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'I'm not sure where home is': narratives of student mobilities into and through higher education

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ABSTRACT

The concept of a typical pathway to becoming a student is a pervasive narrative within higher education, with moving away from home to live at university framed as the "traditional student experience". In response, recent literature has begun to trouble the thinking around student mobilities. Building on this work, this study draws upon semi-structured interviews with students who have moved away from home into university residences in order to surface the multiplicity and diversity of mobilities and transitions. Engaging concepts from posthumanist and poststructuralist theory, we propose a reconceptualisation of students' mobilities and transitions as rhizomatic, and as ongoing becomings. Furthermore, we also surface the materiality of students' experiences, acknowledging the role of the non-human within students' mobilities. As a result, we extend the emerging work attending to more complex depictions of students' mobilities, and examine the implications of acknowledging the heterogeneity, materiality and granularity of students' experiences.

Introduction

In an increasingly mobile world, an interest in the importance of student mobilities is rapidly gaining ground within the literature on higher education (e.g. Brooks and Waters 2017; Finn and Holton 2019; Holton and Finn 2018). In the UK, moving away from the family home to live in university residences has for many years been conceptualised as the "normal" route into university, and a ritualised rite of passage to adulthood (Clayton, Crozier, and Reay 2009; Holdsworth 2006; 2009b). Although 'residential higher education is entrenched in English culture' (Hubble and Bolton 2020, 3), there is evidence that it is also becoming more appealing to students in countries where it has not traditionally been the norm (Whyte 2019). In a welcome move towards increasing our awareness of a more nuanced student experience, recent literature (e.g. Finn 2017; Finn and Holton 2019; Holton and Finn 2018) has problematised the dominance of this perspective, emphasising the importance of recognising students who experience mobilities in higher education in alternative and diverse ways.

In this study we build upon this important work. Furthermore, we also extend these perspectives through engaging key concepts from theorists Deleuze and Guattari, and Barad, in order to explore the rich diversity in experiences of students who move away from home to live in university residences, through an original lens. Specifically, these ideas include Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) conceptual tools of the rhizome and becoming, developed more recently via Gravett's (2019) framework for understanding the fluidity of students' transitions into and through university. Additionally, we also engage with Karen Barad's (2007) work on agential realism in order to attend to the role of the material, and crucially, matter's relationship to mobility practices and students' conceptions of home. In doing so, we surface the rhizomatic granularity of students' everyday mobilities, and deconstruct the notion of a "typical" pathway with a fixed end-point for any student. Furthermore, we explore the surprising breadth of actors that play a role in students' mobilities and experiences.

This study took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, our argument occurs within the landscape in which we now find ourselves and our findings assume new resonance. Such times have seen disruption to mobilities and learning for all staff and students: 'Student mobilities, no matter daily commutes to and from universities, or trans-national movements from one country to another, have been curtailed, unduly reinforced or coerced' (Xu 2020, 750). This context, we suggest, offers an opening in which mobility and transition must be re-evaluated. Indeed, as Xu contends: 'It is … high time to consider student mobilities with renewed theoretical and empirical lenses' (750). As such, we look anew at students' everyday experiences of living away, their evolving perceptions of home, and the complexity of students' relationships to space, place and transition. Ultimately, we suggest that even within a subset of ostensibly similar students, who make apparently predictable journeys from home to university, experiences of moving and living away may be divergent, multiple, shifting, nuanced and complex, raising new questions for conceptualising students' transitions, mobilities, and sense of home.

Mobilities and the student pathway of moving away from home to university

The notion of educational mobilities covers a broad spectrum of movements ranging from social mobility (in terms of widening participation in higher education), to the mobilities of international students, and the physical and conceptual mobilities that include initial transitions into higher education and students' ongoing day-to-day movements whilst at university (Wainwright, Chappell, and McHugh 2020) – their everyday mobilities (Finn and Holton 2019).

Despite a growth in the number of commuter students who demonstrate frequent mobilities (Holton and Finn 2018), in the UK, the majority of students still move away from home for university (over 80% in Britain in 2017–18; Whyte 2019), often desiring the "student experience" (Holton 2018). Students living away from home during university are assumed to experience several benefits. Firstly, living away is expected to help students become independent and autonomous, as their first step towards adulthood (Holdsworth 2009a; 2009b). On-campus accommodation, such as university halls or dormitories, has also been viewed as a vital space for developing a sense of belonging to the university community (Cheng 2005; Garvey et al. 2018; Min and Chau 2012). Ahn and Davis (2020) found that one of the four domains of students' sense of belonging includes their attachment to the

university surroundings. They noted that students' emotional engagement with university is tied to the extent to which they perceive their university as home. Living in university residences is also thought to make it easier for students to form social networks, which are anticipated to be the foundation of the social and emotional support that students are likely to require when adjusting to university-life (Christie, Munro, and Wager 2005; Miller, Williams, and Silberstein 2019; Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld 2005). On the other hand, pathways of moving away are described as being 'semipermanent' (Holdsworth 2009b, 1852); it is not envisaged that living away represents true independence, since it is anticipated that students make frequent returns to the family home and continue to rely on family support, both during and after university (Christie, Munro, and Rettig 2002; Rugg, Ford, and Burrows 2004).

Contrasting the differing ways in which students and non-students move away from the family home, Rugg, Ford, and Burrows (2004, 25–26) describe moving away to live at university as the 'student pathway', and they characterise this type of mobility as being 'planned', 'straightforward', 'supported', and 'unproblematic'. Thus, there is the perception that students have a typical, predetermined and holistic moving away experience consisting of a pathway with common features. Likewise, Gravett (2019, 3) examines how 'discourses surrounding transition also depict homogeneous, linear, pathways for students to undertake', and how 'such journeys have also traditionally been understood as rites of passage'.

Rethinking student mobilities

The idea that students experience a homogeneous and linear journey from home to university has been increasingly critiqued (e.g. Baker and Irwin 2021; Holton and Finn 2018; Taylor and Harris-Evans 2018; Gravett 2019), and it is becoming ever more apparent that we need to understand students' mobilities in new and more nuanced ways – a situation that has become even more necessary due to COVID-19. At the present time, student mobilities are the subject of increasing attention as recent literature has emphasised the importance of recognising students who experience mobilities in higher education in alternative and diverse ways (Finn 2015; 2017; Finn and Holton 2019).

A number of studies have offered a distinct departure from dominant discourses about student mobilities. For example, Finn's (2015; 2017) longitudinal work on young women's experiences at university provides a powerful insight into student mobilities over time. Specifically, Finn (2015) has suggested that narratives surrounding student mobilities 'gloss over the complexities of students' experiences and the different ways that they are rendered meaningful in individual lives' (xii). Likewise, Finn and Holton (2019, 7) offer a new conception of student mobilities in their work exploring everyday mobile belonging which 'problematises sedentarist theories that are present in many studies of higher education which seek to fix students in place.' Other literature has also adopted a more nuanced reading of students' mobilities and their perceptions of home (e.g. Holton and Riley 2016; Janning and Volk 2017). Holton and Riley (2016) consider how conceptions of "home" exist beyond a bounded geographical location and as something which can be 'more transitory, multi-sited and open ended' (640). While in Doreen Massey's powerful work reconceptualising understandings of space and place (e.g. Massey 2005), she considers space as 'the sphere in which distinct trajectories co-exist; as the sphere… of coexisting heterogeneity' (2005, 9).

A rhizomatic perspective

Recent literature has also posed a re-reading of key concepts pertaining to student transition. Gravett's (2019) transitions framework explores the utility of employing Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of the rhizome and becoming. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) consider the concept of the rhizome:

> Rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The rhizome is the conjunction, 'and … and … and …'. This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb 'to be' where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 26).

A rhizome has no clear starting point and can spread in multiple directions (Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008). Crucially, it 'carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be" where are you going?' Indeed, Gravett (2019) asserts that normative conceptualisations of students' transitions as linear journeys or pathways can be limiting and can mask the multiplicity of all students' experiences, whereas a rhizomatic perspective celebrates students' differences (Grellier 2013):

> Seen through [a rhizomatic] lens, there are no uniform pathways: transitions are divergent, fluid and multiple…. By conceptualising transitions as becomings, we are offered a total departure from the notion of a typical or successful pathway through university, or of any linear journey with a fixed end point. Instead, becomings are ongoing, emergent, open, evolving and continuous (Gravett 2019, 6–7).

A rhizomatic perspective offers potential to enrich the student mobilities literature by proposing a 'total departure' from the idea of a linear student pathway of moving away from home to university. Viewing transitions as rhizomatic appreciates the diversity of students' experiences, and viewing transitions as ongoing becomings acknowledges that students have 'fluid, diverse and messy experiences that do not follow one homogeneous path, but rather can be understood as ongoing' (Gravett 2019, 12).

The materiality of mobilities

Additionally, these innovative perspectives are complemented by the work of posthuman theorists who encourage us to look beyond a human-centred conception of education. Explorations of the material as a tool for understanding students' experiences have been increasingly explored in the education and sociology literature in recent years (e.g. Brooks and Waters 2017). Urry (2000) highlights the importance of the material for mobilities research: 'the diverse flows of objects… and their intersections with the multiple flows of people are hugely significant' (3). And Holton and Riley (2016, 626) suggest that belongings can be seen as holding 'transitional value'. Posthumanism takes this interest in the material further, viewing the human as being in relation – with other humans, and with the non-human, or more-than-human. Indeed, posthuman theories have been increasingly put to work as a means to engage with the more-than-human – for example, objects, bodies and materialities – and to consider how these actors might relate to learning (Taylor and Bayley 2019; Braidotti et al. 2018; Taylor and Fairchild 2020). Continuing this developing area of research, in this article, we employ posthuman theory as a frame to understand students' experiences

in higher education in new ways. Specifically, we engage theoretical concepts from Barad's work on agential realism in order to explore the role of the non-human, of the material, within students' conceptions of home, transition, and their mobility practices. In this work, Barad (2007) attends to material-discursive 'intra-actions' and acknowledges the significance of both discourse and matter, suggesting that 'matter and meaning are not separate elements' (3). Individuals are viewed as being entangled with both their human and non-human surroundings. This means that 'what is needed is an analysis that enables us to theorize the social and the natural together, to read our best understandings of social and natural phenomena through one another' (25). For Barad, the material is just as important to our understanding of experience: 'nothing exists in and of itself … everything is always already in relation … matter and discourse are coconstitutive' (Fairchild and Taylor 2019, 1).

The current research

Taken together, we suggest that these interweaving theoretical lenses enable us to revisit conventional narratives that surround students' pathways into higher education, to view mobilities and transitions as dynamic, relational, and as materially constituted. In this study we therefore contribute to, and extend, this growing area of research exploring student mobilities. The current study draws upon data from seven rich, in-depth, interviews with students who had moved away from their family homes to live in residential university accommodation, in order to examine their experiences of moving away, their sense of home and their perceptions of transitioning into and through university.

Since the metaphor of the rhizome should be seen as having 'multiple entryways' (Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008, 637), we did not perceive there to be an ideal stage during students' transitions in which to examine their experiences. We chose a single sampling point towards the end of the students' first semester so that they could readily recall their initial feelings about moving away, whilst still being able to discuss perspectives about living away. We focused on a group of students with common characteristics in order to explore the potential diversity of experiences within a specific subset of students who are often discussed in homogeneous terms. Drawing on another of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts, we viewed these students as being part of an *assemblage* of connecting multiplicities. Rhizomatic assemblages consist of parts that are constantly moving and in a state of becoming (Kinchin and Gravett 2020). Assemblage theory is positioned in direct contrast to essentialist approaches, so 'unlike taxonomic essentialism in which genus, species and individual are separate ontological categories, the ontology of assemblages is flat since it contains nothing but differently scaled individual singularities' (DeLanda 2006, 28). Thus, whilst on the surface appearing to be a highly similar set of students, participants' backgrounds, experiences and choices about university will be diverse and always changing:

> students' assemblages include the stuff and processes of everyday life that conventional understandings might assign to the 'outside' of the transition process: sailing, pensions, magazines, parking, phones, bed. Rethinking transition as assemblage undoes the assumed boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' bodies (Taylor and Harris-Evans 2018, 1259).

In the current study, we therefore aimed to reflect the heterogeneous plurality of students' experiences of moving and living away from home.

Method

Participants

Seven first year undergraduate psychology students (six females and one male; all 18 or 19 years old) were recruited from a London-based post-1992 university in the UK. Six of the participants were from the UK and one was an international student. Three participants stated that they still lived near to their family after their move to university and five had only ever previously moved once or twice (with family). At the time of study participation, all participants had been living away from their family home for two to three months and were living in university residences on campus, which consisted of single rooms in shared dormitories (i.e. halls of residence).

Interviews

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed to assist students in narrating their everyday lives and feelings after moving away from home. We strove to gather data that reflected what participants considered to be most meaningful to their experiences, so questions were open-ended and broadly focused on: Participants' experiences of moving away from home to their university accommodation; their (changing) sense of home; and their relationships to the people in their family home and university residence. The interview schedule was used flexibly and notes were taken throughout to enable subsequent probe questions that were used to clarify and extend on what participants disclosed. This encouraged students to elaborate on specific topics that seemed particularly important to them, thus uncovering the multiplicity and diversity of students' experiences. Ethical approval was granted and participants gave informed consent, then were debriefed at the end of their interview. Interviews lasted between 35 and 65 minutes and were audio-recorded, then transcribed. All participants have been given pseudonyms in the analysis that is presented below.

Analytical approach

We undertook a reflexive thematic analysis of the transcripts (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2019) utilising a collaborative coding approach to identify patterns of shared meaning in students' experiences of moving and living away from home. Transcripts were entered into NVivo software and two of the authors familiarised themselves with the data, then independently coded all transcripts in their entirety. Coding involved a data-driven inductive reading of all data items. However, our coding was also driven by the theoretical frames of the study, so there was a particular focus on features of the data that deductively aligned with concepts of the rhizome, of becoming, and of the role of the non-human and the entanglement of matter and meaning. For example, in order to understand the significance of materialities, we paid particular attention to students' narratives about their possessions. Notions of the rhizome and becoming also encouraged us to focus more in our analysis on participants'

ongoing and fluid sense of home. A number of codes and initial themes were generated that were then modified and refined until we agreed upon a final set of themes that were considered to best depict the richness of students' experiences.

Findings

Through employing the thematic analysis approach described above, four themes were generated at a semantic level, then the notion of the rhizome and related concepts was used to aid our interpretation of these themes at a latent level, as expressed through the narrative below. The themes were labelled as: *Living away from home is part of becoming a student and an adult*; *Moving away is not moving on*; *Living in university residences is not an endpoint*; and *Entanglement with material objects and belongings*.

Living away from home is part of becoming a student and an adult

For many of the participants, making the choice to move away from home was related to a desire to have the "typical" experience of being a student. For example: 'I was expecting myself to live on campus and have like you know that campus feel. Like when you watch movies or stuff like that, it's kind of like [a] stereotypical kind of view [of] going to university' (Ruth). For Ruth, this choice seemed to result from a preconceived view of what going to university involves, showing how depictions of "how university should be experienced" can impact upon students' expectations.

Participants also reported that they viewed the experience of living away from home as necessary. For example, Sue described the experience as 'liberating' and 'overdue', reinforcing the notion that moving away is a standard rite of passage for some young people to 'a different phase of my life, which I'm happy to move on with' (Louise). Participants saw the added responsibility over themselves as being part of becoming an adult, and the new found freedom and independence was much of the appeal of living away:

> At home I never felt like I could do exactly what I wanted, I felt like a bird being caged.... For example, I couldn't blast my music whenever I wanted. It was kind of like I had to be cautious because of parents and stuff, whereas here I can blast music and go out when I want.... I can invite my friends over when I want (Kallee).

> At first maybe I felt a bit lost, because I was like I don't have anyone telling me what to do.... But then it's all just part of growing up really and I've accepted that responsibility (Louise).

Most participants also felt that the experience of living in a new environment, with increased independence and more of a need to be social, helped them to redefine themselves, possibly discovering something new about their personality, or allowing them to form a new identity. Louise explained how the increasing control over her own life meant she felt 'like more of an individual'. For others, living away offered them an opportunity to start again and decide how they could frame who they were:

> I was very shy when I first started secondary school and it kind of sort of became a self-fulfilling prophecy like even when I did become more confident I felt like ... I had to stay the shy person who didn't start conversations with new people.... But like when I came here I realised I could start off by being the confident person (Sophie).

Thus, in line with traditional narratives of students' transitions, our findings do in part support the notion that students move away to live at university for reasons beyond the convenience of the location of their accommodation; normative conceptions that conflate living away from home with being a student appear to be ingrained for many students.

Moving away is not moving on

Despite the independence and freedom that came from moving and living away, many participants did not identify a clear pathway from home to university, and instead spoke of the blurring of boundaries between their family home and university residence. For example, Ruth referred to her on-campus accommodation as a 'home away from home', and Sophie emphasised a need to maintain ties to her family home: 'I call my parents every day'. Similarly, Ruth describes the fluidity of her sense of home:

> My criteria really were for going away to university: I had to be far enough away for me to live independently, but close enough if I wanted to go home, if I felt homesick, I was able to do that… In an ideal and kind of utopia[n] world, having my mum [at university] … like if I had my house but I could like get a bulldozer or something, I don't know a crane, to move my house right here that would be perfect (Ruth).

For these participants, transitions can be understood as non-linear, and they do not necessarily desire a clean break from home. Instead of just moving on from the family home, participants noted actions they took to remind themselves of home. For example, Scott described 'bring[ing] people into your home surrounding that you'd like to spend time with like you would at your original home'. Kallee noted how she would replicate one of her habits from home to make it feel like she was at home whilst in her university residence:

> When I was at home my door has a little gap in it so it feels like someone's always there and so [at university] I leave my door open most of the time … which makes it feel more like home I suppose…. It's because like light comes in and I know that that is my brother's light (Kallee).

Although some participants felt that living away had offered them the opportunity to redefine who they were (as highlighted by the first theme), others felt they had not 'changed as a person' (Ruth) and were 'very similar at home and [university]' (Kallee). Hence, there was also a sense of continuation of existing identities in their new environment: 'I don't feel like I am strikingly different. I haven't like done a 360 and turned into a different person' (Sue). These findings highlight how transition is likely to be much more complex and nuanced than a rite of passage, which resonates with literature exploring mobilities as 'multisensory and embodied' (Finn 2017, 744).

Living in university residences is not an endpoint

Further supporting the idea that moving away to university is not a simple linear transition from one point to another, participants expressed a feeling of being in-between places, suggesting they were occupying a liminal space in which the concept of "home" was no longer clear-cut: 'It just makes you question … "is that your home?" … "oh, well this is my home too, so what's going on?"' (Kallee). For Kallee, 'neither [the family home nor university residence] feel like full-on home' anymore, whereas Sophie felt that 'both places feel like a

home', and Sue suggested that 'I feel like this is home while I'm living here, and then when I have to move out, my old home will become home again'. All these perspectives indicate a changing sense of home and where this was now located:

> Last time I went back [home], I thought it would really help because that was when I was being overwhelmed … but it didn't really help because … everything has changed now because I don't live here … like my bed is there and everything but then … none of my stuff is here and it doesn't feel, it feels different because my [family are] … doing it without me … [so] I'm not sure where … home is (Kallee).

> Going back to my old home … the bed was made … to perfection because my mum did that herself. When I looked around the walls I thought 'God this is a bit depressing you know; all my stuff is down' (Scott).

Participants' experiences suggest dislocation and uncertainty, reflecting the unsettling nature of transitions, and resonating with Finn and Holton's (2019) conception of mobilities as mobile and evolving. Kallee describes the experience as 'unknown and that's scary…. Unsure seems to be like the predominant word'.

Participants were also mindful of the transient nature of university residences. Thus, although university accommodation could begin to feel like a home, the temporary status of this home, and this stage in their life, was apparent:

> It's expected as well that you don't stay in student accommodation like halls for your whole three years. It's all part of the development of going to uni[versity] (Louise).

> I haven't done too much just because I know that I'm not going to be living there for like years and years. I don't want to get like really really attached to the room and then just have to leave at the end of the year (Sarah).

The time limited position of university residences meant that participants were already looking ahead: 'I have just moved in, but it does feel like I'm leaving soon so it makes me slightly stressed that we have to find a new house' (Sue). Sue also noted that she felt 'quite sad' about reaching this realisation after having only just moved into her university accommodation. The awareness of the lack of permanence of living in university residences means that students are required to continuously evolve.

Entanglement with material objects and belongings

Many of the participants explore how objects and their material surroundings are fundamental to their sense of home and to their experiences. Kallee describes the door's positioning as integral to her conception of home. Scott discusses his made bed, the walls and how the absence of his 'stuff' makes him feel. Sarah describes her experiences of home evocatively through the materiality of her location in Central London as opposed to her home overseas:

> Central London especially has also sort of dazzled me, just 'cause you know everything is so big and the buildings are so tall…. Like even when I see like a double decker bus. I'm still like wow…. I think when I lived [overseas]…. I always found it too hot and I didn't like these things and it was always like in the poorer areas there was like garbage in the gutters and

drains and stuff…. but they are still my people and they are still you know, it's still where I came from (Sarah).

Here, Sarah's vivid depiction of place shows how home is conceptualised through vehicles, buildings and the sights and smells of her surroundings.

Bringing material possessions from their family home to university residence also enables students to adjust and feel comfortable by supporting a continuation of their identity: 'It's just wherever I am, if I have like my little bits, possessions that will just become a home to me' (Sue). This need to continue previous identities was also identified in the second theme, so this was clearly important for the participants. These objects enabled participants to replicate who they were at home in their new environment:

> I brought a lot of stuff from my room [at home] and made [my university room] look quite a lot like my room [at home]…. it's like I've brought my home with me and set it up in this new house (Louise).

> [Bringing possessions from home] makes me like remember when I brought [sic] it at home and when I put it in my house for the first time. And like now it's here and it still makes me feel like I'm actually at home. Like especially having like pictures around because obviously I'd look at the picture and I'll remember like what happened, what that whole day was like when I took that picture and stuff like that. And it's very like nostalgic (Sophie).

Objects go beyond acting as mere reminders of participants' family homes. For example, Sarah described how her belongings were part of 'expressing yourself in the space…. [through] furniture that you really like or paintings, stuff on the wall, things that sort of make it your own'. In this sense, participants portrayed their entanglement with their material surroundings that could be used to both represent and to develop their (new) sense of self. Notably, Ruth wanted to express her own personality through her bedsheets, decorations and 'a cushion … that has my initials on it'. She continues: 'I spent so long looking for it, for the right rug, and it's now there with me and I feel like it's a part of me, it's a part of the experience of moving away from home'. For Ruth, the use of this object was not necessarily about reminding herself of home, since she acquired the item specifically for her university residence, but instead it was used as a way to enact her experiences of becoming a student. Here, this object powerfully expresses Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action: Ruth's rug is there with her and she feels like it's 'a part' of her. In these comments, transition and a sense of home is depicted as much more than a straightforward story of mobility from familial home to university residence. Rather, transitions can be understood as rhizomatic, and complex, and as constituted by the material ('my little bits'), spatial and the social: '[My university room is] absolutely littered with photos, posters, pictures, whatever.' (Scott).

Discussion

The current study aimed to examine the extent to which students' experiences of moving away from home to live in university residences can be seen as rhizomatic, as ongoing becomings, as well as to examine the role of material intra-actions within individuals' experiences. In engaging theoretical frames inspired by the work of poststructural and posthuman theorists, Deleuze and Guattari, and Barad, we sought to examine the granularity of students' experiences and mobilities, from a new perspective. We identified four themes depicting the multiplicity of students' experiences.

The first theme from our thematic analysis highlights that many of the participants moved away from home for the "student experience" (Holton 2018), anticipating that they would become more independent as part of the need to grow up. This perspective reinforces traditional depictions of the 'planned' 'student pathway' of moving out of the family home (Rugg, Ford, and Burrows 2004) and shows the impact of such cultural expectations upon students' conceptions of becoming a student. One participant even described their choice to move away and live in university residences as being built on a 'stereotypical' expectation of what it means to be a student. The perceived independence gained from living at university also supports the idea that this experience is often seen as a rite of passage to adulthood (Clayton, Crozier, and Reay 2009; Holdsworth 2006; 2009b). Thus, our findings suggest that conventional conceptions of living at university are still very much in existence, and are both limiting, durable and significant.

The second theme highlights how transitions, and specifically, experiences of moving away to live at university, can be viewed as rhizomatic (Gravett 2019). Firstly, frequently returning to the family home or attempting to maintain pre-existing identities does not just mean students cannot move on or lack true independence (Christie, Munro, and Rettig 2002; Rugg, Ford, and Burrows 2004). Instead, the concept of the rhizome symbolises the non-linearity of experiences depicted in our sample; the notion of pathway is not sufficient for capturing the multiplicities of these experiences. This view echoes Barad (2007). Barad disrupts the binary boundaries between past and present suggesting that: 'the past is never finished it cannot be wrapped up like a package, or a scrapbook, or an acknowledgment; we never leave it and it never leaves us behind' (2007, ix). Boundaries between new and former identities become blurred. The significance and complexity of mobilities and space has also been examined in Massey's work where she identifies space as 'the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality' (Massey 2005, 9). Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) describe the process of becoming a student as 'negotiating between the old life they have left behind (family, home and friends) and the new life they have ahead of them' (712). However, some participants had more fluid experiences of moving away in which they wanted to maintain ties to their family home rather than leave their old life behind. Similarly, moving away did not appear to signify a simple break from students' previous identities; whilst Holton (2018) found that students who did not move away from home during university would be more likely to want to retain a sense of their pre-student identities, our findings suggest that even when students do move away, some of them do not necessarily express a desire to change either.

In the third theme, participants highlighted the uncertainty of knowing where home was now they lived in university residences, with many of them saying they did not feel like they had a home or that they had more than one home now. This supports the idea that moving away causes a sense of living in 'in-between-ness' (38), so the notion of liminality is particularly useful for understanding these experiences (Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens 2009). This also resonates with Gravett and Ajjawi's (2021) conception of belonging as situated, where belonging is presented as an evolving process and not as something fixed or achievable. Students were very conscious of the fact they would only be staying in their university residence for a short amount of time. This reflects the complexity and multiplicity of mobilities that extend beyond initially moving away from the family home. Participants were already looking ahead to their next move and some did not want to become too attached to their current residence. This evokes the idea of transitions as ongoing, and participants can be understood to be

experiencing ongoing becomings. Although students obviously need to be aware that their university residence is only temporary and they need to think ahead, this may also be contributing to their liminal sense of home, making it harder for them to adjust to their new environment. Here these findings again support Massey's conceptualisation of the fluidity of spatial mobilities, where she contends that space is 'always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed.' (Massey 2005, 8).

The final theme we identified highlighted the importance of materialities, and the role of the non-human, in participants' adjustment to university, particularly their entanglement with objects and spaces as part of their sense of home and identity. Through our analysis, it was immediately noticeable how often the participants referred to the significance of material objects and to their selves as in relation with these objects and spaces. Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens (2009) found that when students brought objects with them to university, they used them as a reminder of home to manage their homesickness. Palmer et al. referred to these objects as 'continuity anchors' (2009, 48) that connected the student's university residence to their family home. Whilst some of our participants did use belongings for this purpose, objects were more commonly not simply *used*. Rather, objects expressed participants' sense of self, and belongings and objects worked as actors, possessing their own agency within the space(s) described. The objects are not peripheral to students' depictions of their university experience, but key actors within the assemblage. This echoes Barad's contention that 'what is needed is an analysis that enables us to theorize the social and the natural together, to read our best understandings of social and natural phenomena through one another' (Barad 2007, 25). For these participants, transition was understood as signifying a complex assemblage of human and non-human factors: independence, mobility, space, but also the most simple and ordinary of objects: bedsheets, a cushion, a rug.

In order to emphasise a 'total departure' from conceptions of a homogeneous pathway of moving away from home and living at university, we drew on in-depth qualitative interviews to gain rich understandings of these experiences. However, there are some limitations to our approaches. By only focusing on students early on in their first year of university, we were unable to determine their experiences beyond this first year, so the current research is a snapshot, focusing on a single time-point. We also did not explore other residence experiences beyond those of on-campus accommodation. It would be interesting to examine the experiences of students living in private accommodation, as well as the perceptions of students from different age groups, and those who move away for university, but from a different starting point to the family home. However, we believe that by focusing on a group of students with the common surface characteristics described, we were able to show the rich diversity of experiences within even a small subset of students who would often be discussed in homogeneous terms.

Conclusions and implications

In this article we have demonstrated how moving away and becoming a student does not signify a simplistic break from students' previous identities, as is sometimes assumed. Instead, we have engaged generative concepts from posthuman and poststructural theory in order to contend that students' mobilities and transitions can be understood as more complex, fluid, messy, uncertain and rhizomatic, than normative depictions of the journey from home to university would suggest. Furthermore, we also explore how students' experiences are intricately entangled with objects, spaces and materialities, within a

more-than-human assemblage. As such, this study extends the growing literature in this area to offer original insights into how we might conceptualise key issues of transition, mobility, and materiality within higher education for all students, as well as encouraging a further questioning of dominant discourses that attempt to depict a singular higher education student experience. Our data suggest that a situated understanding of students' lives, that attends to the granularity of students' experiences, in relation to their surroundings, may offer us a new perspective. This enriched perspective may lead us to a greater understanding of the surprising breadth of actors, both human and non-human, that impact upon students' experiences in higher education. Indeed, attending to the more-than-human reveals the vast scope of 'things' that might matter, including the smallest objects: a rug, a cushion, a double-decker bus. Through attending to the objects and materialities of our learning and teaching contexts, (as well as to the discursive) we are able to look anew at how learning is experienced, enabling new insights into our understanding of what matters. As a result, we assert that our findings have resonance for a greater understanding of all students' experiences, across a diversity of contexts and institutions.

We also believe that attending to the situated granularity of students' experiences will gain further significance post-COVID-19 as we seek to understand the unique challenges posed by students' disrupted mobilities and transition experiences. Overall, our findings highlight the heterogeneity of student trajectories, the complexity of conceptions of transition, mobility and home, and the materiality of individuals' experiences. We encourage teachers and researchers to see learning and institutional spaces anew, as assemblages where the human and non-human, social, material, connect and intra-act, and we suggest that support for students to transition into and through university should acknowledge the multiplicity of individual experiences, as well as the ongoing and diverse nature of students' transitions and mobilities.

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