

Being First in Family: motivations and metaphors

Ann Luzeckyj, Ben McCann, Charmaine Graham, Sharron King & Jacqui McCann

To cite this article: Ann Luzeckyj, Ben McCann, Charmaine Graham, Sharron King & Jacqui McCann (2017) Being First in Family: motivations and metaphors, Higher Education Research & Development, 36:6, 1237-1250, DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2017.1300138](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1300138)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1300138>



Published online: 13 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1591



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 9 View citing articles [↗](#)



Being First in Family: motivations and metaphors

Ann Luzeckyj ^a, Ben McCann ^b, Charmaine Graham ^c, Sharron King ^c and Jacqui McCann^c

^aCentre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia; ^bFaculty of Arts, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia; ^cUniSA College, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

ABSTRACT

First in Family (FiF) is an under-recognised equity grouping which may encompass low-SES, mature-aged, regional and remote, and Indigenous students. FiF tertiary students are more likely to be in a position of educational disadvantage over students who have other family members available to share the experience of university life and discuss aspirations. Building on previous research, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 FiF university students from a range of disciplines across three South Australian institutions. We analysed the interview data based on themes derived through readings of FiF literature, adding new ones as they emerged as part of the process of analysis. In this paper, we specifically focus on the interview responses which included metaphors or analogies. Metaphors provide a conceptual framework for thinking about a particular problem and drawing comparisons between unlike situations. Our experience as educators told us that students often subtly and unintentionally utilise metaphors when articulating lived experiences. We both specifically asked the FiF students to identify a metaphor that reflected their experience of being at university and also considered their use of metaphors in response to other questions. In exploring these metaphors, we have gained insight into students' day-to-day experience of attending university and have gained information about their motivations and their struggles. When considered by university staff and policy-makers, this information could be used to guide the development of strategies that may help future FiF students.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 April 2016

Accepted 20 November 2016

KEYWORDS

First in Family; first generation; higher education; managing transition; metaphor; narrative motivations for attending university

Introduction

In this paper, we draw on a research project funded through the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) where we interviewed 18 First in Family (FiF) students across three South Australian universities. Although our previous research (Luzeckyj, King, Scutter, & Brinkworth, 2011) has provided extensive quantitative data on FiF students' expectations and experiences of university study, we do not know a great deal about these students' day-to-day experience of attending university. We do not know what constraints FiF students face or what shapes their aspirations and ambitions to attend university, what factors impact on them most significantly whilst at university. We

do not know how university life impacts upon FiF students' self-identity or their extended relationships with family and friends. The purpose of these interviews was to explore FiF students' understandings of their university experience including their motivations to commence study and what factors helped to sustain their progress. These interviews included an explicit question which asked students to identify a metaphor they associate with their university experiences. Metaphors are a useful and powerful device that help us gain insight into how we understand and make sense of our experiences (Bozik, 2002). By analysing the metaphors students used, we hoped to gain further insight into how FiF students perceive the social reality of university study. We will discuss the specific FiF student context and the method and rationale of our interviews before focusing on why we asked students to discuss metaphors and how we analysed the metaphors they used in their responses. We will conclude with a brief discussion about why these ideas are of value to the wider higher education community.

FiF student context

FiF is a growing, though under-recognised, equity grouping with a disproportionate number encompassing low-SES, mature-aged, regional and remote, and Indigenous students (Bui, 2002; Engle, 2007; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). As our own and other research has shown, FiF students, whether from low socio-economic status areas, rural or remote locations, school leavers or mature-aged students, are more likely to be in a position of educational disadvantage over students who have other family members available to share the experience of university life and discuss aspirations (Karimshah et al., 2013; James et al., 2010; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Luzeckyj et al., 2011; O'Shea, 2015; Simmons, 2010; Thomas, 2002). Too often, the burden of navigating the uncertainty and complexity of university is placed on the student to adjust rather than the institution to provide more effective teaching and support strategies that better accommodate non-traditional students' needs (Bamber & Tett, 2001). Previous studies have indicated that FiF students experience a greater mismatch between their initial expectations and actual experiences of university life, with many commenting that university felt like a foreign place where they did not readily belong (Luzeckyj et al., 2011). Another project that investigated first-year students' conceptions of thriving, health and well-being found that FiF students more readily self-identified as 'just surviving' rather than 'thriving' or 'coping OK' when compared to the overall student cohort surveyed ($n = 459$) and struggled with a sense of belonging in the university environment (King, Garrett, Wrench, & Richardson, 2013).

Our previous research shows that FiF students experience educational disadvantage because their cultural and social capital does not readily align with that of the university (Luzeckyj et al., 2011). The literature indicates that FiF students lack the advantages gained from possessing an understanding of university procedures, academic practices and a general awareness of the tertiary space (Bowl, 2001; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; O'Shea & Stone, 2014). Bowl (2001) also suggests that information deficit is not compensated for by higher education institutions, leaving FiF students to pilot educational pathways single-handedly.

Research indicates that these FiF cohorts are highly capable when given opportunities to participate and support to succeed (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012). These students come to university with significant pre-existing motivational strengths often

drawn from prior challenging circumstances and life experience that assist them in thriving at university. Benson, Heagney, Hewitt, Crosling, and Devos (2012) and Devlin and O'Shea (2011) also maintain that although FiF students may have deficits in some areas of academic skills, possession of strong personal characteristics such as motivation, perseverance and determination can be attributed to academic success. In analysing the traits of non-traditional students that persisted with higher education, Fleming and Finnegan (2011) identified resilience as a personal attribute that contributed towards FiF student academic success. The authors indicated that resilience commonly translated into determination with student comments such as 'I am going to do what it takes' being an indication of this transformation (p. 6). FiF students often articulate these strengths and motivational pull-factors in dramatic language including, as will be shown, through their use of metaphors.

The interviews and our approach to analysing them

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 18 FiF university students from the University of Adelaide, University of South Australia and Flinders University, in various disciplines (such as Arts, Engineering, Speech Pathology, Graphic Design). We identified participants through our previous quantitative study on expectations and experiences of university study (Luzeckyj et al., 2011). We checked enrolments to ensure that our selected participants did not include students who had left the institution through attrition, as we believed talking to students who were still at university would provide insight into what had encouraged and enabled them to stay. Six interviews were conducted at each institution with the researcher who worked at the institution conducting the interviews. There was no conflict of interest, as the participants were not studying in areas taught by the researchers; had this occurred, another researcher would have interviewed the participant.

The semi-structured interview questions were based on themes derived through an exploration of the FiF literature. These questions allowed the participants' stories to develop, as the participant could choose the direction their own story might take (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). Because the questions were constructed around student reality rather than imposing pre-conceived perspectives on them, the responses emerged more organically: some students chose not to answer certain questions, admitted that they did not have a particular response to some, or often pre-empted other questions by dealing with multiple aspects of their transition experience in one longer response. The very nature of these semi-structured interview questions allowed conversations to unfold naturally, and often in directions not originally intended (or pre-conceived) by either interviewer or interviewee.

Therefore, the interview participants were given agency to narrate their own stories about their experiences of getting to, attending and being at university as well as their lives outside of the institution and their aspirations beyond graduation. In this way, the 'different worlds' that exist in educational settings could be explored, as the FiF students were invited to articulate their experience of university on a 'symbolic and lived level' (O'Shea, Stone, & May, 2014, p. 3). Providing participants with opportunities to discuss matters beyond the questions asked involved actively encouraging them to expand on their responses and build a picture of their lived experience as university students.

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), in-depth interviews require ‘active asking and listening’ between partners who are participating in a process of ‘meaning-making’ which allows deep and rich descriptions to emerge (p. 94). The objective of such an approach is to confirm the fidelity, coherence, plausibility, and usefulness of researcher constructions and interpretations of individuals’ narrative identities (Coulter & Smith, 2009; Creswell, 2013).

Students were sent the interview questions a few days before the recorded interview to allow more reflection on certain areas (e.g., how they felt during orientation week, their initial coping mechanisms, etc.). Each interview was recorded and transcribed, then transcriptions were checked against the recording by the interviewer for accuracy before being sent to the participant for confirmation. These interviews provide a compelling collection of stories which reflect the cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional nature of the FiF student experience.

All students were de-identified after the transcripts were completed and assigned an alias. The interviews were coded into the framework of specific themes identified in the literature (which linked to the themes we used to determine the interview questions); however, as other themes emerged through the analysis, these were also included as points for further exploration across the interviews.

Three main themes (the student; the journey; and the networks) and eight sub-themes were identified. These were: individual characteristics and skills; consolidation of student identity; and, life at university, as sub-themes within the ‘student’. The ‘journey’ included the sub-themes: motivators; enablers/barriers; and, choosing ‘what’ and ‘where’ to study. The ‘networks’ theme included the sub-theme ‘who’ and the ‘how’. Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework of the themes and sub-themes and the relationships between them. It places the student at the centre of the university experience while depicting the close connection we found between the ‘student’ and their individual characteristics.

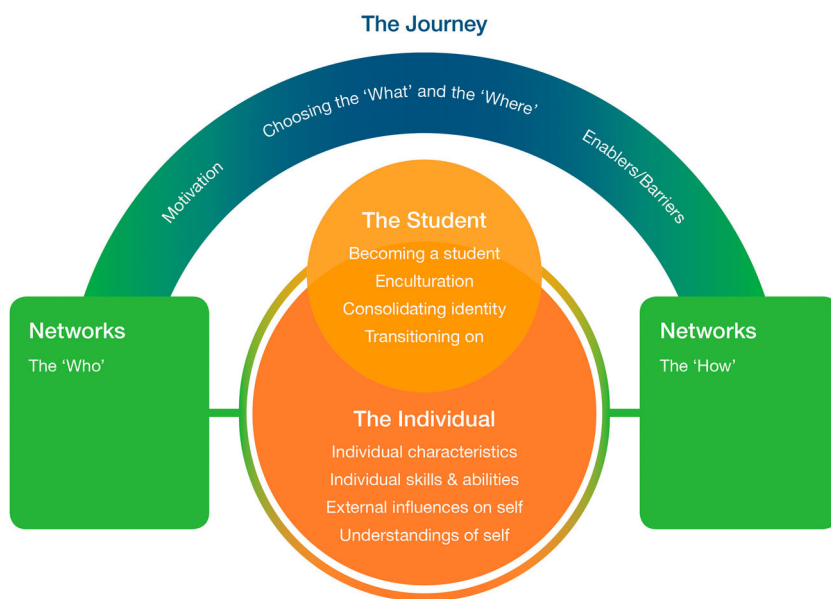


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of themes.

The university experience is presented as a ‘journey’ which encompasses the student while connecting two ‘networks’ that are used by them. The networks are separate but linked to each other as well as being connected to the student (King, Luzeckyj, McCann, & Graham, 2015; Luzeckyj, Graham, King, & McCann, 2015).

The particular focus of this paper is on the metaphors used by students to reflect on their university experiences. FiF students’ lack of exposure to institutionally inflected discourse means that they are potentially more inclined to employ metaphor and less specialised language in order to shape and make sense of their experiences at university. Thus, we included a specific question asking students to use a metaphor or analogy to describe their university experiences insofar as it asked students to encapsulate this experience via a more reflective memory. Metaphors and analogies were also evident in responses unrelated to the metaphor question and have been included where they add to the richness of the portrayed lived-experience. Discussion about the broader findings from the interviews is available in other papers (Graham, King, Luzeckyj, & McCann, 2015; King et al., 2015; Luzeckyj et al., 2015).

The metaphors our interviewees used

The deployment of metaphor as foundational to our conceptual system was first proposed by cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their groundbreaking book, *Metaphors we live by*. Here, they state:

In all aspects of life, [...] we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphor. (p. 158)

Thus, a metaphor allows the speaker ‘to open a door that cannot be opened by approaches that are too weighed down by duty to literal truth’ (Bakan, 1996, p. 7), providing them a conceptual framework for thinking about a particular problem and drawing comparisons between unlike situations. In the teaching and learning environment too, metaphors are commonplace: we ‘plant seeds’ in students’ minds and ‘scaffold’ our teaching to support the ‘the light bulb moment’ to occur. More broadly, the teaching process has been variously described metaphorically as transmission, persuasion, nurturing, building, cultivation and coaching (Northcote & Fetherston, 2006). As argued by Bozik (2002), metaphors aid reflection and help understanding.

In order to aid both our own and the students’ understanding and to encourage them to reflect on their experiences, we asked the students to identify a metaphor (or analogy) that reflected their experience of being at university. The diversity of metaphors and analogies used by the students illustrates a range of metaphorical constructs which are applicable when referring to the FiF student experience at university. All transcripts included metaphors in response to one or more questions; these were unprompted and the interviewee appeared unaware of the vivid, colourful language they were using to make sense of their time at university.

The students’ use of metaphoric language throughout the interviews indicated that they were comfortable with using it (however unconsciously) to structure their lived experience. It also demonstrated how they deployed such language as a means of reflection,

allowing a better understanding of a particular emotion, crisis point or transitional phase in their university career. The difficulties students felt they were overcoming and their determination to succeed were frequently reflected in metaphoric language, which suggests not just that metaphors and analogies are a way of framing the FiF discussion when it comes to ‘sticking it out’ or ‘staying the course’, but that FiF students are subtly introducing metaphor into their own discursive practices to make sense of their lived experiences.

In analysing the metaphors, we grouped them according to the ‘something else’, that they evoked or as discussed by Bozik (2002, p. 144) ‘their referent’. Putting the responses together in this way allowed us to consider what the ‘something else’ might mean in relation to their being a FiF student.

The interviewees used a variety of evocative descriptions in relation to their experiences at university. These included metaphors: linked to travel or a journey; illustrating unknowns; and illustrative of not belonging. Many metaphors also reflect how the participants felt they managed their experiences, which for some, involved overcoming difficulties, thus demonstrating their determination to succeed and their resilience. Given that the metaphor question asked interviewees to reflect on their experience of being a student, all fit within our identified ‘student’ theme (even where they use the journey metaphor). However, the motivation aspects of the ‘journey’ theme and the ‘who’ and ‘how’ aspects of our ‘networks’ theme are also evident within some responses, indicating the interconnectedness of themes we identified in the broader research.

Metaphors related to a journey

Landau, Oyserman, Keefer, and Smith (2014) specifically explore the journey metaphor and its common use when discussing higher education. They suggest that it ‘cues a sense that one knows how to reach a goal and fosters identity connection’ arguing that the journey metaphor ‘uniquely influences students’ understanding of their academic future and hence their motivation to achieve academic goals’ (p. 679). In the interviews we conducted, two participants specifically used a ‘journey metaphor’ and others used variations of it. Nina (35-year-old female) used the journey metaphor, reluctantly stating that she thought everyone would use it. She said:

I suppose the journey part of it – I thought about that, and I thought everyone would say that. But it is I guess, it’s – start here and you’ve got to get to there.

In saying that ‘I thought everyone would say that’, Nina suggests that the metaphor of journey may be a common one. However, she continues her response with ‘But it is I guess, it’s – start here and you’ve got to get to there’, subtly suggesting that while the journey metaphor may not completely reflect her unique life circumstances (she was a mother of six young children), the pragmatic aspects of a journey, where you need to get from one place to another, does reflect her experience of being at university. Her comments concur with Landau et al. as she reflects a path that will enable her to reach her goal. By evoking a sense of determination and perseverance as she identifies her own success will involve getting from one point (where she is now) to another (completion), Nina also reflects Benson et al. (2012) and Devlin and O’Shea’s (2011) discussions regarding disadvantaged students relying on their own personal qualities to support their success.

Rowan (31-year-old male) also used an explicit journey metaphor, relating how his ‘journey’ as a student helped him to develop. He said: ‘I think that my university journey has been about, I would say it’s made me a more-well-rounded adult’. Rowan utilises the journey metaphor without drawing attention to what he is doing and therefore appears to take for granted how his experience as a student is a journey. Nina’s pragmatic description of the journey which has a finishing point and Rowan’s reflection that the university journey has helped him to grow and develop provide some insight into their motivations. For Nina, the journey is about the end point, while for Rowan, it is about personal development.

Marg (43-year-old female) provided a variation on the journey metaphor as she discussed climbing a mountain. ‘I feel like I’ve walked up a really big mountain and I’m just at the very top now and about to come over the other side.’ Marg was in the final stages of her degree and had been offered the option to commence an honours degree. It is not clear if Marg considers the next stage will be as difficult as her climb so far, but she is ‘just at the very top’ and there is a sense that she is pleased to be there. Through her use of terms such as ‘really big mountain’ (calling it a mountain rather than a hill), Marg emphasises that her journey has been uphill, long and hard. As indicated in a range of studies, (King et al., 2013, 2015; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; O’Shea, 2013), students from FiF backgrounds find adjusting to university life more difficult than other students. They have fewer opportunities to discuss their opportunities and their feelings with family members who cannot share their experience, which may add to the sense of an uphill struggle. Marg also uses a tunnel metaphor to describe nearing the end point of her degree: ‘I can see the light is quite bright there at the end of the tunnel now’ which indicates that there have been times, for her, when the light and potential end of the journey was not so bright or perhaps not even visible.

Jen’s (26-year-old female) response was also a variation on the journey metaphor that involved climbing. Jen described her experience as being difficult but also ‘lovely’. She said:

I think the image that comes to mind is you know those lovely places when people travel and there’s those huge amount of stairs [...] Well it’s lots of steps, so when I first arrived [...] it was a couple of feet so I sort of had to really stretch out my foot and then step up.

Jen’s use of imagery suggests that she was in a place where she was happy to be: ‘lovely places when people travel’ but knew that she would have to make an effort: ‘there’s those huge amount of stairs’ in order to make the most of the experience. Both Marg and Jen appear to be on their own as neither refers to being in the company of others which may link to their sense of autonomy. In both of these responses, they discuss the difficulties associated with university but imply that the reward of reaching the top motivated them to continue. Jen also uses the terms ‘stretch’ and ‘step up’ to indicate she felt she needed and was able to move beyond what was her norm. Here, Jen is also reporting that she has changed as a result of attending university.

Metaphors illustrating unknowns

The ocean metaphors used by Carl (19-year-old male) and Travis (20-year-old male) involve journey metaphors which are different again as they combine with ocean metaphors and illustrate that the student feels much of their university experience involves

unknown aspects. Carl's metaphor illustrates his mixed feelings as he discussed the ups and downs of being at university. He said:

For some reason I want to describe it like an ocean – going sailing through an ocean – it has its ups and downs. You're always heading towards your destination [...] you know where you're aiming to go. You know there's always going to be those challenges.

Carl combined his ocean metaphor with one about a journey as he discusses 'heading towards your destination' and knowing 'where you're aiming to go' despite the challenges that are known to the student. His outlook is positive, demonstrating his resilience, as he is aware that it would not be easy.

Travis' use of the ocean metaphor is slightly more dramatic and negative as he discussed the calmness of the ocean which disguises the potential danger that lurks beneath its surface. Travis used the following metaphor:

I see uni as somewhat like the ocean. At times it seems calm but when the ocean is most calm, it generally means that there's something really dangerous coming, whether it be a storm or a gigantic wave.

He is unsure what dangers are waiting for him but knows that the calmness of the ocean does not mean that there is nothing to be worried about. Here, Travis reflects what Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, and McCune (2008) describe as 'the "culture shock" on entering higher education – the anxiety about not knowing what is expected – which underpins and becomes entangled with the learning process' (p. 569). However, in Travis' case, it is not only the anxiety of not knowing what is expected, but also of what to expect. This culture shock can be particularly pronounced for FiF students, as they do not have family members to provide advice or offer a frame of reference for understanding these experiences.

Because metaphors 'carry a great deal of abstract and intangible information in a concise and memorable package' (Lawley & Tompkins, 2001), they can help bring a coherent understanding to the chaos of everyday life, and in this case, offer a valuable insight into the mindset of FiF students as they verbalise feelings about their final experiences of university life. For a number of the students, the metaphors they used indicated that they were unsure what it would be like; Gail (20-year-old female) said 'University is like a surprise' while Alison (17-year-old female) provided a more illustrative and less positive image when she said 'I think ultimately it's been like opening a can of worms'. Her explanation of the metaphor, however, was more positive; she went on to say,

you go into it and you look at it and you have no idea what's going to come out of it or what you're going to get out of it and you kind of get into it and it's so much more than you expected.

Alison's elucidation reflects her sense of confusion about being at university but she implies that she is gaining a lot from the experience. Although the 'can of worms' is a graphic image of entanglement and confusion, Alison identifies a quality akin to Gail's 'surprise', when she says, 'it's so much more than you expected'. Gail's 'surprise' and Alison's 'can of worms' illustrate how each interviewee was not sure what to expect from university and reflects the plight of the FiF students who do not have family members with whom they can discuss what they might expect or what they are experiencing.

Metaphors about not belonging and adapting

Brendon (18-year-old male) uses a ‘fish out of water’ metaphor to describe his sense of not belonging and need to adapt. Brendon said:

Anything to just describe coming into an environment [you are] not so familiar with and trying to adapt to that I think. So I think that ‘fish out of water’ is probably a good one.

For Brendon, moving into a new environment requires adaptation rather than creating a new life. Although he suggests that a ‘fish out of water’ is a good metaphor, the picture this invokes is of a fish gasping for air or flapping about, it is not one of adaptation as the fish never adapts to its new environment. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) use a similar but opposite metaphor, a ‘fish in water’ to describe a sense of belonging, when discussing the terms the ‘habitus’ and ‘social world’ (p. 127). Maton (2008) explains that Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to explain why those from ‘working-class backgrounds are less likely, to attend university’ (p. 57).

In using this metaphor, Brendon is suggesting that the process of adapting is a very difficult one; he is not a product of the social world that is the university and knows he does not belong. Brendon’s reference to the ‘fish out of water’ is one that afflicts many FiF students, especially early on, as they struggle to first establish, and then assert their ‘student identity’. These students need to adapt to their new environments before they can feel they belong. In a later stage of his interview, Brendon referred to the fact that many of his law student peers had family members who were lawyers whom they could ask for advice on assignments; he felt that his parents’ lack of tertiary education set him at a disadvantage in comparison to these other students. He also found that many of his peers had come from the same schools and knew each other socially and described his experience as being a ‘bit of a lone wolf’. He said,

I find it harder to break-in to the cliques and groups that have already formed early because they carry through degrees and I think I sort of started as a lone wolf I suppose. So that was the tough side of things, I think that I struggled with the most.

This feeling of social isolation and not fitting in with the ‘clique’ is often one of the most difficult aspects for FiF students like Brendon to overcome.

As outlined by Chapman (2013), identity is a significant aspect of being a FiF student that undergoes transformation and is often the largest hurdle to overcome as evidenced by participant descriptions of feeling like an ‘imposter’, or being at university ‘under false pretences’. This struggle with student identity is further supported by Orbe (2004), who found in a qualitative study of 79 FiF students across multiple campuses the recurring issue of student identity, not fitting in with existing ‘self’ identity requiring the maintenance of two separate identities, being that of ‘home’ and the other of ‘student’. The impact of this fragmented existence leads to feelings of disjunction, of not belonging, or feeling like a ‘lone wolf’ or ‘a fish out of water’. While Brendon did not discuss his motivations, he alludes to a range of problems he has overcome without giving up, which indicates that he is motivated to continue in his studies despite these difficulties.

For Todd, describing the experience of being at university involved reflecting on what he thought it should be like. He said:

I think it’s just the popping of the bubble which you expect to keep inflating [...] Yeah your resources and your skills just keep going and going but then, and to reach a point where it’s

just all. But eventually, it doesn't pop because [...] you're no different, but you expect it to be better than what it is.

Todd uses the metaphor of the popping bubble to describe his transition and learning experience. The concept links to the imposter syndrome outlined by Chapman (2013) as Todd's bubble inflates and pops until he feels he has reached a point of understanding and where he becomes the learner and has transitioned. In his own words, he is 'no different', implying that he anticipated that he would have changed. However, Todd may be reflecting his immersion in his student identity. His suggestion that 'reach a point where it's just all ... it doesn't pop' alludes to his absorption in being a student where there is no longer any difference between who he was and who he is as a student, although he feels there should have been one. He went on to say 'but you expect it to be better than what it [was]', indicating that he felt disappointed by his experience (he may be suggesting that he should have been more cognisant of the changes and feel improved by them).

Roxie (33-year-old female) used a diving board metaphor, she said:

It was being on a really high diving board and needing a good shove to take that first dive in. So I got shoved off the diving board, then figuring out that you can swim, then forgetting how, and then remembering again.

Roxie's description of needing to be pushed off the diving board which is closely followed by the interplay between 'forgetting' then 'remembering' how to swim, reflects both her fears associated getting started and needing a push and her changing roles between self and student.

Carol's (20-year-old female) image of returning to university after the long summer break has a similar aspect of trying to manage the balance between the two worlds of home and university. Carol said, 'It's always that whole roller coaster thing' indicating that she experiences ups and downs as she renegotiates the shift back to life at university. Christie et al. (2008) identified the rollercoaster metaphor as one which indicates a student's 'acute awareness of the psychological costs of the transition to university' (p. 573).

Their work concurs with those cited earlier which explore the unique difficulties faced by non-traditional students as they transition to university and experience excitement mixed with fear and alienation. These authors also provide a discussion on the complexities non-traditional students face as they engage with new ways of learning. For example, Crozier and Reay (2008) and O'Shea (2011) discuss ways in which students are frequently required to move in and out of different identities, resulting in feelings of not completely belonging to either world.

There is also discussion surrounding the disjunction between FiF students' home and university life across the literature, describing them as being 'worlds apart' Bowl (2001), Engle (2007) and Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, and Durón (2013). In addition, these authors suggest, when combined – the 'culture shock' of university and the unexpected stress of identity transformation – the disjuncture often results in FiF student attrition. While our participants had experienced a range of challenges relating to disjuncture as reflected in the metaphors they used, all had persevered in their studies.

Conclusion

This paper has explored FiF students' own narratives and their use of metaphor to consider the students' experience and how they work to adapt to university. In asking students to consider a metaphor, we helped to provide a conceptual framework for the students to think about their experience of being university students and draw comparisons between that experience and another situation. Asking the question aided both our own and the students' understanding and encouraged them to reflect on their experiences. The diversity of metaphors and analogies used by our students illustrates a range of metaphorical constructs which are applicable when referring to the FiF student experience at university. Metaphors provide us with an avenue for gaining in-depth understandings of the ways that students make sense of what is happening to them, as their difficulties, their experience in overcoming complications and their determination to succeed are reflected in the metaphoric language that they use, suggesting that metaphors and analogies are a way of framing the FiF discussions and in aiding them to make sense of their lived experiences.

Their metaphors are effective tools that enable us to unpack FiF students' experience of university life beyond the merely descriptive and uncover the complex and potentially transformative experience that university can provide. The metaphors not only provide vivid depictions of students' understandings of their lived experiences but also offer an avenue for the wider educational community to comprehend both the affective and cultural impacts that navigating the new environment of HE has on these students' lives. These insights into motivations and struggles could be considered by university staff and policy-makers when creating guiding strategies for future students. These strategies might include a dedicated website which celebrates difference, normalises feeling alien, and provides guidance on how to interpret the often implicit rules of engagement in this new learning environment. The introduction of pedagogical practices such as those discussed by Kift (2009) which help students gain insight into how to learn and succeed at university as they develop content knowledge and skills would also prove useful. Ultimately, the larger project, with its emphasis on qualitative research, the interpretation of stories, and thematic analysis, is, to use a final metaphor, a vital stepping-stone in intuiting the FiF experience. The ideas explored in this paper shed light on some of these issues. The paper is of value to the wider higher education community because it provides valuable insight into how under-represented groups such as FiF cohorts reflect on their experience of university as a journey which heralds a range of unknowns where they do not belong but must adapt to if they wish to survive. In considering these metaphors, it is important that university staff and policy-makers consider ways they can, especially if the intention is to ensure that university is universally available, better welcome and support these students so that their journey is smoother, more transparent and engenders a feeling of belonging for all students.

Acknowledgements

We would also like to express our appreciation to the 18 participants for sharing both their experiences and insight.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

We would like to thank the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) for funding the broader research project of which this paper was produced.

ORCID

Ann Luzeckyj  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1445-8410>

Ben McCann  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3545-1683>

Charmaine Graham  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5366-1361>

Sharron King  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3955-7378>

References

- Bakan, D. (1996). Some reflections about narrative research and hurt and harm. In R. Josselson (Ed.), *Ethics and process in the narrative study of lives* (pp. 3–8). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Bamber, J., & Tett, L. (2001). Ensuring integrative learning experiences for non-traditional students in higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 3(1), 8–16.
- Benson, R., Heagney, M., Hewitt, L., Crosling, G., & Devos, A. (2012). Social inclusion and the student experience: What are the implications for academic support? *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14(2), 11–28.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bowl, M. (2001). Experiencing the barriers: Non-traditional students entering higher education. *Research Papers in Education*, 16(2), 141–160.
- Bozik, M. (2002). The college student as learner: Insight gained through metaphor analysis. *College Student Journal*, 36, 142–151.
- Bui, V. T. (2002). First-generation college students at a four-year university: Background characteristics, reasons for pursuing higher education, and first-year experiences. *College Student Journal*, 36(1), 3–11.
- Chapman, A. (2013). A (re) negotiation of identity. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14(3), 44–61.
- Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V.E., Hounsell, J., & McCune, V. (2008). ‘A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions’: Learning to be a university student. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(5), 567–581.
- Coulter, C., & Smith, M. (2009). The construction zone: Literary elements in narrative research. *Educational Researcher*, 38(8), 577–590.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.
- Crozier, G., & Reay, D. (2008). *The socio-cultural and learning experiences of working class students in HE: Full research report, ESRC end of award report*. Swindon: ESRC.
- Devlin, M., & O’Shea, H. (2011). Directions for Australian higher education institutional policy and practice in supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 33(5), 529–535.
- Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L., & McKay, J. (2012). *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education* (Final report). Melbourne: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.
- Engle, J. (2007). Postsecondary access and success for first-generation college students. *American Academic*, 3(1), 25–48.

- Fleming, T., & Finnegan, F. (2011). *Non-traditional students in Irish higher education: A research report*. Wroclaw: RANLHE.
- Graham, C., King, S., Luzeckyj, A., & McCann, B. (2015). *Beyond the economics, benefit and cost of higher education: First in family student perspectives*. Paper presented at the STARS: Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention and Success, Melbourne.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2011). *The practice of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- James, R., Krause, K.-L., & Jennings, C. (2010). *The first year experience in Australian universities*. Canberra: DEEWR.
- Jenkins, S. R., Belanger, A., Connally, M. L., Boals, A., & Durón, K. M. (2013). First generation undergraduate students' social support, depression, and life satisfaction. *Journal of College Counseling*, 16(2), 129–142.
- Karimshah, A., Wyder, M., Henman, P., Tay, D., Capelin, E., & Short, P. (2013). Overcoming adversity among low SES students. *Australian Universities' Review*, 55(2), 5–14.
- Kift, S. (2009). *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education* (Final report for ALTC senior fellowship program). OLT website.
- King, S., Garrett, R., Wrench, A. & Richardson, A. (2013, July 1–4). *What does it take to thrive in this place? An exploration of students' experiences of first year university*. Conference paper presented at the 36th HERDSA International conference The Place of teaching and learning, Auckland, NZ.
- King, S., Luzeckyj, A., McCann, B., & Graham, C. (2015). *Exploring the experience of being first in family at university: A 2014 student equity in higher education research grants project*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Exploring-the-Experience-of-Being-First-in-Family-at-University-Final.pdf>
- Lawley, J., & Tompkins, P. (2001). *Learning metaphors*. Retrieved January 20, 2015, from <http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/60/1/Learning-Metaphors/Page1.html>
- Lohfink, M. M., & Paulsen, M. B. (2005). Comparing the determinants of persistence for first-generation and continuing-generation students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(4), 409–428.
- Luzeckyj, A., Graham, C., King, S., & McCann, B. (2015). *First in family students – what they say about being at university*. Paper presented at the STARS: Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention and Success, Melbourne.
- Luzeckyj, A., King, S., Scutter, S., & Brinkworth, R. (2011). The significance of being first: A consideration of cultural capital in relation to 'first in family' student's choices of university and program. A practice report. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 2(2), 91–96.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Landau, M. J., Oyserman, D., Keefer, L. A., & Smith, G. C. (2014). The college journey and academic engagement: How metaphor use enhances identity-based motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(5), 679–698. doi:10.1037/a0036414
- Maton, K. (2008). Habitus. In M. Grenfell (Ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu. Key concepts* (pp. 101–119). Stocksfield: Acumen.
- McCarron, G. P., & Inkelas, K. K. (2006). The gap between educational aspirations and attainment for first-generation college students and the role of parental involvement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(5), 534–549.
- Northcote, M., & Fetherston, T. (2006, July 10–12). New metaphors for teaching and learning in a university context. In *Critical visions, proceedings of the 29th HERDSA annual conference, Western Australia* (pp. 251–258). Perth: HERDSA.
- Orbe, M. P. (2004). Negotiating multiple identities within multiple frames: An analysis of first generation college students. *Communication Education*, 53(2), 131–149.
- O'Shea, S. (2011). Nomads in diaspora space: Exploring women's identity work in the university. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 43(1), 61–77.

- O'Shea, S. (2013). Transitions and turning points: Exploring how first-in-family female students story their transition to university and student identity formation. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(2), 135–158. doi:10.1080/09518398.2013.771226
- O'Shea, S. (2015). Avoiding the manufacture of 'sameness': First in family students, cultural capital and the higher education environment. *Higher Education*, 72(1), 1–20.
- O'Shea, S., & Stone, C. (2011). Transformations and self-discovery: Mature-age women's reflections on returning to university study. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33(3), 273–288.
- O'Shea, S., & Stone, C. (2014). The hero's journey: Stories of women returning to education. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 5(1), 79–91.
- O'Shea, S., Stone, C., & May, J. (2014, July 6–9). *Breaking the barriers: Supporting and engaging mature age first-in-family university learners and their families*. In N. T. Darwin (Ed.), *First year in higher education conference*. Retrieved January 20, 2015, from http://fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers14/11D.pdf
- Simmons, O. S. (2010). Lost in transition: The implications of social capital for higher education access. *Notre Dame Law Review*, 42. Wake Forest Univ. Legal studies paper no. 1785528.
- Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423–442.