given moment through persistent reiteration and repetition, for Butler and for us, identity is never fixed. Even when an identity categorisation may appear to be immutable, it is not, rather it is malleable, fluid and open to contestation; to troubling, unsettling, and to change.

Both Davies (2020b) and Youdell (2009) draw on Butler's work and consider its applications in education. Youdell (2009) uses Butler's conceptualisation of performatively constituted identity, to explore how student-and-teacher, and student-and-student discourses construct and regulate the multifaceted subjects of education. Of particular significance for us, is Youdell's (2006) focus on learner identities, of possibilities for being recognised as an acceptable learner. She considers how overlapping, interweaving performativities in education constitute some subjects as desirable, acceptable as learners, whilst others are made virtually unintelligible as learners, constituted instead as outsiders, rendered as flawed, or almost unrecognisable as learners. We argue that the rent strikers, as they learn together in activist spaces outside of formal education, become constituted and recognisable as what we term activist-learners.

Davies (2020b) uses Butler's (2002) broader ideas of subjectification, also called subjectivation, to probe student and teacher exchanges and interactions. Here processes of subjectification encompass ideas of performatively constitutive processes and Foucauldian (Foucault, 1977 [1975]) notions of productive power. This allows for wider considerations of the role of productive power and institutional practices in the making and monitoring, constructing and constraining, of

subjects, where once again some subjectivities are made visible, recognisable, and intelligible, whilst others are not.

Notions of intelligibility, recognizability, and speakability are useful for thinking about how performative constitutions are constrained and why they are necessarily embroiled in processes of subjectivation (Youdell, 2009: 138)

We will argue that the students involved in the rent-strikes are performatively and discursively constituted as activists—that their activist identity is inherently an activist-learner identity. In so doing, we are influenced by Youdell's (2006; 2009) discussions of learner identity and Davies's (2020b) explorations of subjectification in education, as well as underlying concepts around identity categorization from Butler (2002).

In our analysis, we embrace Davies's (2020a) three components of recognition as a lens. In so doing, we do not intend to privilege her ideas above others which we see as compatible and coherent. However, in exploring the learning journey of the rent strike activists, these components provide a productive framing.

Situating the exploration of activist-learner identity within wider social movements research

The instances of activism here, and how learning and identity pertain to activism, can be situated in the substantial body of research into current and historical protest movements, including those within universities.

In considering learning through social action, Ollis (2011) highlights learning in terms of community development skills. She distinguishes two sorts of activist explicitly by their learning, namely life-long and circumstantial activists. For her, life-long activists often have their earliest activist experiences while participating in student politics. Their social, informal learning through activism is incremental. By contrast, the circumstantial activist, suddenly involved with social action, must learn rapidly to be effective. Whilst our rent-strikers are indeed all participating in student activism, for some this is not their first campaign. They cannot readily all be termed newcomers, circumstantial activists, as some are already closer to the more experienced incremental learner, despite the term life-long seeming premature for their age.

In terms of education systems themselves, there is research into social movements around more socially just curricula, be that in terms of inclusion, representation, or decolonisation (Bhambra et al., 2018; Glowach et al., 2022; Jester, 2018). Even with these social movements being situated within educational contexts, the research rarely focuses on the learning of activists. Choudry (2015) asserts that “relatively little social movement studies literature focuses on learning and knowledge production” (42).

Research exploring social movements frequently has a political, as opposed to educational, lens. For example, in exploring, social movements taking direct action, Graeber (2009) probes evolving organisational processes, cultural dimensions, and political implications, while collective learning is only lightly touched on. Similarly, in researching with activists from the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, Lang and Lang (2012) draw out structural features of planning, facilitating and organising, alongside rich artistic and cultural aspects. Elements of social movement learning, such as deliberate reading and researching together, are present across the accounts of activism yet remain in the background. Despite learning not being the focus of much of the research, education has long been deployed intentionally as a tool for change across political social movements. Hence, much learning in social movements is commonly planned and curated, making use of embedded,

educational activities, with additional unintended learning acknowledged as also present in a more ad hoc manner (see, for example, Hall et al., 2013).

Elsewhere, we bring the unplanned aspects of learning through participating in social movements to the fore (Wenham and Young, 2024), locating the student experiences of participating in rent-strikes in between ideas of critical pedagogy and learning in social movements. There, we use a Freirean lens to probe aspects of unplanned learning, explicitly then, learning is in terms of raising critical consciousness. Here, in this paper, we move away from a focus on learning in this sense. We argue that these student activists are also learning of themselves, their connectedness with others, and crucially, their sense of themselves as becoming-activists. Learning *is* becoming. It is in this sense that we argue that an activist identity is also inherently a learner identity, as the two are interwoven in their mutual reconstitution. We apply a theoretical framing of recognition (Davies, 2020a) to deliberately foreground how it is that the student-activists identities are being continually reconstituted through their activism.

Some research into social movements also connects to concepts of identity. In looking at students engaging in political activism on US college campuses, Linder et al. (2019) specifically focus on identity-based activism, aimed at addressing inequalities pertaining to race, gender, sexuality and more. Whilst, for Linder et al. (2019), possessing a minoritised identity is commonly central to motivations to act, reconstitution of identity through action is not emphasised. Moreover, in later work Quaye et al. (2022) carefully review a breadth of research into such identity-based student activism over the first two decades of this century. They highlight historical underpinnings, the actions and approaches of the activists, their experience of engagement and the institutional responses. Once again, issues of identity pervade the research in terms of who is participating and why. Identity in flux, foregrounding theories of reconstituting the self, is seldom touched on.

It is this focusing of the reconstitution of activist-learner identity, which we argue is both novel and generative.

Research approach

In the Spring of 2021, we conducted online, semi-structured interviews with eleven students, from seven universities (Wenham and Young, 2024). Students were invited to participate through Facebook and Instagram where they had rent-strike profiles. One was invited through a personal contact. Some use was made of snowball sampling, with participants suggesting further interviewees. All participants had taken part in a rent-strike except one, Dale (pseudonyms are being used), who was involved in planning for one which never occurred.

We took an inductive and exploratory methodological approach to foreground the voices of the students. We used 'grounded theory methods as flexible, heuristic strategies rather than as formulaic procedures' (Charmaz, 2003: 251). Our coding was inductive but we also used sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954) to inform our approach, including ideas of identity, learner-identity and recognition (for example, those from Butler, 2002; Davies, 2020a; Davies, 2020b; Youdell, 2006). We first conducted independent free-writing and initial memoing on a range of interviews. Then we both read one interview and discussed coding approaches, which we subsequently tried applying to other interviews. Once we had agreed on our main emergent codes, we each coded and wrote further analytic memos on the interviews conducted by our co-author (Charmaz, 2006).

The constitution of activist-learner identities

Drawing on the empirical research, we explore the discursive entanglements of the rent strikers in their neoliberal universities; acknowledging that 'We become-with each other or not at all'

(Haraway, 2016: 4). Moreover, we emphasise the importance of togetherness, the social, the rent-strikers-as-a-whole, or collective. Hence, we align ourselves with the idea of the impossibility of completely detaching, or dis-entangling, one individual from a greater social collective.

the act of recognition involves an entanglement of multiple, emergent subjects, an enfolding and unfolding. Rather than an unbridgeable gap between self and other, extracting oneself from the multiple, more-than-human lines of force, is, in new materialist thought, virtually impossible (Davies, 2020a: 90)

“Recognition” here is about a recognisable identity but avoids the fixity that ‘identity’ may imply for some. Davies (2020a) articulates this recognition through three components: 1. “affirming normativity through possession”; 2. “forming borders through dispossessing the other”; and 3. “creative-relational affirmation of difference” (87).

The three components of recognition do not exist in isolation from one another; they are intimately entangled, they even depend on each other; the first gives us a (potentially) safe plot of land, the second closes that land in, defending and reinforcing it, drawing boundaries around it and defining normativity in opposition to the outside, while the third expands the safe plot of land and gives it its ongoing vitality (Davies, 2020a: 97)

For us these three components elucidate, the ongoing formation of what we term “activist-learner identities.” Firstly, the “safe plot of land” for our participants is found in coming together with like-minded-peers; moving to individually and collectively “possess” the identity of “activist.” Secondly, they set themselves against others who are not part of their evolving “activist” identity. Through such othering, their collective ties grow stronger. Thirdly, they recognise a shift in their sense of self. They are no longer who they were. Yet, their identities remain in flux with “ongoing vitality.” For Davies (2020a), “movement” (88) is central to her “concept-practice of recognition” (88) since this values “the emergence of the not-yet-thought” (88) rather than describing limiting fixed “identities.”

Below, we use these three components to explore the data and frame our arguments. It is worth reiterating here that we are embracing this structure, not because we dismiss other bodies of work on matters of identity construction, such as Butler (2002) or Youdell (2006)—on the contrary, their foundations are crucial and remain informative for us. We apply Davies’s framework as it is analytically generative. We see the narrower, incomplete, first and second components across the various accounts, as strikers engage in collective action and their learner and activist subjectivities are re-constituted. Moreover, we see Davies’ third component as in harmony with the ideas already discussed here, acknowledging that recognition is a shifting category, porous at the edges, fluid, and constituted and re-constituted through performativity and discourse.

“Affirming normativity through possession”

This component of recognition is “generated and maintained through the reiteration of collective beliefs and actions, through which subjects are possessed. . . . Through that possession individuals become (more or less) predictable and recognisable as themselves in relation to each other” (Davies, 2020a: 94). For us, this first component implies incrementally coming to ‘possess’ the sense of being-activist through an evolving shared identity with fellow activists. They come to possess the identity of “activist” and the normativity with which this is associated.

Coming to possess nascent activist identities. In looking back, many of the participants felt they were already beginning to develop a sense of themselves as “activists” before reaching university. For example, Ivy, Anna and Brandon talk about themselves and others:

I'd gone to, like, a couple of climate strikes and stuff, like, where you were missing school on Fridays to do them but I hadn't really been involved with anyone on the organising side whereas now I'm talking to a lot of people who are, you know, going to actual camps to do stuff or um, yeah, organising stuff like this (Ivy)

This extract illustrates Ivy's changing sense of self, as she re-constitutes herself as more of an activist than previously. Through the phrase "a lot of people," Ivy identifies as part of a collective who play an active role. This is an instance of becoming 'predictable and recognisable as themselves in relation to each other' (Davies, 2020a: 94). Similarly, Anna says,

I was quite politically I guess aware before. Like you know, I'd like put kind of informative stuff on my story on Instagram about like – I was like kind of like that sort of level of, like before I came to uni I wasn't like actively organising any campaign. A lot of the people who have been organising were and like done. . . . ran the climate strikes or like other campaigns before or like pro-Palestine or like other environmental stuff but before I came to uni I'd only done stewarding at um the BLM protest in London over the summer and which I again found through Instagram (Anna)

Again, for Anna there is the recounting of a shift from "before," from having an interest at a distance, commenting, posting on-line, but not actively organising. Previously then action for Anna did include stewarding, arguably starting to play a more active role, but in her telling of her story she recounts this as stemming from social media again, diminishing its engaged nature, playing it down in her re-telling, while highlighting the removed aspects. Brandon comments,

Well, I mean I guess most people would have been political in the fact that they would have like followed politics day to day but not in a sort of active activist sense, right? And that was definitely the case with me. Like I've always been interested in politics but never really had done anything like this but from setting up the rent strike everything has snowballed so you then get sucked into other campaigns and it just goes on from there and now it's basically my whole life. (Brandon)

Brandon's recounting has echoes of earlier engagement at a step removed. The way he "followed" directly contrasts to his later organising. Recounting a trajectory of stepping in, the observer becomes an active participant, the commentator becomes engaged in dialogue, the individuals cohere, merge, blend into the collective, which they begin to see themselves as a part of.

On reaching university and their accommodation in halls, many students found things were not as they had expected. They told various stories about mould, rats and theft in addition to the main lockdown related issues of online teaching, closed facilities and a lack of food when isolating. The situation led to some who had not previously considered activism becoming involved:

you know it wasn't what I expected to be doing when I came to uni er but I sort of found a bit of a passion for it. I thought it was really, really fun to sort of start actually taking back a bit of our power and doing things, yes (Edi)

Again, Edi's becoming involved, is another report of moving towards self-identifying as one of the rent-strikers. This is all "affirming normativity through possession." That is not to say that the other aspects were not present, just that in their recounting of the initial stages of their involvement, these extracts speak to this first component of Davies's (2020a) recognition.

Coming to possess diverse intersectional identities. The participants were emerging as activists whilst also recognising intersections with other identities including marginalised identities. This

resonates with the multifaceted, blurry, and non-linear nature of recognition. Not only are Davies's three components entangled and messy but additionally, on-going acts of recognition pertaining to different identities occur simultaneously, overlapping and interplaying:

One side of it that I would like to bring up that I normally don't bring up is it's very much run by women and non-binary people and LGBT people (Anna)

organising is caring work too so, like, we're, we're talking about a rent strike but it, it, like, in the effort of caring for other students and how they're all being exploited and whatever, whatever, but, like, that caring work at the end of the day falls down to more marginalised people – women and people of colour and LGBT people . . .

there's no coincidence that I'm one of the only people of colour and the only queer person in this group chat and stuff and most of the work is falling down to me and one other who's also a person of colour and who's also a queer . . .

it's just that we have more experience in caring and organising. (Tali)

They were recognising intersections and, in Tali's case, theorising this. The important role of minoritised activists here needs emphasising as it sits in contrast to the 'ideal activist' identity which Craddock (2019) asserts is male. Craddock argues that direct action is lauded as the most effective activism and more available to men. However, here Tali's analysis reflects the mundane and resonates with Ahmed's work which highlights how burdens fall on those with intersecting minoritised identities. Ahmed notes that:

Counterinstitutional work in feminist hands is often housework, with all the drudgery and repetition that *that* word implies, painstaking work, administrative work, also care work, because if we need to transform institutions to survive them, we still need to survive the institutions we are trying to transform (Ahmed, 2021)

Jake, at Poplar, commented on diversity although his joking may indicate some discomfort and growing awareness of his positionality as a 'straight white guy':

I think the guys might have been in a minority on the committee actually, and like we had two people of colour that were like regularly getting involved with it. I don't know about anyone's like sexuality to be fair, or like whether they're trans or not. When we did the occupation actually . . . I'm obviously a straight white guy, like I was in a minority in the occupation, which we made a few jokes about. Because there were two Asian girls and a gay guy, and I think all of them were nonbinary. So like at least with the occupation it was extremely diverse. (Jake)

At Beech, when compared to the rent strike organisers, the occupation demographic seemed different:

I think it [the occupation] was slightly male heavy erm but there was a fair mix and then it was quite white heavy because obviously it's quite a high-risk activity so there were very few sort of people of colour or international students (Edi)

Racism in the conduct of some university lockdowns was reported in the national media, for example, the BBC reported on an incident at Manchester University (Freeman-Powell, 2020). Some of our

rent-strikers recounted that students on bursaries, or those with international visas, were not able to become as involved in the collective action, as their circumstances left them more fearful of reprisal, creating further groups of marginalised students. Brooks (2017) notes the limited constructions of international students in the discourse of UK policy documents, suggesting that they are either seen as “‘the best and brightest’ students, who are continued [sic] to be welcomed to the United Kingdom, and those ‘bogus students’ who are deemed to be responsible for shoring up low-quality providers” (12). Our participants suggested that under the government’s “hostile environment,” many international students in their halls had become acutely conscious of their vulnerability and lack of rights.

Coming to possess contradictory identities under neoliberalism. The students may have seen themselves as resisting neoliberalism in higher education but they are also subject to individualising neoliberal discourses themselves (Wenham, 2022). Neoliberalism saturates our ways of being and knowing. Academics struggle to find spaces for collective action in the neoliberal university (Museus and Sasaki, 2021). Students face the same contradictory pressures. One striker apparently perceived some of his fellow rent strikers as selfish consumers:

it was a lot of people just expecting us to do everything so that they could get the benefits, which was quite annoying at times and you know, now when people are like just kind of indifferent towards it, it can be quite frustrating because they’ve obviously stood to gain a very, a lot of money from it, um, to be honest. Er, but in terms of being involved with the collective action, it was nice (Simon)

The students had understood the wider political context of marketized higher education, yet some were worried about being seen as selfish, in trying to resist this, for the sake of their own rent, as well as for the wider good.

one of the things that I was worried about with the rent strike is that people from an outside perspective would sort of be, like, ‘Silly little [Oak] students just want to pay less for their rent’, it’s like, you know, like, on a wider social scale, I was worried, like, well it’s not like we’re going to be regarded as, like, people seeking justice; we’re just going to be looked at as people who don’t want to pay as much rent, whereas actually it is more complicated than that because, you know, it’s about making it more accessible, not exploiting people, whatever, but it felt a bit . . . it felt more like there could be negative press or, like, people wouldn’t take it as seriously, like, I don’t know, just see it as students wanting to make a political situation where there wasn’t one to begin with or something like that. (Ivy)

Neoliberalism is premised on *homo economicus* pursuing their own selfish interests. Ivy is claiming that they are doing more than that through the rent strikes but recognises this may not be intelligible against a neoliberal backdrop. Furthermore, many of these students may not have become aware of interconnected wider issues, including marketised higher education, if it were not for their personal experience of rent injustice and strike action. The personal and political are deeply entangled. There is a productive recognition of this in political theory:

As Jayne Mansbridge argues (1990), duty, love (or empathy), two commonly recognized forms of altruism, and self-interest intermingle in our actions in ways that are difficult to sort out; when people think about what they want, they think about more than just their narrow self-interest. When they define their own interests and when they act to pursue those interests, they often give great weight both to their moral principles and to the interests of others (p.ix). (Vincent and Martin, 2000: 476)

Several [deliberative democracy] authors now argue, contrary to the image of rational, calm and “sanitised” deliberation, that emotional investment in the issue oils the wheels of deliberation. With such

investment comes the motivation to discuss, and to engage with, material and with fellow citizens (Davies et al., 2006: 129)

Much normative political theory has derived from Kantian universalism and the possibility of a “view from nowhere” (Young, 2002 [2000]: 113). The idea that it is possible to be a “disinterested,” “altruistic,” “outsider” and that this is preferable to having an involved perspective is far removed from our lived reality. In key contemporary issues such as climate breakdown, none of us are outsiders. Moreover, these students were moved to action, motivated to discuss and engage, precisely by their personal experience and the sense of injustice and emotion this ignited. As their involvement grew, so did their learning, their awareness of the entanglement of the personal, the collective and the political.

In this section, we have introduced our participants as nascent activists of diverse ethnicities, genders and sexualities with diverse forms of privilege and marginalisation. We have suggested that they are shaped by neoliberalism but in complex and contradictory ways which are held in tension. We have hinted at ways in which aspects of neoliberal identity can recede within this entanglement.

“Forming borders through dispossessing the other”

We concur with Davies’s second component of recognition that collective ties are often strengthened by dispossessing others, placing them outside of recognition and in opposition. The process of ‘affirming normativity through possession’ adumbrated above is entangled with the constitution of the “other.” “The reiterated assemblage that possesses, and makes a safe space for those who possess and are possessed, denies that safe space to others, dispossessing them, denying them recognition as human within its terms” (Davies, 2020a: 95).

In this section, we explore how the students’ identities were constituted in opposition, in particular, to the neoliberal university. We also consider how some aligned themselves with their student union (SU) and some “othered” their SU.

Simon describes meeting with the Principal:

out on campus. . . I saw the principal himself . . . I was extremely nervous when I spoke to him, I kind of, you know, fumbled my words a bit . . . we did have a conversation and that really just kind of highlighted for me how much he kind of . . . you could say he treats us with kind of disdain . . . he doesn’t really see us as anything important or relevant to him, he just sees it all as a bit of a joke. You know, I was telling him this story of my friend who . . . he’s making pay £7,000 for a room that she has given the keys back for and he, you know, just completely dismissive, just says, you know, there is the process for people quitting their contracts [Simon narrates her story] I said to him, you know, the, the contract clearly doesn’t work because even when we found someone to replace someone in a room, you’ve just taken them and put them in a different room, which is what it says in the contract, it says, you know, unlet rooms will be let first, therefore this contract is completely invalid in 2021. . . he just sees me as just, as nothing really . . . he doesn’t acknowledge that the, the strike has, you know admirable aims that are just trying to look out for the students (Simon)

In this, Simon’s nervousness in the face of personified power is clear. His disillusionment then becomes central. Perhaps he sees the Principal as having an entirely different relationship to principles he expected. It seems Simon saw that, “The neo-liberal subject is malleable rather than committed, flexible rather than principled” (Ball, 2013: 139). Ivy experienced a similar form of disillusionment:

Um I think it's demonstrated that just because people are in positions of authority doesn't mean that they're willing to engage with you on, like, a meaningful or completely truthful level, . . .

So I think, yeah, it just, it's made me realise maybe this, like, unwillingness to engage . . . which I just find very hard to believe (Ivy)

Yeah, and the um college sent a very er worrying email basically talking about, like, threatening eviction and things um which I don't think would be feasible and also I think it's quite revealing - they did it on, like, a Friday afternoon when we couldn't really respond and a lot of people were very, very anxious, understandably, as a result of that so I think it kind of. . . that further shows why we need to do stuff (Nicola)

In these three cases, students are finding themselves increasingly distanced from the position of their university management. They articulate this divergence in emotive terms, through feelings of disappointment, frustration and astonishment, and in positioning themselves ever-further from these university authority-figures, they are re-constituting themselves in opposition to the neoliberal university.

The constitution of the participants' identities was also shaped by how they related to their local SUs. These relationships were very mixed. Where they opposed the SUs, this led to a stronger sense of themselves as being more 'radical' activists:

I don't want to be too harsh [laugh] however I will because it's important. Er, so the student union originally were very sceptical about the strike. Um, so from what we've heard from kind of, you know, from the UCU people about what previous student unions have been like, as in like the executives in previous years, they've been more like on the activist side of things, a bit more radical, whereas this year unfortunately we just got a bit of a bad bunch who are just kind of looking to further their careers . . . we don't really feel that they actually pushed the cause (Simon)

we had been meeting with them [the SU] every week but, like, long story short, the student union just aren't radical enough to be able to um facilitate a rent strike here at [Willow] (Tali)

Brandon had had different experiences with two local universities:

say [Elm] student union, we got in contact with them, had a meeting with them and essentially we've tried to email them for some follow up and they just haven't got back to us really, and from other experiences they're not particularly keen on this sort of thing, these sorts of campaigns, so that would be an example of a student union that's not particularly helpful. So our student union, [Plane] seemed to have like a just permanent student movement which means that their union officers are particularly keen . . . what I'd want to probably put more emphasis on is SU supporting student led campaigns because this is what I quickly mentioned before around other campaigns that SUs are setting up (Brandon)

There were varied views on whether the response should be to join and change the SU from within, or to avoid it altogether:

like that group [who occupied a building], one of us is running for Gen Sec, quite a few of us are running for SU next year (Anna)

the rent strikes were sort of the foundation of everything that's happening now, but then people involved with those have then now got involved with other campaigns and are running for SU positions and trying

to build a sort of broader movement around scrapping tuition fees, demarketisation, that sort of thing (Brandon)

it's taught me about, like, the need for organising outside of um student unions if the student union isn't radical enough (Tali)

It was less clear whether Jake saw possibilities for renewed SUs. He seemed to attribute their alleged failings to individual officers whilst also noting that many have become “an extension of university management.” In contrast, he felt that a minority of universities had SUs that he would agree with and which were supportive:

So, basically most rent strikers hate their students' unions. Unless you're at like [he lists three universities], we all hate our students' unions. I don't hate the NUS as much But the NUS itself can't really do anything, it's a useless organisation, and students unions are basically like another arm of the University now, they're not like an independent union that like campaigns for students. They're just like an extension of university management. So like a lot of rent strikes basically found . . . the students unions would either be like openly hostile to them or like they'd try and coopt it Because like if you've got a students' union with officers that are really good, like you have at [names two] then like they've been really useful with their rent strike campaigns. If like . . . say at [Poplar] you've got a load of useless officers, which we do and they don't know how to do a campaign, . . . they're not very political, they're not particularly interested in this, and they don't understand it, then they just get in the way and they piss everyone off (Jake)

Jake felt Poplar's SU officers were not “political” in ways that he thought they should be. He clearly constructed his own sense of how to be, seeing himself at odds with the SU, yet nonetheless acknowledging possibilities from engaging with the “other.”

Nicola and her peers recognised that SU claims to neutrality, in fact, indicated siding with the powerful:

there was a bit of, like, debate as to whether the [Oak Student Union] should show support for strikers and whether it should be, like, a neutral body but we kinda said that in showing neutrality, that is making a political statement, if you're not offering support for those students um so that was kind of something else that came from it as well (Nicola)

As discussed in Wenham and Young (2024), Freirean consciousness raising (Freire, 1996) was central to their experiences. This growing awareness of the inter-connectedness of political struggles, further helped position these students firmly in opposition to the powerful, neoliberal university.

Here, we have explored how the othering of the university has contributed to the rent-striker activist identities as they learn more about the operation of power. We have also considered their varied stances in relation to their SUs and how some identities were constituted through opposition to them.

“Creative-relational affirmation of difference”

This is “where the new and different is celebrated” (Davies, 2020a: 96).

This third component is akin to Deleuze's *encounters*, or Barad's *intra-actions*, in both of which each participant, human and more-than-human, affects and is affected by the other, such that the world they are

of is no longer predictably the same – and nor are they whatever it was they were before, though the shift might be minute. The assemblage shifts, the world shifts, most often in minute creative mo(ve)ments of being. (Davies, 2020a: 97)

This component allows for new ways of becoming, this shift or “movement”—in which each participant ‘is no longer predictably the same’—is less rigid than the preceding two components, embracing and entangling these into a messier, more nuanced and fluid re-constitution. “Affirming normativity through possession” and “forming borders through dispossessing the other” overlap and blur with this third component. Nothing is immutable and identities are continually re-constituted. This rich conceptualisation of recognition resonates with Butler’s (2002) ideas of unfixed, performatively constituted identity categories.

The participants were constituted through dialogue and togetherness with other rent strikers and allies. They shared narratives of “becoming-with” (Haraway, 2016):

it’s been a very coordinated effort throughout the country I think, it’s a very national kind of phenomenon (Simon)

Caris recounts a moment of awakening, which came whilst listening to a series of speeches at a protest run by another student campaign group. She recalls the collective experience of listening and seeing things anew together as memorable, poignant and empowering.

Key moments . . . Honestly, there was, there was a moment for me . . . Liberate the University . . . a student group. They did quite a big protest . . . and, like, all of the speeches there were, like, implicitly, like, anti-capitalist and, like, anti-marketisation of higher education and it was just, like, really interesting to see that focus – like, because I had all these ideas already and, like, um I, I was reading some things already, like, as part of my course and, like, as part of the societies I was involved in . . . it was kind of that moment for me, like, the realisation that everyone was realising this together was quite empowering (Caris)

From being with other activists, from their own movement and beyond, listening to speakers from diverse cultural and historical campaigning movements, implicit commonalities resounded across entangled struggles:

It was just the fact that, like, this struggle is kind of tied into all of the struggles that are going on in the UK at the moment (Caris)

I mean rent strikes at this point are only one part of the broader student movement and it has really blossomed. So, the rent strikes were sort of the foundation of everything that’s happening now, but then people involved with those have then now got involved with other campaigns and are running for SU positions and trying to build a sort of broader movement around scrapping tuition fees, demarketisation, that sort of thing (Brandon)

The entangled collective of strikers emerged through recognising commonalities and difference and developing a much stronger sense of others’ situations and perspectives, as well as the subtleties that intersectionalities bring:

I think something that’s really good about the organising group we have together is that it’s quite diverse – not insofar as, like, just, like, ticking a box for diversity but, like, we have international students, we have students who, like . . . LGBT+ students who aren’t in contact with their families and this is, like, their

only, their only home, so we have people who are kind of, like, from all walks of life who are able to, like, kind of talk about the fears that people may have about it um which we, we, is really important to us um because, like, obviously different groups of people are going to have different worries (Caris)

I've learnt there's a massive problem with sexual violence at [Poplar] . . . a couple of lecturers did a report and we found like over 100 cases of sexual violence like in just one department, just between like September and April (Jake)

In this, Caris recognises and values that different people have “different worries” and “fears.” Jake's account makes clear his own surprise at others' experiences of which he had been ignorant. Both accounts show a coming together that is echoed in Anna's observations that some who had led “quite privileged lives” come to better understand “exploitation” and the need for “political action” in response to their shared lived experiences:

I think there's a lot of people who normally would not do any sort of direct action and would feel incredibly uncomfortable opposing authority in any way, so have become involved just like – I suppose even the few Tories as well [laugh] like. Most people, like the organisers . . . were previously very engaged in like you know direct action and protests and all that sort of thing but I think it's engaged a much larger kind of demographic of students who previously weren't and I think that's just because everyone's been put in this situation together and is directly affected by you know, exploitation and a lot of people before would have not necessarily encountered that because they weren't necessarily in particularly – like they were living quite privileged lives so I think a lot of people who before hadn't ever had problems have suddenly realised that political action is necessary in some situations (Anna)

Coming together as a recognisable collective with shared norms is seen here to be messy, with the ebb and flow of similarity and difference evident, and often held in tension.

The sharing of experiences led to a greater understanding of the vulnerable experiences of international students as students came to recognise their diverse positionalities, as they became activists together, yet were differently exploited, exposed and engaged:

getting involved with it you do learn a hell of a lot . . . talking about like the securitisation of campuses and the hostile environment policy and the way that international students are essentially exploited and yet we pay almost no attention to the way that international fees are completely unregulated. They can pay anywhere between £10,000 a year to £60,000 a year for some medical degrees and as a home student you don't really appreciate that until you come into these spaces where you're organising with people who are also involved in those kinds of campaigns (Brandon)

we had an international student from China who really wanted to get involved but he was like, ‘The state of UK/Chinese relations, like, at the moment there is no protection for me. Like, if I'm kicked out, I'm kicked out of the country’, so, like, he didn't get involved, like, with the strike itself but he's still able to help us out (Caris)

Some people who are on bursaries don't want to risk their bursaries being cut, for example; international students don't want to risk being kicked out of the university, um so everyone kind of has their reasons for not wanting to do it so I think everyone's quite respectful (Mala)

Nicola learnt about the experiences of “disabled” peers, again illustrating a change, learning as becoming. Again, we see the nuanced nature of this change, where similarity and difference are held in tension.

I felt, like, a responsibility to get involved in striking, partly because one of the reasons for striking is because students who are disabled um are given less choice in where they can stay and often times their accommodation's a lot more expensive than, like, the average cost of um of a room which is obviously in violation of the [2010] Equalities Act (Nicola)

The participants' developing understanding of power (discussed in Wenham and Young (2024)) was closely linked to their dialogue and empathy with other students. This understanding also emerged from engaging with the other people and organisations which they aligned with, as well as from rejecting those which they did not want to closely align with. There were flows of entanglements as the strikers came together with particular groups, then moved apart:

a lot of people, surprisingly maybe, um, a lot of organisers weren't actually people who were paying rent. So we had like second, third year students who just have a strong sense of social justice who just wanted to help out (Simon)

we didn't really want to be closely affiliated with the Socialist Worker party because they have their own agenda going on and it wasn't. . . it's never been connected to the rent strike network. Um they were helpful . . . in the beginning just because of, like, the experience some of them had and the access to resources and stuff like that but, yeah, other than that, not really (Tali)

I was also involved with, like, the national coordinating network and that was, like, really what kept me going, is seeing people win in other universities, seeing ideas um from other rent strike groups and being able to use them for our own group because that was more of like a mutual space where people would share resources and stuff (Tali)

so there's groups like Liberate the University and there's groups like the Rent Strike Now national network, like Pause or Pay . . . and there's like loads of different like activist groups (Jake)

In all this, students experienced the “ongoing vitality” (Davies, 2020a: 97) of shifting entanglements. We have seen, here, how intra-activity was central to the constitution and re-constitution of their activist-learner identities:

Awareness of that intra-activity, the capacity to affect and be affected, lies at the heart of Barad's ethics: “[Justice entails] the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly. The world and its possibilities for becoming are remade in each meeting. How then shall we understand our role in helping constitute who and what come to matter?” (2007, p. x). (Davies, 2016: 120)

The students suggested they would take forward these constantly changing activist-learner identities into future activism and named various activities they were signing up to such as, “women Reclaiming the Night marches” and “university-wide Palestine Society” (Ivy); “tenants” unions and “stuff like that” (Jake); “Green Party” (Jake and Simon); “environmental stuff. . . climate stuff” (Mala). They talked about change, their changing sense of self, being “made,” having a “changed mindset,” or an “awakening,” for us their on-going reconstitution of activist-learner identities:

I don't think I could really go back from this stuff, I can't really do this sort of stuff and then decide not to get involved with future stuff. Because like I've got like skills and abilities and the confidence to do this sort of stuff again (Jake)

I'd say it's kind of made me more interested in getting involved in student politics (Mala)

it's being more involved with people who are of that sort of political charged mindset (Ivy)

[it has] kind of awakened the activist in me I suppose. . . I've had like the kind of, the motivation to set up societies next year for these things that I care about and to get involved in further kind of organising (Simon)

Conclusions

The three entangled components of recognition drawn from Davies (2020a) and her understanding of recognition as “movement” (88) have helped us to theorise the constitution of activist-learner identities. We have traced how the strikers increasingly saw themselves as activists; their constitution in opposition to the neoliberal university (and, in some cases, SUs); and their becoming learner-activists through intra-activity.

The global pandemic created a period of flux and heightened affect. Affect is central for the theorists we drew on (Butler, 2002; Davies, 2020a; Davies, 2020b; Youdell, 2006) and permeates the data. Strong currents of nervousness, fear, frustration and disillusionment together with positive feelings of belonging and contributing shaped students' experiences of activism. This echoes other literature emphasising the role of affect and emotions, in bringing about and maintaining engagement in social movements (Goodwin et al., 2001; Jasper, 2011).

There was a strong sense of the rent strikes as part of a broader student movement against marketised higher education and linked to wider campaigns for social and climate justice. The strikers came to recognise and understand the interrelationships between these wider issues, neoliberalism and power. In an individualising neoliberal context, their subjectivity was constituted and re-constituted through the complex interplay between ‘selfish’ and ‘altruistic’ motives, as well as in shifting entanglements of similarities and differences. Their mutual understanding grew through dialogue, engendering greater appreciation of their diverse experiences and reflection on their variously privileged and marginalised subjectivities. Rent strikes are an inherently collective experience and we have explored the ways in which the strikers ‘become-with each other’ (Haraway, 2016: 4) through intra-activity.

The focus on identity and recognition helped us conceptualise the constituting and re-constituting of the strikers' activist-learner identities. In all this, we see their learning and becoming as inseparable. Here, learning *is* becoming; and it transforms possibilities for future activism.

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