FQS FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH SOZIALFORSCHUNG

Volume 23, No. 3, Art. 8
September 2022

"In Universities, the Religious People Keep Their Mouths Shut": Solving an Interdiscursive Problem in Higher Education Literacy Practices

Paul Vincent Smith

Key words: religion; ethnomethodology; FOUCAULT; higher education; academic literacies; WINCH

Abstract: Religious faith, despite being a protected characteristic under UK law, is under-studied in higher education. In this article, I answer the call for studies that demonstrate the difference that religious adherence can make to the student experience of higher education instruction and assessment. In my qualitative study, I used ideas from ethnomethodology, FOUCAULT's archaeological work, academic literacies, and the Wittgensteinian perspective of WINCH to characterise the meeting of religious faith and sociological constructionism as a discursive problem occasioned by a born-again Christian student. I show how this discursive problem was described after it had been solved, pragmatically if not academically, in the student's writing. The solution comprised an interdiscursive technique of presenting faith-inspired ideas without pressing them into the service of an argument structure. My analysis of materials demonstrates a series of considerations that would not be relevant to non-religious students.

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1. Introduction

The experience of students affiliated with a religious faith in the UK higher education sector has started to attract greater attention from researchers and policy-makers. Despite religion being a protected characteristic under UK legislation, it has not yet received the same prominence as other such characteristics—especially those of race and sex or gender—in studies of university students (STEVENSON & AUNE, 2017). This is steadily beginning to change as researchers come to realise not only the opportunities afforded by the so-called "intersection" of religious faith with other markers of identity; but also the practical implications of the possibility that students of some faith may outnumber students of no faith on many campuses. [1]

The landscape for students of faith in UK higher education can still fairly be said to be one where they encounter secular influences. Although it seems that the

influence of university attendance has minimal effect on the *religiosity* of students (GUEST, 2015; GUEST, AUNE, SHARMA & WARNER, 2013), with a few exceptions the universities themselves have no religious mission, governance, or organising principles. The specific challenges and needs of religious students are not generally met by the institution. In addition to negotiating the home-university nexus, life on campus, and religious allowances (GILLIAT-RAY, 2000), various teaching and learning considerations—instruction, assessment, syllabus—have the potential to take on a particular charge, especially in disciplines which, even if not designed to provide alternative explanations to those of religion, are frequently delivered in this way (FAIRWEATHER, 2012). These teaching and learning issues are gradually being brought into focus. [2]

This is notably the case in the critical studies of *academic literacies*, where only LILLIS (2001) and SMITH and BARATTA (2016) have addressed faith in any depth; one possible reason for this being that although religion may intersect with other protected characteristics, it is far from clear that a religious affiliation alone will signal the underprivileged or non-traditional status that academic literacies tends to focus on (AUNE & GUEST, 2017; WINGATE, 2015). Another reason is that "students often hold back from expressing their religious beliefs in the knowledge that what they really think is too controversial in the academic environment in which they are operating" (SABRI, 2017, p.198), thus avoiding the "dialogical encounters" (LILLIS, 2003, p.204) between discourses—religious and disciplinary—that potentially conflict. There are then few contemporary studies of practices "in the wild", concerning real events and work assessed for credit. [3]

According to SABRI (2017, p.192), there is a need to conduct further studies of "what differences religion might make to the nature of students' engagement with higher education, particularly in relation to the practices of learning and teaching". In this article I respond to this call with a detailed qualitative study of the events surrounding a second-year undergraduate student in the social sciences at a large UK university. The focus was, and will be here, on the spoken and literacy practices of this student, who self-identified as a born-again Christian.[1] My holistic analysis of the case materials reveals something of the contemporary landscape of universities. [4]

In Section 2, I briefly introduce the context of the study, and give a detailed account of the conceptual influences on my analysis, as well as introducing the problem-solution heuristic implied by the student protagonist. In Section 3, I outline the initial meeting of faith and constructionism as encountered by the student. Following this, in Section 4, I provide interview data with staff accompanied by some analytical commentary. Section 5 is dedicated to a full analysis of how the problem was seen and established by the student, while in Section 6, I suggest her textual means for solving it. In Section 7, I offer a conclusion. [5]

1 In the context of research, I understood this to mean that she had gained or renewed her Christian faith as an adult. The student did not specify a denomination that she identified with, but as our discussion progressed, it became clear that she understood the born-again appellation as enough of a warrant to contextualise her opinions and actions.

2. Materials and Methodology

The materials for this article were collected in the late 2000s as part of doctoral research on academic literacy practices, and consist of extracts from an interview conducted with the student, the completed assessed essay she described, and feedback on the essay. These textual artifacts were discussed with the student in the interview. Subsequently, two interviews were conducted with academic staff who had experience with delivering the gender and sexuality course that the essay was written for. In coming to characterise the materials, I have used some of SACKS' early ideas on *sociological description* (1963, 1999; SCHEGLOFF, 1999). SACKS posited that sociological description is to be distinguished from sociological reconstruction on the basis that *description* supposes observed phenomena. As he pointed out (1999), this was not an option for WEBER (1967 [1917-1919]) in the latter's work on Ancient Judaism; rather, to extract a social structure from the biblical record, WEBER had to *interrogate* his texts, that is, treat them as providing answers to his questions. The warrant or criterion for assessing the outcome of this interrogation is *recognisability*—in this case, limiting the audience to those who can see what WEBER was about by dint of their professional training. [6]

Along similar lines, I suggest that there are three important features of my own collection of materials. First, they can be characterised as emerging from an ethnographic or more properly quasi-ethnographic methodology, on the following basis.[2] The study was conducted largely in and around my work setting, with limits on extensive "hanging around" with the student participants; the setting was moreover one in which I was "uniquely adequate" (GARFINKEL, 2002, pp.175-176) by virtue of my familiarity with academic writing generally and with its features in local pedagogical contexts, a reversal of most ethnographies. Despite this, employing an "ethnographic sensibility" (LILLIS, 2008, p.372; RANDALL, MARR & ROUNCEFIELD, 2001, p.37) opened up the possibility of allowing any given event, account, or interaction to become relevant, so that all the component materials became reflexive or "mutually explicating" (HUGHES, RANDALL & SHAPIRO, 1993, p.128). This sensibility is reflected here in the chronological order in which I set out the investigation as it occurred from my perspective. The analysis of materials therefore allows a *perspicuous* view in both WITTGENSTEIN's (2009 [1953]) and GARFINKEL's (2002) senses: the former in that they are amenable to an ordering that reveals the connections between them;[3] the latter, in the sense that the materials partly consist of "work affairs"

2 Although it is difficult to find a concerted definition of "quasi-ethnography", it seems to be used where researchers see their work as in some way short of qualifying as a full ethnography, perhaps along the lines I discuss in this paragraph, where it does not involve the staple methods nor time commitment of ethnography (JOHNS, 2013), where there is a perceived lack of ethnographic context (COULDRY, 2003), or where the data collected may consist of "fragments" (BANDYOPADHYAY, JEFFERSON & ULGEVIK, 2012, p.28). Despite these ostensible limitations, in a quasi-ethnographic study the reflexive relationships will nonetheless be noted between interactions and their institutional context (RANDALL et al., 2001), without treating ethnography as a "shorthand for 'contextual background' to linguistic material" (BLOMMAERT, 2005, p.239). Also, the researcher will find a balance between emic and etic perspectives to drive forward the analysis (LILLIS, 2008).

3 In the edition of "Philosophical Investigations" used, "perspicuous" was translated as "surveyable" (p.54, §122).

that reveal "the organisational *thing*" that the student writer is up against (GARFINKEL 2002, p.182). [7]

Further to this, the materials have and depend upon what SACKS (1963, 1999) referred to as the "serious" characteristic of analysable data. This is to say that they are connected in a meaningful and orderly way, and constitute a course of action that is amenable to being traced by the enquirer. They have a *prima facie* consistency (PESTELLO & PESTELLO, 2000) that itself becomes a topical, "researchable issue" (p.62). Further, this consistency is of a piece with a *motive* that reflexively provides for the veracity and coherence of described actions. [8]

Finally, the study is nonetheless a *reconstructive* exercise. Ethnomethodologists aim to avoid attributing motive as an explanatory factor in accounting for actions. In this case, assuming that the student writer took a course of action through and in her writing, grounding the motive in the concreteness of actions as demonstrated in both text and talk is necessary in order to come to an understanding of the methods "that could have been used to produce 'what happened in the way that it did'" (BENSON & HUGHES, 1991, p.132; TEN HAVE, 2002). This is not an *in vivo* study of writing but relies on the sense of post-hoc accounts. In studies of writing, for the most part we deal with written products, and post-hoc accounts of those products. Further, when asked about writing, people tend to respond with formulations of the text (GARFINKEL & SACKS, 1970), bringing to mind GARFINKEL's "gap" in writing "between the work of composing a text and the retrospectively analysable properties of the resultant document" (LYNCH, 1993, p.289). The subsequent sense, reference, and meaning of the document is what can be called the *text* (HEAP, 1991). [9]

In this case, GARFINKEL's "organisational thing" (2002, p.182) is also a *discursive* thing because my analysis of the materials demonstrates that there are limits to what can meaningfully be said without sanction. The organisation—a university, in this case—is associated with certain discourses that are not necessarily amenable to those who work and study within it. The heuristic used is that of the *problem-solution*, but in keeping with the ethnomethodological edict that analyses should be faithful to the methods used by the participants in a social setting (LYNCH, 2017; MAIR, BROOKER, DUTTON & SORMANI, 2021), the problem identified and the solutions deployed are those of the protagonist rather than those of the analyst. The descriptive analyses of ethnomethodology and archaeological studies are both relevant here inasmuch as they demonstrate the ways in which members are faced with "particular conjunctures within the webs of competing and contradictory discourses and on the subjects who must find equally discursive 'solutions' to their problems in the form of available techniques" (McHOUL, 1986, p.66). The matter of *what can be said* becomes one with the *available techniques for saying* (or writing) (LAURIER & PHILO, 2004). For PESTELLO and PESTELLO (2000, p.71), questions of motive as emerging from the relationship between words and actions can come about "when identities are at stake". Archaeological and ethnomethodological analyses of such rely on

> "finding an often marginalised or specialised group for whom what has become taken-for-granted and unproblematic by most of 'us' cannot be so for them. Foucault and the ethnomethodologists then have the charge to consult those people (alive or dead) as serious experts in producing, say, normal appearances, warranted observations, sincerity, class, gender, or whatever in the face of embodied, situational, and practical difficulties" (LAURIER & PHILO, 2004, p.432). [10]

This article therefore joins a body of other studies notable for the attempts of their protagonists to solve practical problems through discursive means: Oliver North (LYNCH & BOGEN, 1996), Pierre Rivière (FOUCAULT, 1982 [1973]), and the transgender woman Agnes (GARFINKEL, 1967).[4] For its focus on matters of identity and power in educational writing practices, the field of *academic literacies* is also relevant (IVANIĆ, 1998, LEA & STREET, 1998, LILLIS & SCOTT, 2007). The aim is to identify and describe the problem as set out in the spoken data, and to establish as endogenous practices some of the techniques used as written discursive solutions by the student. As per SABRI's (2017) aspiration above, these should demonstrate the difference that religious affiliation can make to experiences of tertiary study. [11]

3. Faith and Constructionism

The data emerged from a longitudinal (two-year) cooperation during a doctoral study involving eight undergraduate students. One of them was a "non-traditional learner", a mature student who had entered university at the age of 32 after taking an Access course,[5] and to whom I gave the pseudonym "Cathy", following a practice of giving random pseudonyms to all participants. Cathy identified as a born-again Christian and was reading for a joint honours undergraduate degree in sociology and criminology. Her involvement in the project spanned her second and third years of study. In her second year, Cathy took a sociology course on gender and sexuality, and wrote an essay on this title: "'As far as gender and sexuality are concerned, nature has nothing to do with it' (Weeks, 1985). Discuss this statement with reference to gender and/or sexuality."[6] [12]

4 Oliver NORTH was a Lieutenant Colonel in the US National Security Council staff when he was summoned to testify by a joint congressional committee investigating the Iran-Contra affair. NORTH's testimony was notable for his conversational posturings, ability to leverage his background as a military hero, and facility in deconstructing the meaning and reference of the many texts used in the investigation. Pierre RIVIÈRE was a French peasant who, in 1835, killed three members of his family. His memoire was written as a way of justifying his actions and thereby inviting the death penalty, in the context of competing medical, psychiatric, and legal discourses over his fate. Agnes, known only by this first name in GARFINKEL (1967), aimed, as a transitioning transgender woman, to "acquire the rights and obligations of an adult female" (p.134). This she attempted through means such as filling in her missing female biography, and taking on new performances and behaviours consonant with a person who could straightforwardly be ascribed the category "woman".

5 In England and Wales, "[t]he Access to Higher Education Diploma is a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at university" (https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/ [Accessed: July 25, 2022]).

6 Jeffrey WEEKS is a prominent UK-based sociologist of sexuality. In this essay title, a quote from one of his publications has been used.

Our discussion of this essay was occasioned by my asking Cathy, hitherto a rather unforthcoming interviewee, whether she felt she was being given the opportunity to put her own views and opinions into her writing. This line of questioning was inspired by IVANIĆ's (1998) work on identity in academic writing, and by the academic literacies interest in *essayist literacy* (LILLIS, 1999; SCHROEDER, 2001).[7] This conversation occurred in the second year of my research and Cathy's own third and final year on her degree, and her answer constituted the longest stretch of uninterrupted speech by her in our conversations (S = student, R = researcher):

> "S: Yeah, I just don't know how! I don't know how you're supposed to do it, so I just—especially in my Gender essay, because I really struggled with that course anyway because of my faith and some of the issues that were coming up. And I didn't feel like I could put my opinion in, because I didn't—obviously I had the Bible to back it up, but I didn't know how, or—basically I went to see someone at the church who is the head teacher and he said, just leave it out, because that's not what they're expecting to see anyway, so I just left it out. But I did feel that I wanted my opinion to be in but I wasn't sure of how to go about that. So I kind of went around it, and did a quite broad context really.
>
> R: So what you ended up with was a broad discussion ...
>
> S: Yeah, I kind of mentioned the Bible and stuff like that, but I didn't really put my opinion in, because I didn't know how to back it up really." [13]

A little later in the conversation, we came back to the essay and its provocative title:

> "R: Did you come down in favour of this—because it's quite a flat statement, isn't it—did you come down in favour of that or against it, or neither?
>
> S: Against what it's saying. I don't believe nature has nothing to do with our sexuality.
>
> R: And did you manage to find any kind of authors or, you know, ammunition that backed you up in that?
>
> S: In terms of my faith, I believe that nature ... I mean I believe that God created us, so ... I really can't remember in depth. I've done five more [essays] since then." [14]

While the first exchange includes a problem identified and briefly narrated by Cathy, the second is important in that it warrants the argument that she held views that did not sit easily with the tenets of contemporary social science. It also allows the observation that although other aspects of identity might be relevant here, religion is the major influence in this discussion. Finally, in this case, there is a justification for saying that these opinions could be described as a form of *essentialism*, in that they posit a central component not established through culture or social interaction. It should be noted that the remainder of Cathy's studies appeared to progress without such problems arising. [15]

7 That is, forms of literacy that require the writer to be more "objective" and to distance the content of writing from their identity. A critical perspective on essayist literacy will tend to suggest that more privileged groups are more familiar with writing in the ways preferred in the academy.

There are several interesting features in these exchanges. First, repeated readings hinder rather than help a clear understanding of what the anaphoric "it" and "that" refer to, as in the utterances, "he said, just leave it out", and "that's not what they're expecting to see". These usages can be seen as literal instances of the "Sacksian it", i.e., a conversational item that "is produced, recognised, and understood before it has a definiteness of sense or reference" (GARFINKEL, LYNCH & LIVINGSTON, 1981, p.157). Second, it is notable that Cathy sought the teacher at her church for advice rather than a university figure. Third, despite seeking and receiving advice, she seems equivocal about following it. These three features constitute the initial scene of investigation. [16]

Cathy also provided me with her essay and the feedback on it. Below are the most relevant passages from the essay (those that specifically mention Christianity or the biological basis of sex and gender). They are taken from various parts of the essay. The introduction ended with the following passage:

> We are going to look at the historical roots of gender and sexuality and explore how sexology has been influential in constructing meaning to gender and sex. Furthermore, we will look at the statement put forward by Weeks and develop his view, with reference to gender and sexuality, that nature has nothing to do with the formation of our sexuality and gender. Does nature in actuality have nothing to do with it? Could it be an amalgamation of both nature and nurture? Do cultural values and morals impact the configuration of ones gender and sexuality?

The next passage immediately followed the introduction:

> Looking back through the history of sexual behaviour we notice that it was moulded primarily by Christianity (Giddens, 2006, p. 443). Whilst the Bible was not intended as a history or scientific text book we can, however, use it as a starting point of understanding, as Christians believe the creation of man and woman. Adam and Eve, who were created in God's own image, were blessed by God and were told by Him to "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1: 27-28).
>
> The view of the Old Testament could therefore be interpreted that sex was created for man and woman to reproduce within marriage. Thus we could presume that any sexual behaviour outside of this would be seen as being wrong. We see this in the book of Leviticus. However, we must look at the book of Leviticus in context. The main message of Leviticus is the holiness of God and its focus was on behaving differently to other civilizations around. Its purpose was to outline the duties of the priests and Levites in worship and a guidebook for living differently for the Hebrews. In the New Testament, Jesus' teachings do not focus on sex, outside of marriage, as being a bigger issue than other sinful behaviour we adhere to. In fact he taught the opposite, he could do this through his claims of being the Son of God. It is true to say that throughout the history of the Church (people who follow Jesus Christ) many have interpreted scripture without taking into account the context of the time which may possibly have been seen as Church being out of line with reality. These Biblical narratives set out the ways in which our gender and sexuality were created from the beginning of time. Although for nearly two thousand years Western attitudes towards sexual behaviour were based on the teachings of the Church, many people ignored or reacted against them. The idea that sexual fulfilment can and should be sought only through marriage was rare (Giddens, 2006, p.443).
>
> With a decline of Christianity, attitudes of sexuality signal a shift in authority from religion to science.

In the essay, Cathy subsequently moved from surveying essentialist to constructionist arguments. In fact, the essay mirrors the order of the course content in its moves from the Christian context, through sexology and

psychoanalysis, to socio-biology, and finally to social constructionism. This is one way of understanding what Cathy meant by the "broad context" she talks of. An important personal claim by Cathy appears on page 6 of the essay[8]:

> 36 Therefore, I would say, there is evidence to suggest that there is definitely a biological
> 37 basis to our gender and sexuality.

Finally, this passage appeared in the conclusion:

> 38 My opinion would be that our
> 39 sexuality and gender are innate, although society influences the decisions we make in
> 40 regards to our sexual orientation. Decisions in relation to what biology "is" along with
> 41 where it stops and "society" starts are affected by social beliefs and norms. Where we
> 42 draw the line between the two depends on the frameworks of knowledge that guide us in
> 43 our attempt, because what we "see" is conditioned by what we expect to see. This is
> 44 important for a discussion of sex and gender, because it means that judgements about
> 45 which attributes "belong" with (biological) sex and which "belong" with (social) gender
> 46 depend on the ways knowledge is socially constructed. Therefore, it is difficult to
> 47 separate biology from society. In this sense, the gender and sex distinction over-simplify
> 48 complex social processes.

The body of Cathy's essay appeared to be faithful to the intentions set out in her introduction. It was also consistent with her account of the essay from the interview. The passage at lines 9-32 at least bears the hallmarks of a writer who has more involvement with Christianity than someone who simply wants to provide a starting point through historical context. [17]

Cathy's essay was criticised along a number of lines in the feedback. Thus, under the criterion "Development of coherent & reasoned argument", the marker (most likely a teaching assistant) wrote: "You repeat the 'obvious' arguments in favour of 'innate' elements of sexuality and gender after discussing the problems with this—so therefore this is quite weak." Under "Use of evidence & illustration", he/she wrote: "You introduce various 'illustrations' from the bible and from introductory source materials—but at this level, more advanced use of evidence and illustration is necessary." [18]

More concerted criticism came under the heading "Relevant literature used":

> "This is the source of the major weaknesses of the essay—you do well to incorporate Weeks, but you have mostly engaged with only basic and general sociological introductions. This is a 2nd year degree module—and we covered a range of literature on complex theories and debates. But you do not appear to have engaged with these." [19]

The general comments encapsulate some of the remarks above:

> "You indicate a basic understanding of the issues & some familiarity with relevant literature, theories and debates. However, your essay is weakened by an over-reliance on basic introductory sociological texts, and limited engagement with the

8 This point was argued on the basis of the facticity of sexual reproduction, and on the basis that some social scientists see the biological as the main influence on gender.

> wealth of work we have covered on the course. More reading of appropriate literature would improve the essay and analysis considerably". [20]

It is interesting to read the faith the marker had in the therapeutic possibilities of reading and engaging with "appropriate literature". By the marker's own assessment, though, the essay would have required this reading to culminate in *arguments* that were better produced. There was also a need to produce arguments that were not "obvious" if a better outcome was desired. This could mean a number of things: arguments that are deeper, more developed, or based on more reading, and therefore more technically adept. It could also be read, though, as questioning the very line of innatist argument in the essay—note the scare quotes surrounding "innate" in the feedback. This need not, then, be understood only as a matter of coherence; it could also be that the innatist or essentialist side to the argument is being problematised. [21]

4. What Can be Written on the Gender Course?

Having examined the materials above, I started to ask myself about the messages that could meaningfully be communicated in work for this course, and whether arguments based on "innatist"—or perhaps "essentialist" or "universalist"—views on gender and sexuality could have any kind of currency. A provisional thesis was that the realm of nurture would be a better fit for sociological interrogation than that of nature. [22]

Informed by these thoughts, I conducted interviews with L1, a past tutor for the course, and with L2, who had tutored the course at the time that Cathy had taken it and who at the time of my study had taken over as course convenor. These were ethnographic interviews (ANGROSINO, 2007) in that in what had emerged as the research setting, the lecturers assumed the guise of experts who could potentially provide a deep understanding of behaviours in a "domain of interest" (p.47). They were conducted as semi-structured interviews because of the delineated topic of the discussions, and because although the lecturers were themselves part of the ethnographic "scene", they were one-off interlocutors. L1 complained about the historical inability of many former students to connect with the main messages of the course, which she saw as designed to engage them with theoretical accounts of gender and sexuality:

> "Students really feel that if they see a picture of a man or woman, they can describe what is masculine, what is feminine about them just by looking at the picture, but they don't realise that [this course] is actually pretty theoretical. For them it's just fun, you know, talking about sex, lesbians, homosexuals ... they don't really connect with the theoretical challenge, which is more important in a sociology course." [23]

In fact, L1 said that many students presented essentialist viewpoints in their course writing, which she associated with written work that was homogeneous and basic, suggesting an easy comparison with the feedback above. Both L1 and L2 saw their challenge as helping students cross into social-theoretical territory,

which was more or less equivalent with guiding them to analyses of how nurture and social influence work, rather than trading on descriptions of universal givens:

> L2: "Its aim is to change people's thinking. A lot of students arrive with the attitude that there's something natural to gender and that ultimately they are natural qualities, something inherent. It's a very sociological or cultural studies project in that it seeks to encourage students to investigate the idea that these things we take as natural are in fact constructed, the results of human interaction."
>
> L2: "It is part of the agenda about practices rather than solid, fixed identities that never change, i.e., 'you are a homosexual', 'you are a heterosexual', or whatever. It recognises the fluidity and changeability of those categories. It looks at what people do, and the meanings attached to it, rather than what people are ... But I guess as well as challenging essentialism or determinism [the course] also aims in part to look at how these categories are enmeshed or co-constituted." [24]

Essentialism, then, appeared in the course, but only initially and as a "straw man" that could be employed to show, by contrast, the real business of sociology. It was not unknown for the very ideas of the "natural" or "essential" to be appropriated by a constructionist perspective, both by social theorists in the syllabus, and by some of the more successful students (including another in my study). L2 noted the possibility of a sociologism, or social determinism, if considerations of biology and physiology were jettisoned completely, and referenced the work of JACKSON[9] as part of a movement that had brought back materiality to post-structuralist work on gender. Nonetheless, he presented a picture of the gradual channelling of *all* disciplines into a single orthodoxy or paradigm:

> "R: In your view, is that [constructionism] the dominant perspective within the Sociology [department]?
>
> L2: There's certainly a kind of ... I think any kind of essentialism is really to be avoided [laughs], and that's not just within the [department], that's the same at any kind of sociology or cultural studies-oriented conference. It's something that dare not speak its name [laughs]. Unless you invoke it as a point of criticism, you define yourself against it ... So I'd say it is a fairly dominant paradigm ... It's probably not quite so hegemonic in sociology as it is in humanities." [25]

The tenor of the discussions, and the overall form of the course, not to mention the essay title, suggested a dialectic between society and nature that, once resolved, was still defined by the sociality of its objects. As CALLON put it, "When the society described by sociologists confronts nature (no matter which description they give), society always has the last word" (1986, p.198; ENDRESS 2016). The ways in which "nature" can be brought under the purview of "culture" or "society" suggests the reversal and re-inscription of a Derridean hierarchy (DERRIDA, 1976 [1967]; SPIKES, 1992). In this case, the historical pre-eminence of the natural over the social, or cultural, is reversed such that there can be no concept of nature "outside" that of its appropriation by sociocultural apparatuses.

9 Stevi JACKSON is a prominent UK-based sociologist working in the field of sexuality and gender.

The logic of this move relies upon mediating *concepts of* nature, such that what nature *is* depends upon the ways we think about it—these ways being inextricably sociocultural phenomena. This is the kind of observation that one might expect of students working at an advanced level, and is present to some extent in what Cathy wrote in lines 40-48. However, following WINCH (1987, 2003 [1958]; see also SHARROCK & ANDERSON, 1987), it can be argued that sociological constructionism and religious essentialism are not *bound* to contradict each other as abstract ideational systems. Any conflict only comes about in an *occasioned* way (HANRAHAN, 2003; MOTTIER, 2005). Here, it is achieved through setting them up as rival accounts. Rather than being set up as methods belonging to different domains (say, for establishing social scientific insights and for ethical ways of living, respectively), they are understood as mutually exclusive accounts of states of affairs in the world. [26]

Some final remarks from these interviews concern L2's approach to instruction and the scope for negotiating meaning in the gender course (LILLIS, 2001). His experience of teaching had led him to avoid playing the role of the pedagogue, wanting rather to provide students "with the intellectual tools that they can make decisions about themselves". The transformative experience that was the goal of the course should be realised above all through encouraging independence and autonomy of thinking; but also, through a disciplined—in both senses (FOUCAULT, 1977 [1975]; TURNER, 2003)—adherence to reading and use of relevant theories. The use of personal experience in written work was seen as something that presented risks to the student writer: L2, leaning on FAIRWEATHER (2012), provided a memorable reversal in saying that students "need to get to know what the debates are, what the issues and what the paradigms are before they start doing anything as sophisticated as using their own experience." [27]

Further, L2 speculated on the sociological discourse at play and whether this might discourage opposing viewpoints from being expressed:

> "It may just be that the kind of people who sign up for that particular course either observe the kind of power dynamic and are maybe reluctant to speak out. Also it's not just the power dynamic between student and teacher. I guess anybody who might express that particular view, whether it's religious or secular, they might be just as afraid of vocalising that because of peer pressure. They might calculate that people who elect to do this course might be more likely to have more liberal views about sexuality ... it's part of the academic doxa that this course really is attuned to people with liberal beliefs and attitudes, isn't it, and invites that way of thinking." [28]

The reflexive, self-sustaining aspect of this discourse was not lost on L2, who repeatedly used sociological terminology such as "hegemony", "canon", and "doxa" in describing it.[10] He outlined a pedagogy that we might see as familiar and defensible, but that nonetheless implies the presence of those power

10 Readers of this journal are recommended to refer to a polemic by RATNER (2006) on social constructionism. This occasioned several responses within these pages which differ on the aims of constructionism, and whether such views tend to be held with any degree of dogmatism.

relations that, described in similar terms, have become problematic in higher education in recent years. The idea that it could be students rather than instructors who do most of the work of delineating what can and cannot be said is supported by recent research (e.g. BARATTA & SMITH, 2019; WELLER & HOOLEY, 2017). [29]

5. Setting up a Discursive Problem

As stated, I investigate in this article a case "where surface appearances are problematised less by the theorist, and more by certain persons, practices, and places" (LAURIER & PHILO, 2004, p.432). It is clear from Cathy's narrative that she saw a problem in need of a solution. This problem requires careful description, as it had a reflexive relationship with the solution and how it worked. This needed a careful rendering of the initial interview. The three features of her account isolated above are a good place to start. [30]

However, an understanding of the problem is made more difficult to arrive at by Cathy's view that she found deploying opinion in essays *generally* challenging. This matter was then not endemic to, but exacerbated by, the issues in the gender and sexuality course. It is difficult to countenance that Cathy sought the advice of a church teacher for *generic* academic advice, not least as her short narrative appears to concern the gender essay specifically. The difference in this setting was that "I didn't *feel like I could* put my opinion in", as opposed to "not being able to"; some aspect of normativity or extrinsic limitation is at work. In the idea that "obviously I had the Bible to back it up", there was an opinion *supported* or *supportable* by the Bible, which will not be the case for all opinions in all essays. "Backing up" is moreover described as something like a necessary component of presenting opinions: "I didn't really put my opinion in, because I didn't know how to back it up". In this case, the relevance (or reception) of scriptural support exacerbated Cathy's wider technical challenges in handling "backing" for her views. [31]

For DRIESSEN (1997, p.7), "[to] understand any actual story, first the whole of it must be seized", and the initial exchange with Cathy involves a story that I see, from a vulgar reading (WATSON, 2022), as clear in its message. To support this analytically, though, is a complex task, originating in the presence of the "Sacksian it" referred to earlier. Something is going on with the tying practices (SACKS, 1992) in this narrative that make what is being referred to by the frequent usage of "it" "an ill-defined object" (SLACK, HARTSWOOD, PROCTER & ROUNCEFIELD, 2007, p.182), or to put it more precisely, an object that mutates through the telling. The early candidate for "it" is as a substitute for "opinion", but this then occasions a narrative that appears to have its origin in a "trouble" or lack of "usualness". The story is sequenced such that the *trouble* is the component that binds the parts of it together (SACKS, 1992, p.237). It begins with unelaborated "issues", involving Cathy perceiving herself as belonging to a category outside the norm (SACKS, 1992, pp.60-61; see also TEN HAVE, 2002) to which she sought and received a solution. However, there is something unsatisfactory with the solution and the matter remains unresolved for the

purposes of incorporating opinion, despite being practically concluded at the time. A further conversational resource, the membership categorisation device, is also present in the narrative and allows us to hear the conversation between a Church teacher and religious adherent as a dilemma that can be addressed by the former as a suitable arbiter in affairs at a discernible religious-secular border. The suggested solution ("just leave it out") is one that, on the basis of the teacher being sought for a certain purpose, is hearable as an occasioned and not pan-contextual solution. The "tellable" story here helps to mutate the anaphoric "it" and "that" into an evolving object, the understanding of which changes through co-presence of membership categorical and narrative components.[11] Following SACKS (1992, p.518), "the very order of phenomenon being invoked by the indicator, is not invoked by the indicator", but rather by other conversational features that influence our understanding of it. On this basis, we can understand the discussion of opinion here as an opinion-informed-by-faith-in-this-setting. [32]

This is further supported by the observation that, as far as Cathy is concerned, her opinion in this context is liable to be one that can be backed up by the Bible. Thus, having been advised to "just leave it out", taking this advice would involve Cathy omitting her views on the basis that an opinion-based-on-scripture is completely isomorphic with her opinion-as-it-pertains-to-the-essay-title. In other words, leaving out *scriptural* "backing"—a strong candidate for "not what they're expecting to see"—leaves an argument without a necessary component. As it happens, Cathy's opinion on the innateness of sexuality is stated (lines 38-39 of the essay), but with a justification (lines 40-48) that owes more to a constructionist line of thought. [33]

It is easy to understand the church teacher's advice as given in Cathy's best interests: omitting that which "they're not expecting to see" precludes a likely source of criticism. Two assumptions seem to be at play here: first, overt arguments or backing based on scripture are difficult to render as consonant with sociological discourse (WINCH, 1987). Second: the omission of such views is not an insuperable problem for the identities tied to them. Identities, it seems, can and should be bracketed for the purposes of dealing with a competing discourse in domains where that discourse has primacy (DINHAM, 2017; GUEST et al., 2013). Certainly, the suggestion made by the church teacher can be rendered conceptually by the modes of self that were outlined by IVANIĆ (1998).[12] However, given the title that Cathy is writing on, removing opinions generated in this way effectively means that she is left without a way of expressing her personal views to their full extent, which in this instance has a direct bearing on

11 Two questions arise here. The first is whether the various "its" and "thats" refer to a single object. I suggest that anyone attempting to find the coherence in this narrative will hear these usages as referring in common. The second is why an object is not named. Following SACKS (1992, p.518), I would say that something is being done as well as said here, that it is not a case of merely not naming something.

12 "I suggest that there are three ways of thinking about the identity of a person in the act of writing, which I am calling the writer's 'autobiographical self', the 'discoursal self' which the writer constructs in the act of writing, and the 'self as author', referring to a writer's relative authoritativeness. These three 'selves' are all socially constructed and socially constructing in that they are shaped by and shape the more abstract 'possibilities for self-hood' which exist in the writer's socio-cultural context" (IVANIĆ, 1998, p.24).

her positioning within theoretical sociological debates. The course of action suggested by the teacher is adoptable, but it comes at a price. [34]

When approaching the question of why Cathy approached her church teacher for help, we are on somewhat more speculative ground. In one sense, the very fact of her appealing to somebody outside the university requires little further comment. To adopt the perspective of the student, though, the church teacher would have to be in a better position to proffer help than any university figure. This could be due to the church teacher's association with a prioritised belief:

> "... if beliefs are organised hierarchically, religious beliefs are those at the top. I should make it clear that being 'at the top' does not refer to having content on the broadest (e.g., 'cosmic' or 'ultimate') level. Rather, it refers to the priority that it carries, and influence that it exerts, over the wider belief structure. Assuming that all beliefs lower than belief X in the hierarchy cannot overtly contradict X ..., then 'religion' is that belief that, by being at the top of the hierarchy, forces compliance on every lower belief" (DONOVAN, 2003, p.83). [35]

However, with no evidence for Cathy's Christian identity having been divulged at any point during the gender course, a connection could be made with local policing of the academic orthodoxy. As STARK tersely put it, in universities "the religious people keep their mouth shut" (in LARSON & WITHAM 1999, p.91), an idea made more explicit in L2's suggestion above that express departures from the orthodoxy might be avoided either because of the lecturer-student relationship or because of peer pressure. To reiterate, such students "might calculate that people who elect to do this course might be more likely to have more liberal views about sexuality", and so circumvent such discussions. [36]

Further insight into this matter is suggested by the manner in which Cathy takes on the church teacher's guidance. Despite following this advice, Cathy's account can be read as expressing some unease with it. In that she "wanted my opinion to be in", but realised that this would be problematic, there is a matter of the public availability of identity, or an identity politics of recognition (WERBNER, 2010, p.251) that in certain instantiations could imply a "denial of identity ... tantamount to an effacement of the person". This clearly fits with the sentiments expressed in the quote from DONOVAN above. Including her views would be a way both for Cathy to avoid this effacement, and to include necessary components of an argument in her academic work. [37]

6. Finding Solutions to Competing Discourses

So far, I have established that there is a discursive problem brought about by the perceived lack of fit between religious and social scientific discourses. This dilemma exacerbated an existing problem of incorporating opinion into academic writing but generated a story tellable as an incident that diverged from the norm. It is possible to see this occasioning WERBNER's "denial of identity" (2010, p.251) if beliefs at the top of a hierarchy are not expressed or taken into account. In IVANIĆ's terms (1998), the *autobiographical* self thereby becomes the most *authentic* component of the self. There is nothing to dissuade us from this characterisation in anything said by the two lecturers. On this basis, we might expect nothing substantive to be written in Cathy's essay that gainsays her religious influence. But, in so far as this constitutes a solution for her, how do we describe the methods she uses to avoid potential conflict? [38]

It is worth saying, first of all, that if we ask, "what practices are applied here in order to bring about the desired outcome?", that question can be answered in a variety of ways and at a series of levels of abstraction. At something like the least concrete level, Cathy operated with notable self-governmentality (LEMKE, 2002), adapting her writing to the known requirements of the dominant constructionist discourse, even if she is less successful in regard to the stated assessment criteria. This involves being able to see the potential for an occasioned conflict and what suitable responses designed to avoid it might be. [39]

Similarly, the distinction of public and private as intimated by WERBNER (2010) provides a useful heuristic for what happens in the essay and begins to hint at the textual practices used. The extended attention paid to Biblical heritage (lines 9-32), and the content of the conclusions, diverges from what would be expected of student work that is fully attuned to a constructionist orthodoxy. Both, rival, accounts receive attention, but the alignment of the arguer (IVANIĆ's *discoursal self*) to these accounts is not completely clear. What to the marker is "repeating the obvious arguments" could be seen differently by the religious gaze. This lack of concerted alignment, enabling the writer to navigate between two distinct discourses, comes at the expense of textual coherence, but fulfils its pragmatic purpose. Evasion, reticence, or hedging becomes a practical technique as well as a textual feature. Aspects of an autobiographical, "authentic", or private self (IVANIĆ, 1998) are put into the public domain, but careful work is carried out to avoid the appearance of the same inter-discursive conflict the student encountered in coming to write the essay. [40]

In terms of manifest textual practices, one of the most prominent features of the essay is that the scriptural ideas are not pressed into service within an argument structure. Instead of using the Bible to back up her opinions overtly, as expressed in the statement "My opinion would be that our sexuality and gender are innate" (lines 38-39, and elsewhere at lines 36-37), Cathy retains both the argument components of assertion and backing (lines 12, 27-28), but they are *dis-located* rather than *co-located*. This dis-location is itself achieved in at least two ways: by the separation in the textual location of these potential argument components;

and by the absence of linking terms signifying logical relations (*because*, *therefore*, etc.) to connect them in a relationship of coherence. The coherence of argument among other things generally relies upon the proximity of its components (HALLIDAY & HASAN, 1976). As seen in Note 8, the *immediate* reasons given for the argument claim at lines 36-37 and 38-39 are the facticity of sexual reproduction, and the availability of social science perspectives that see physiological features as the main influence on gender. The discussion of Christian influence could clearly have a place in this line of argument, whether as *data*, *warrant*, or *backing* in TOULMIN's model (2003 [1958]), but textually it is distant from the argument structure at lines 36-39 and in the preceding lines. Similarly, there are no cohesive markers in the essay that would require the reader to revisit earlier parts of the text to draw conclusions from the passages that do the most to express Cathy's autobiographical self. [41]

To the reader expecting a coherence of argument, then, these components cannot easily be connected in a chain of inference. In fact, as mentioned, the assertion at lines 38-39 is accompanied by a series of points that favour a constructionist approach to gender and sexuality, making this passage of somewhat dubious coherence and leading to the feedback comment concerning the repetition of arguments in favour of innate sexuality. A second feature, solving a different aspect of the problem, is the sheer length of the passage in lines 9-32. Separating the claim from the backing as discussed here occludes Cathy's religious affiliation to a large extent; but it is not made entirely private, either. There is thus a public record of her discussing the Bible but nothing to link her personal views with the Bible as the (sole) backing of her opinions. The substantial *presence* of the scriptural backing (PERELMAN, 1982 [1977]) has the rhetorical value of bringing these ideas to the attention of the reader, but while rhetorical they are not overtly argumentative. Textual coherence is the price to pay for accommodating competing discourses. [42]

7. Conclusion

In this article, I have addressed the ways in which a university student designed literacy practices in response to the perceived mutual contradiction of two distinct discourses. The discursive *problem* concerned how to avoid being associated with a discourse perceived as inimical to the social science orthodoxy; and at the same time, avoid asserting premises that are contrary to a religious faith. The problem also comprised the need to present a suitable public identity for the essay to be recognisable as the expected product of a "university student". This took place in the context of wider concerns the student had with academic literacy. [43]

The *solution* involved writing in such a way as to discourage the reader from making connections between an assertion in favour of innatism, and a source (the Bible), such that the reader would be warranted in seeing that the source supports the claim in an argument structure. The technique is dis-location of these components. In this way, extradiscursive sources are separated from the claim. At the same time, IVANIĆ's (1998) *autobiographical self* is made publicly

visible only to those able to see it, allowing for the plausibility of a sociological subjectivity in the text (IVANIĆ's *discoursal self*). [44]

Given that the essay was recipient designed (SACKS, SCHEGLOFF & JEFFERSON, 1974) for these interdiscursive purposes, it does an admirable job. The essay did not receive a high mark, as the feedback comments suggest, but there was no question of it falling outside the bounds of student-level sociological discourse. Cathy successfully deployed techniques that allowed her to find a workable compromise between the different aspects of writer identity. That is her unacknowledged achievement in this episode. [45]

For the purposes of this article, I have included such information that other analyses are possible; not least, a critical analysis based on Cathy's status as a non-traditional learner and what scholars in academic literacies might see as her lack of facility in using "essayist literacies". This analysis is concerned not so much with Cathy's perceived lack of insight in how to incorporate opinion, and more with how she manages the practical work of knowing "how to go on" (WINCH, 1987, p.134) when confronted with conflicting discourses. Thus, Cathy can be said to have successfully worked through her dilemma, even if the process was difficult and the outcome suboptimal. A Winchian reading of the materials, then, leads the analyst neither to assume that contradiction is necessarily the result when language games or discourses are ostensibly concerned with the same ground—say, sexuality, or the nature of reality (SHARROCK & ANDERSON, 1987)—nor to resort to psychological explanations for adaptive practices. Rather, when knowing how to go on is a fraught issue, the researcher will look for the concrete practices used to navigate through them. [46]

One final remark addresses the difference religious affiliation has made to this student's engagement with her academic work. As someone not amenable to having her way of thinking changed, as per the stated aims of the gender and sexuality course, it is clear that she experienced concerns, sought advice, and felt obliged to generate pragmatic textual strategies that are outside the direct experience of non-religious counterparts. The extent to which this type of experience can or should be mitigated against bears more discussion, but I have demonstrated through the methodology brought to this article largely undiscussed practices that will find parallels elsewhere and which it would be productive for instructors to be aware of. [47]

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Author

Paul Vincent SMITH is a lecturer in education at the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester. His research interests include academic writing, the student experience, and all aspects of higher education practice and policy. His methodological interests include qualitative research, in particular forms of ethnography and textual analysis.

Contact:

Paul Vincent Smith

University of Manchester
Manchester Institute of Education
B3.12, Ellen Wilkinson Building, Oxford Road,
Manchester M13 9PL, UK

E-mail: paul.v.smith@manchester.ac.uk

Citation

Smith, Paul Vincent (2022). "In universities, the religious people keep their mouths shut": Solving an interdiscursive problem in higher education literacy practices [47 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *23*(3), Art. 8, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-23.3.3891.