'I Call Myself a *Mature* Student. That One Word Makes All the Difference': Reflections on Adult Learners' Experiences

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This article discusses findings from a longitudinal study of 20 mature students from a broad range of backgrounds that joined a full-time Access to University programme at an English urban FE college in September 2001. The fieldwork involved repeated interviews – up to five times each – over a two-year period, covering the Access course and first year at university for those progressing as intended (13 of the 20). The interviews explored the impact of returning to study on the lives and biographies of those involved, particularly changing personal relationships, negotiations of risk and the (re)construction of class and learner identities. I seek here to highlight the social context of the interviewees' lives, and to draw heavily upon their stories and self-representations to ground the theories underpinning the analysis offered.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores experiences of life changes for a group of mature learners on an Access to Higher Education (HE) course. The students contest, negotiate and reframe aspects of their identity and subsequent biographical narratives whilst returning to study as adults. In some cases, this return is many years after a childhood engagement with formal education now viewed with a mixture of resentment, regret and a sense of wasted opportunities. This is especially true where schooling left them with a fragile academic self-esteem, a consequence of being labelled 'a failure' as a child (see Waller, 2004, for a more detailed analysis). For some, this

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contributes to a desire to 'make good' perceived deficits through re-engagement with formal education as an adult learner (Archer, 2003), leading to what McFadden (1995) termed 'second chance education'.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) wrote of a 'learning career' amongst (younger) further education (FE) students, which I also find a useful way of viewing older people returning to formal education, as it assumes a (learner) identity in a state of flux, under constant (re)construction. The theories used here to conceptualize identity see it as fragmented (Woodward, 1997), and never 'complete' or finalized, but continually in a state of transition (Ball *et al.*, 2000; Green and Webb, 1997). As such, this understanding of 'identity' can be traced to earlier influences including Beck (1992), Giddens (1991) and Hall (1992; 1996). It is also seen as subjectively experienced (Chappell *et al.*, 2003), embodied in the individual (Charlesworth, 2000), and, in a time of gradually weakening class affiliations, family ties and traditional expectations (Bauman, 2004), determined to an increasing extent by consumption and *lifestyle choices* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). The decision to become a mature student is one such 'lifestyle choice' and the impact of this upon identity (re)formation is what I seek to explore in this article.

The idea from Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) of an individual 'learning career' was further developed by Crossan *et al.* (2003: 59), who proposed that it is 'frequently contingent and associated with rather *fragile and experimental* changes in identity' as opposed to a necessarily '*lasting and unilinear* change' (my emphasis). These studies focused upon the learning experiences of people younger than those in mine, but I consider the approach to be of equal, if perhaps not greater, merit when applied to older students. For instance, the recognition that the trajectory of 'learning careers', can be forwards, sideways or *in reverse* helps us to understand the impact of (frequently negative) earlier encounters with formal education upon the learner and general self-identity of students prematurely leaving an academic programme, as some in the wider study did. None of the seven considered here left during the Access year, although one, Meg,[1] gave up her studies after a few weeks at university.

I have indicated elsewhere how the negotiation of various risks influences the biographical construction of mature students (Waller, 2002). I have also written on how the changing sense of selfhood plays out for these mature students in terms of class, gender and learner identities (Brine and Waller, 2004). Here I focus upon two other components of an individual's biographical construction, which we can employ as lenses through which to view someone's life. These lenses often overlap and reinforce one another, and move in and out of focus at different times. The first lens is the shifting notion of 'self', particularly through growing

self-esteem, maturing world outlook and improving academic abilities. The second is the lived experience of be(com)ing a student, with particular reference to changing lifestyle, contestations over the appropriateness of the label 'student' and processes of 'othering'/being 'othered' in both public and private spheres.

Several recently published studies have used longitudinal humanistic research like that employed here to explore changes in the lives of Access students (see, for example: Bowl, 2003; Burke, 2002; Warmington, 2002a; 2002b). In so doing, they have sought to 'give voice' to adult learners. However, they have not employed the combination of analytical frameworks or tools used here – the focus upon relationships, and the exploration of evolving aspects of personal identity for instance. Similar longitudinal studies of younger people on the transition from school into work and/or further study have occurred too, for example in the UK, Hodkinson *et al*. (1996) and Ball *et al*. (2000), and, in Finland, the ongoing study of Gordon and Lahelma (2003). But, at the risk of stating the obvious, whilst these also deal with a transitory period in peoples' lives, they were/are of a rather dissimilar nature due to the ages of those involved, and the consequential differential experiences and responsibilities of the people within the studies. That said, there are some areas of commonality with such studies, for instance that Ball *et al*.'s (2000: 17) account 'blends fairly detailed narrative with a degree of conceptual focus.' I will be highlighting further similarities later.

ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Access to HE programmes have flourished from their inception in the mid-1970s (West, 1996), and attract increasing numbers of mature students from a range of backgrounds to study within a further education college setting (Britton and Baxter, 1994; Reay *et al*., 2002; Ross, 2003). Access courses do more than provide adults with few or no formal qualifications a route into university. Peters (1997) for example writes of how supporting activities within a similar pre-HE writing skills course provided 'scaffolding' to assist students' academic development. An Access course curriculum has this as a central purpose, with the usual 'core activities' of study skills, numeracy, literacy and communication skills in addition to subject specific knowledge. There is an informal curriculum too, with the course aiming to raise the confidence level of students, and to develop transferable generic 'soft' skills including time management, handling work-related stress and effective group working.

Parry (1996) suggests Access programmes traditionally combine two main features: a curriculum concerned with preparation for HE, and a course of study aimed at those otherwise unable to qualify for university

entry in 'traditional ways'. Parry also suggests Access courses redress educational exclusion amongst low-participating groups – primarily mature students from working-class backgrounds – who account for the majority of those considered both here and in the wider study. More recent studies have often criticized how the reality for the majority of 'non-traditional' students such as those from an Access course is 'an inferior, vocational HE for the masses', in 'this new, cold climate' (Sinfield *et al*., 2004: 142–43). Charlesworth (2000) amongst others has highlighted the apparently growing division between (elite) pre- and (mass) post-1992 universities,[2] whilst Brine and Waller (2004: 110) noted that 'widening participation has meant in practice (A)ccess to *new* universities'.

However, student experiences of Access courses usually compare favourably to those of compulsory schooling, where emergent learner identities may have been first damaged. As Crossan *et al*. (2003) suggest, for non-traditional learners prior negative experiences of studying can result in a position of hostility towards educational institutions. Such antipathy is one reason identified by Archer *et al*. (2003) for the non-participation of some (predominantly working class) people in post-compulsory education. As well as being considered preferential to the experience of school, Access courses have traditionally been considered of greater benefit and more enjoyable than the subsequent time at university too. This was usually the outcome of research before the implementation of the UK Labour Government's widening participation agenda that recent studies cited above have criticized as leading to a poorer university experience. Both Wakeford (1994) and Betts (1999) for instance suggested Access programmes give mature students a yardstick against which to measure their experience of HE, and many compare favourably the 'supportive' environment of Access with that of a larger, more 'anonymous' university course. I interrogate interview data here to explore how a group of adult learners reflect upon the impact of post-compulsory education on their identities and wider lives, including personal relationships.

The education system purports to offer individuals the chance to develop intellectually, equipping them for work, and adding to their sense of personal fulfilment whilst increasing their knowledge and understanding (Dearing, 1997). However, not everyone achieves all of this satisfactorily at school, and some writers suggest that an Access course offers a 'second chance' to revisit previous 'failings' within *or by* the educational system, as Paul Willis put it, 'settling old scores' (cited in McFadden, 1995). This position, which privileges subcultural or resistance theories, is not without its critics. Warmington (2002a), for instance, has illustrated how circumstances behind educational disaffection are usually more complex than such largely deterministic theories suggest, and that an individual's response to their experience is informed by factors far beyond

their socio-economic situation alone. I am certainly not dismissing the importance of structural factors in framing peoples' lives and even their understanding of how to 'improve' them. I would for example support Roberts' (1994: 51) position when he proposes that: '… even when individuals have moved consistently towards pre-formulated goals, these aims themselves and the individuals' ability to realise them, were products of their structured locations'.

Yes, an understanding of individual agency is important in a study like this, but we must acknowledge that structures limit the extent to which individuals can act. My interview cohort seemed to understand this to a far greater degree than the youths in the study by Ball *et al*. (2000). Those young people conveyed the impression of being largely autonomous actors in control of their biographical trajectories (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) and not restricted by social factors such as class, gender or ethnic identities, as many subsequent commentators would in fact argue (see, for instance, Lash, 1994).

By re-engaging with formal education, mature students are involved in changing their learner identity, a process that may also challenge class and/or gender identity/ies. Several post-war studies, most notably perhaps Jackson and Marsden (1962), highlighted the problematic learner–class relationship by showing that changing learner identities among grammar-school-educated working-class boys produced conflict within families and their lived class identity, culture or *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). Hoggart's (1958) largely autobiographical study *The uses of literacy* revealed similar tensions, whilst the more recent edited work of Mahony and Zmroczek (1997) demonstrates the frequently contradictory positioning of women academics with working-class backgrounds. Education-induced class uncertainties and tensions (Lawler, 1999) mean progression to university does not simply involve the straightforward adoption of an unproblematic new learner identity, but frequently involves risk and reflexivity, contradiction and confusion regarding class and other identities too (Brine and Waller, 2004; Davis and Williams, 2001; Reay, 2003).

THE RESEARCH STUDY

This article reports aspects of an ongoing project focusing upon experiences of mature students during an Access course and subsequent transition into university. Whilst the themes addressed here sometimes appear in the life stories of the wider cohort, the findings are primarily from seven of the 20 interviewees. Semi-structured interviews were conducted up to five times with each student, around the end of term times, for two years. The interviews, which lasted between 25 and 90 minutes and usually took place either on the college premises or at the home of the respon-

dent, were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The author of this article undertook them all. Similar questions were asked of each respondent for a given set of interviews, and whilst some themes such as *whether they considered themselves a student* were revisited, others only arose during one set of discussions. Informed consent was gained at the start of the project and again before each interview, and individuals were reminded that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, which some chose to do before the period of fieldwork was over, including Meg here.

In September 2001, the students had joined a multi-pathway Access to HE course in an urban FE college with close links to neighbouring universities. The 20 people in the bigger study, and the seven under consideration here, were chosen to reflect the diversity of their Access cohort, rather than to construct a representative sample from which generalizations could be attempted. Bertaux (1981) refers to the notion of 'representativity', and recommends researching until we possess sufficient information to understand the pattern of 'sociostructural relations' making up people's lives. In the data presented here, students contemplate experiences of adult education, specifically its impact upon biographical (re)constructions through their developing learner and other identity/ies. This enables an exploration of what Crossan *et al*. (2003) suggest are tensions and dilemmas experienced by adults occupying positions generally associated with youthful dependency.

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews focused on issues of reflexivity, risk and identity, although the interviewer did not necessarily use these precise terms. The chosen research method enabled the direction of conversations to change and subjects be explored as they arose, and was considered the most appropriate method of obtaining rich data from which we might best understand student experience. For the wider study, and to an extent here, narrative, life story and other forms of biographical representation are being explored for their utility (Erben, 1998; Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995; Sparkes, 2002). The data presented now are drawn primarily from the first three interviews with each respondent, that is, whilst they were on the Access programme, although occasional reference is made to events at university for some of the cohort where it is felt useful in aiding our understanding of people's experiences.

The interviewees knew I worked as an Access tutor, and was involved in educational research at a local university. At times, it felt appropriate to point out that, in common with most of them, I too was a mature student balancing academic studies with family responsibilities and part-time work commitments. This aided the development of rapport necessary to produce the richly detailed qualitative data sought. None of the respondents knew me before the project commenced, and the

only formal points of contact were the interviews from which extracts are selected. Whilst these discussions may not necessarily coincide with 'turning-points' (Strauss, 1962) or key decision-making moments, they do demonstrate 'doubts and indecisions, changes of mind, vague possibilities' (Ball *et al*., 2000: 15) as the interviewees reported and reflected upon their experiences.

The seven students whose stories are presented here were chosen because they in particular referred to experiences of Access in terms of a changing sense of identity including the meaning of being 'a student'. Other respondents also sometimes referred to these topics, but not to the extent of those considered now. All seven here successfully completed their Access year and progressed to university – usually the local post-1992 institution – although one, Meg, left within a month. Those abandoning their studies nevertheless remained part of the larger project, and are discussed elsewhere.

As accounts of developments in mature students' lives, those presented here are not necessarily unique. I am also aware that there is not just one 'correct' interpretation of the stories and lives introduced, which it is my responsibility as a researcher to reveal, and I am caught between presenting a highly theorized account of them, perhaps 'rendering the complexity of the lives of (my) subjects less and less visible' (Hodkinson *et al*., 1996: 158), and in simply letting the accounts 'speak for themselves', permitting the reader to construct *their own* understandings and meanings (Barone, 1995). I have tried to develop an accommodation between the two ends of this continuum, since for most in the study, particularly the respondents considered here, major changes *have* arisen in their lives and sense of identity through re-engaging with formal education as an adult learner. It is thus incumbent upon me to seek to offer at least a framework for understanding contributory factors and the effects of such changes upon the individuals concerned, which is what I have tried to do.

Ball *et al*. (2000) distinguish between 'active' and 'inert' choices to enter FE amongst their youth cohort. The Access students in my study have been far more 'active' than 'inert' on this binary measurement. Given the sacrifices usually made and risks undertaken (Davis and Williams, 2001; Reay, 2003) by adults returning to education, it is unlikely to be through mere serendipity or 'happenstance' (Baumgardner, 1996a; 1996b; Miller, 1996), and they did not just 'drift' into FE for want of something more attractive to do when faced with leaving school. In contrast, whilst many of the group in Ball *et al*.'s (2000) study were 'guided', sometimes reluctantly by parents and/or teachers at school, sometimes reluctantly, into 'staying-on', most Access students made the decision to *return* to education, in some cases after a 'break' of decades, themselves. As one

of the respondents in my wider study, Elizabeth, suggested, Access students have 'all given up something to be here' (Elizabeth, 1st interview, December 2001). The return to formal learning has for some been a long cherished aim, often requiring changes in personal circumstances, for instance a child reaching school age, before going back to study was feasible. Others came back to education after encouragement from those closest to them, or, in some cases, as a result of an 'epiphanic' insight (Barone, 1995) regarding the direction their life should take. This was often after a traumatic personal event such as the death of a loved one, a relationship breakdown, or redundancy at work had caused them to 'take stock' of their lives. And whilst they may tend to share the view of 'Lucy' in Ball *et al*.'s (2000) study, who cites getting a degree as significant in improving her prospects in the job market, all of the above distinguishes the situation of the adult learners in my study from the youth cohort followed by others.

Drawing upon, amongst other influences, Gidden's (1991) ideas of construction of the self through lifestyle, and Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus*, Hodkinson *et al*. (1996) have usefully indicated how even supposedly rational, pragmatic decisions are still largely socially grounded. They propose a notion of *careership*, '… formed by the individual, constrained and/or enabled by the historical, socio-cultural and economic contexts within which that individual lives' (1996: 145). Whatever the reason, what is clear from the vignettes below is that the motivating factor(s) behind a radical and potentially life-changing move like returning to study as an adult informs significantly the type of experience the mature learner will have during their re-engagement with formal education.

REFLECTIONS UPON MATURE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

As explained above , the major themes – identity and 'studentship'(James, 1995) are discussed in turn. For ease of analysis, the themes are further divided as previously suggested in the introduction above. To be consistent, for each of the themes the accounts of two of the cohort are used to illustrate the topic in question.

(Re)constructing learners' biographies – developing self-esteem

I discussed above how increasing students' self-esteem is an essential, albeit usually unstated, aim of a programme of study such as Access. As Peters (1997) suggests, success outside an educational setting, through work for instance, does not guarantee similar inside academia, and older learners particularly may experience a lack of confidence or sense of disempowerment upon entering an unfamiliar and potentially threatening

environment. For many Access students, the potential for failure is risking further harm to an already low academic self-esteem, a result of an unsuccessful and perhaps unhappy time at school. As Shah (1994: 261) suggests, returning to education as an adult '… is a public exposure of one's ignorance', although this fear of exposure is not necessarily well founded. Jo, a 31-year-old single mother, demonstrated this when she said towards the end of her course

> I'm a lot more confident in my abilities now than at the start, and I'm a lot more focussed, I know what I want to do. … I've gained skills on the course, and have more belief in my actual abilities. You imagine that everyone's going to be really good, and you're going to be really dumb … but you gauge your abilities against other people around you, and that gives you confidence.
>
> (Jo, 2nd interview, March 2002)

Yet, whilst those who are unsuccessful on the course may leave with a further damaged sense of self-esteem (see, for example, Brine and Waller, 2004), the successful ones can discover their confidence greatly enhanced. Finding they *can* cope with the challenges of studying can strengthen more than just a student's learner identity. Its impact can affect other areas of their sense of self. Lyndsay, a 30-year-old mother of two, demonstrated this at the end of the Access course when claiming

> My confidence has shot through the roof. I've done something *for myself* for a change, and I achieved what I think are very good marks. … With all the problems I've had, I've done it, and that's really boosted my confidence. My family and friends are all really proud of me. So I've come out of it feeling a lot better than a year ago.
>
> (Lyndsay, 3rd interview, July 2002)

So, whilst for Peters (1997) confidence from life outside of formal education does not necessarily translate into confidence on the course, academic success may yet give students the self-belief to tackle other problematic areas of their lives. Jo reflected upon this when she commented

> Since starting course I had the strength to say I wanted to finish with my partner. I wanted to before, but was happy to let things 'go along' … (but) since starting the course, I don't know if it's a confidence thing … things that you thought of as difficult before, you just realise that 'I can do these sort of things' … push myself or motivate myself … to make things how you want them to be. (My ex-partner) sees the reason for breaking up as *because I've started college* … but that's just *given me the confidence to finally do it*.
>
> (Jo, 1st interview, December 2001)

Lyndsay also finished her long-term relationship, between completing her Access course and starting university.

(Re)constructing learners' biographies – changing personal outlook

Many students in the study reported changes in their opinions of other people, or their world outlook. Akhtar for instance talked of being 'more accepting of what people do … be it good or bad'. Elaborating, he suggested

> Now, I see things from others' perspectives, and I think I'm better for it. … I'm much more tolerant of their views. I now sit down and think 'why is that their view?' rather than 'that's their view and that is wrong'. … I've definitely changed as a person, *and I hope to continue to*.
>
> (Akhtar, 1st interview, December 2001)

Akhtar *has,* it seems, carried on experiencing personal changes. I have spoken to him since he finished his first year at university, and Akhtar is happy to report that the process of change, of 'personal growth', continues.

Such developments tend to be evolutionary, and not revolutionary or instantaneous, which partly explains why I chose to employ a *longitudinal* research method for the project, to explore the process *as it occurred*. In some cases biographical changes have been actively sought, whilst for others they were an unintended consequence of returning to study. For instance, Maria, a married, middle-class woman of 48, thought her view of the world *had* altered since starting the course. She suggested she had become more aware of politics and social affairs as a consequence of both the formal curriculum of her Access to Nursing course, and mixing with students from a range of backgrounds. The process of Maria's developing social awareness can be tracked during the course, as illustrated by the following extracts from her responses to the question as to whether she felt she had changed as a result of being on the course:

> I'm beginning to change. I think it makes you look at a lot of things that you would never really consider. It opens up your mind to an awful lot of things that you probably wouldn't bother thinking about before.
>
> (Maria, 1st interview, December 2001)

> Mostly the changes have been having my eyes opened to a different world. No, not so much a different world – because I think the world is the same – but understanding more perhaps about how things work, certainly from the psychology and sociology point of view [*sic*], finding out about things which perhaps you just ignored or never really thought about before.
>
> (Maria, 2nd interview, March 2002)

I certainly read a newspaper in a different light. It probably opens your mind to a lot of things that you didn't bother thinking about before, especially things like sociology. … It's good. … I read a whole article whereas before I might have only read the headline. … I take more notice now.

<div align="right">(Maria, 3rd interview, July 2002)</div>

For Maria it seemed to be that both the formal curriculum and the wider social, political and economic context of the course contributed to her changing world view. She suggested that, for example, she had not really known many people who had lived on state benefits before enrolling on the Access programme, and that her opinion of them was now informed by personal relationships, no longer just popular media discourses. This personalized form of information is similar to Ball and Vincent's (1998) 'hot knowledge', which they found to be more valued in decision making over parental choice of schools than the 'official' sources including school prospectuses and open evenings.

(Re)constructing learners' biographies – improving academic abilities

As suggested previously, a student's self-esteem and self-confidence often improve in tandem with their academic abilities. This could fall under *both* what Parry (1996) suggested was preparation for HE, *and* what he identified as a course of study for those otherwise unable to qualify for HE in more traditional ways. It is an example of how the categories or factors highlighted here are not mutually exclusive. They can overlap, and, in so doing can reinforce or contradict one another. Their inclusion here highlights *how* an adult learner's experiences of returning to study can impact upon their auto/biographical self, albeit via the 'vehicle' of their changing learner identity.

Akhtar passed the Access course with little difficulty, and anticipated the prospect of university with confidence.[3] The course, had, he felt, given him something to support his belief that he was 'quite intelligent'. Others in the wider study expressed similar opinions. But whilst Akhtar's primary aim in enrolling on the programme was self-development, his success was measured by more than just passing the course:

If I can't do it purely because it's above me then I've lost nothing. I've grown as a person. … *I've become what I really want to be*. I've tried. If I die trying, then that's fair enough, but what I've done more than anything is become a positive role model for the young people in my family, and that's all that really matters to me. If I've failed, and I've done everything

that I can and I just don't have the ability, fair enough. But if I fail because I've only put 50% effort into it, that's something I've got to live with. How could I then ask my daughter to sit at home and study. … or my nephew and nieces?

<div align="right">(Akhtar, 2nd interview, March 2002)</div>

Akhtar's idea of being a positive influence upon his daughter and other younger relatives was a common theme amongst the cohort, and in other studies of mature learners. It chimes, for example, with what Bamber *et al*. (1997: 24) called 'role models and trail-blazers for others'.

Max, like most others in the study, was initially worried about his ability to cope academically at university. He thought that it might be 'quite a lot harder'. Akhtar had also been concerned about not being ready for HE *during* the Access course itself, but as suggested above, was confident by the end that he was prepared for the next challenge. Max too expressed this confidence when reflecting on his academic progress. His self-belief is evident in the following extract from discussions after the successful completion of his FE studies

I feel confident that I can sit down and write an essay. I'm still not very good at presentations … but I've done them, and I could do them again. I feel that I can analyse things a lot better now. Even sitting down to watch a film, I could write an essay on that … I feel though I could write an essay on almost anything – it might not be very good, but I'd know what to do.

<div align="right">(Max, 3rd interview, June 2002)</div>

(Re)constructing learners' biographies – be(com)ing a student

Another topic explored during interviews was the meaning of being 'a student', and whether they felt comfortable with this identity at various stages of their academic development. There was much evidence from my research, both from the seven people here and the wider cohort of twenty, to support suggestions of 'othering' taking place. This will be discussed later. First, we will consider what a couple of the respondents said regarding whether they felt they were 'a student', and what the term meant in light of their experience of Access. Again, discussions revealed tensions over *the meaning* of the term – with interviews demonstrating it was not an objective category equally appropriate to anyone on a full-time programme of study. It is not an identity assumed uncritically or even willingly by all, with resonances of what Skeggs (1997) termed 'dis-identification' with the label 'working class' in her study of women in (low-grade) caring roles, and we will also consider this further below.

(Re)constructing learners' biographies – 'student' lifestyle

Most people on the course and in the wider study are from working-class family backgrounds, with the majority having been employed in predominantly manual or routine clerical jobs. This is the case for five of the seven focused on here. We will shortly consider one of the exceptions, Kirti, from a family with strong links to HE. Her father is a senior academic, and her two older brothers, having like Kirti left school with few qualifications, had followed the Access programme and now both study at prestigious universities. But we first consider Meg, who, following her upbringing in a large working-class family headed by a single parent, effectively changed her classed identity by working in a white-collar occupation and marrying a middle-class graduate. For Meg, to a greater extent even than Maria discussed above, the Access course meant 'regrounding' herself in 'real life':

> I've really enjoyed it, it's been a lovely experience, and … like an introduction back into real life. … I worked in an environment where I haven't mixed with people from outside of the office, and I'd forgotten what other people *do* in life … when I was working, people were talking about houses and holidays, the lovely things in life. Here people are *struggling* a bit more. *This* is real life – I used to work in marketing, which is all just 'surface', trying to make everything *look* wonderful.
>
> (Meg, 3rd interview, July 2002)

This cogent observation is a reversal of the usual popular discourse that academia is not *real life*, but work *is*, in that it gave Meg links to people much less financially secure than herself, perhaps people more like she *used to be* in terms of class positioning.

In an earlier discussion Meg had suggested she could not understand how wider public opinions of 'students' were so negative. She defined one thus:

> Someone who stays focussed on what they want … knows where they are going, is enjoying their course, enjoying learning. … If somebody says to me 'what do you do?' and I say 'a student', their face drops, and I think 'what's wrong with being a student?' It's like they go blank, and they go 'right, a student'. But I don't see it like that, so I'm quite surprised by people's reaction in a way, because it's *so* important.
>
> (Meg, 1st interview, December 2001)

Meg's representation of studying being valuable for its own sake links to wider discourses of lifelong learning, but despite official rhetoric (DfES, 2002) is perhaps contrary to many educational initiatives of the UK's government. For instance the recent higher education reforms

(HMSO, 2004), which permit the introduction of variable tuition fees by universities, will arguably further narrow educational opportunities for already disadvantaged groups (Archer *et al*., 2003).

Kirti was also amongst the minority of the cohort in suggesting she was a student for 'the joy of studying' itself, had 'a strong interest' in the subjects she applied to read at university, and 'really, really wanted to find out more about them' (Kirti, 2nd interview, March 2002). Few mature learners in my study adopted the position of the *process* of learning being more important than the *outcome* that is, a place at university, or, in the case of Max, Akhtar and Meg, becoming a positive role model for younger family members. This may be reflected in the falling numbers opting to study the social science and humanities subjects at the college, and the increase in those choosing vocational Access routes, for example into teaching, nursing or law, like Jo, Maria and Lyndsay respectively here. Many students suggested they *had* enjoyed their courses, and whilst they were glad of this, it had not been an essential requirement, since their primary motive was not necessarily that of traditional liberal education, learning for its own sake. Rather, they adopted an instrumental approach to their studies – wanting a better job or career out of education, or perhaps to address a self-perceived deficit in their learner identity. Given the risks they exposed themselves to and the sacrifices each made, this is perhaps understandable. It may be something attributable to class or other social positioning, for instance Kirti being middle class, relatively young at 23, and unencumbered by relationship commitments or parenthood.

Kirti identified during the Access programme how she now resented things – or people – getting in the way of her studies:

> I used to love waking up late … but now I hate wasting time. … I *want* to get up and read this book, or I *want* to get up and do this bit of work. Sometimes it's to do with a deadline … but more often than not, *it's for me*. … I'm doing this *for me* … having done things like giving up work and having to cope on very little money, you don't want to risk *anything*, because you're doing it for yourself. There's no other reason that I'm studying apart from *for me*. I'm not studying to get this really good job. … I'm doing it because I'm *really* interested in the course.
>
> (Kirti, 2nd interview, March 2002)

Biographical representations – 'othered' voices

For some mature learners, the very term 'student' may be problematic in terms of self-definition because of its aged and classed connotations. It may well be primarily of use pejoratively when describing the frequently privileged youth associated with 'the university', rather than themselves.

Stuart (2002: 77) talked of the local 'elite' university, generally being seen in the city as somewhere that 'local people may go to work, but not necessarily … to study'. Tett (2000) also writes of mature students coming from working class communities where, far from their classed identity being a source of deficiency, it was one of pride, and *not* being middle class was valued, with a careful self-policing of associated bourgeois behaviour and pretensions taking place, with similarities here again to Skeggs (1997). Max perhaps best illustrates this position within my study. He was a milkman before joining the course, and suggested 'some of my mates at work are a bit shocked that I'm reading Shakespeare … they think that *people like us* don't do that!' (Max, 2nd interview, March 2002). He constructed his friends as being only really interested in popular – rather than (what they considered) elite – culture. Such representations demonstrate how class *still* determines cultural aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1984), despite the claims of postmodernists and thinkers such as Bauman (2004) who suggest otherwise, that demarcations between 'high'- and 'low'-culture are of minimal significance or use. This sense of (often mutual) 'othering' between 'mature' and 'traditional' students appears frequently throughout the literature, but may well have its roots primarily in *social class* rather than *age* differentials. I will explore this idea elsewhere as it is beyond the focus of this paper.

Biographical representations – differentiating mature and 'traditional' students

Such 'othering' is reinforced by the activities of younger students, as examined below, by college staff, and by the mature learners themselves. Avis (1997: 83–84) refers to the representation of the motivated and committed mature student as 'the preferred and celebratory Access discourse'. This representation applies equally to academic literature and the discursive practices of those working and studying in both further and higher education.

The view from Access students of their younger peers can sometimes be damning, as Akhtar suggested during our earliest meeting:

> What are students? They're middle class kids that don't have a clue about life. They don't struggle … the whole higher education system is set up for the middle classes … and kids that 'make it' (from other backgrounds) are the exception to the norm … some students like to 'dress down', they've got this image to maintain, but they still get picked up at the end of term in a Volvo.

> (Akhtar, 1st interview, December 2001)

Akhtar, by representing students in such a manner is also reinforcing popular discourse. His comments strike a chord with theorists and commentators when referring to the education system being set up for the middle classes (see, for example: Ball *et al*., 1996; Bourdieu, 1974; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Akhtar and his fellow Access students showed a keen awareness of the binary divide between pre- and post-1992 universities (Charlesworth, 2000). When travelling to a (mature students') Open Day at 'Churchill University', the local pre-1992 institution, he spoke of how he was 'a bit in awe going up there', and feeling that he 'did not belong' (Reay *et al.,* 2002).

Akhtar suggested he expected the behaviour of the younger students he would meet at university to be different to that of peers on the Access programme:

> I've been told not to expect the 18 year olds to talk too much during the seminars, that they don't really voice an opinion … it's the 3rd year before they really start arguing, because they are afraid of being 'shot down'. That concerns me, because I'm not a 'shrinking violet' myself, so I'll be there, voicing my opinions, *however misguided they might be*. … And that'll make me stand out from them, as well as the fact that I'm older.
>
> (Akhtar, 2nd interview, March 2002)

Whilst outwardly self-confident, this statement reveals an inner self-doubt for Akhtar, illustrating nicely the differences between mature and younger university students referred to by Avis above. Lyndsay also referred to differences between her self-image and how she saw 'typical' students – 'the image I have of students is *not what I portray myself as*'.[4] Lyndsay proposed 'students' were 'teenagers at school or college', and suggested 'I class myself not as a student, but as *being on a training course*' (Lyndsay, 1st interview, December 2001).

Unlike some of the cohort, Akhtar, possibly because he had a younger brother who had just graduated himself, understood reasons *why* those in their late teens or early twenties may be 'different', albeit expressing himself in a rather deterministic manner:

> When you go to university, I think we're all aware that we're older, and that might be a barrier within *us*, rather than the way we're viewed by 'the 18 year olds'. The thing is that these kids have moved away from home, and the last thing they want to see is people older than them who look like *authority figures*. … It's their first excursion away, and they just want to enjoy it … they're probably not too happy with the mature students, who remind them of mum and dad. *We've* got to accept that. … I don't think that we should be too hard on the younger kids, it's a brand new experience for them, and we're jealous of them to a degree, because *we wish we'd have done it then*.
>
> (Akhtar, 2nd interview, March 2002)

Whilst not all his peers would accept the final assertion, most upon reflection may concede it is in part their attitude too that causes 'othering' to take place, and not just that of the younger students – the '18 year olds' or 'younger kids' as Akhtar called them. Other mature students such as Maria – discussed below – did express regret over not having studied 'at the right time', that is, in their late teens or early twenties. This also suggests that government rhetoric of widening participation and lifelong learning has not entered fully into public consciousness, or perhaps even more worryingly, even that of people who have chosen to return to education in later life.

Biographical representations – differentiated as mature learners

The data presented in this paper is primarily from before the cohort joined university. As well as differentiating themselves from younger students, they were anticipating being treated in a particular manner by them, and in some cases had already experienced differential treatment by university staff in this regard too. Akhtar felt the admissions process at the most prestigious local institution, 'Churchill University' discriminated against older applicants:

> Had they offered me a place, no, I wouldn't have gone. I don't feel the support network's there for me, and I still believe it's quite an elitist place, especially in the more 'traditional' subjects. And also they were asking older people for CVs, and I wouldn't do that, on principle, if they're not asking 18 year olds for CVs. If Access isn't good enough, then turn me down, but don't change the criteria because I'm a mature student, that isn't fair.
>
> (Akhtar, 3rd interview, June 2002)

But being a *mature* student was central to Akhtar's sense of identity. At university he sought to differentiate himself and other ex-Access peers from 'typical' younger undergraduates, as outlined above, and spoke of how being an older learner has a specific meaning to him:

> I don't see myself as an archetypal student, because I'm so much older that the majority. Do I call myself 'a student'? I call myself a *mature* student, and I think that one word makes all the difference, not because I'm 'mature', *but because of people's perceptions of what you are* [*sic*]. First thing you think about of a student is a layabout who doesn't wash, is always out drinking, that sort of thing, whereas a *mature* student has made a conscious decision, not because the choice was 'get a job or go to university' … but someone who thinks 'I will do this, and I will do it to the best of my ability'. I think that's what sets us apart.
>
> (Akhtar, 3rd interview, June 2002)

Akhtar's comments chime with those of Meg, discussed above, as well as theorists including Avis (1997), Bowl (2003) and Warmington (2002b) in terms of privileging mature students in respect of their approach to studying.

Maria amongst others mentioned a change in how people treated her return to college as she approached 50 years of age with children at university. Of her family, she exclaimed: 'Do my sons see me as a student? They think it's hilarious. … I'll always be 'Mum' won't I?' In terms of other people too she also noticed a change in attitudes towards her:

> I think people do see you differently when you tell them what you're doing. They think that's really good, and brave and all the rest of it, at my age … my mother-in-law said 'what do you want to do that for?' I think she was a bit bemused that at my age I wanted to put myself through it.
>
> (Maria, 2nd interview, March 2002)

And like others in the study, Maria revealed her own approach to the subject was perhaps not so different to that she had just commented upon a little disapprovingly when proclaiming, in a manner similar to Akhtar at the end of the course:

> Being a student is something that would have been lovely *if I had done it at the right time in my life*. But I'm glad that I've managed to do it at all if you know what I mean, that I'm lucky enough to … have that opportunity.
>
> (Maria, 3rd interview, July 2002)

The idea that *now* was 'the right time', as *mature* students, for going to university rather than when they were 18 or 19, was rarely suggested by the interviewees. All but a couple in the wider study presented the younger student as the ideal, apparently in contradiction to their general approval of Avis's 'celebratory discourse' of mature studenthood. This may be due to their acceptance of the dominant public perception of education being primarily for the young, and in contrast to discourses of lifelong learning.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The people enrolling on the Access to HE course in September 2001 have all undergone major changes in their lives. I have highlighted some of them elsewhere, and focused here upon how their autobiographical representations change in respect of self-esteem, personal outlook and developing academic abilities. I have also illuminated how those involved have experienced, and *to varying degrees* actively contributed to, processes of differentiating between themselves as mature students and the younger,

more 'traditional' student generally found at university. This has involved the process of 'othering', both in terms of how the mature learners see younger HE students, and how they themselves are viewed by longstanding friends and family, younger students and college staff. The impact of these processes will vary from one person to another, and is informed by factors such as the individual's social class, age and familiarity with the *habitus* of further, and more particularly higher, education (Reay *et al*., 2002).

Dilemmas over the extent to which the people here identify with the label of 'student' are apparent in the interview extracts. Jo, Meg, Max and Maria accept the term, but for some adult learners including Kirti and Lyndsay here, the label seems an ill-fitting one. Akhtar insists upon prefacing it by the word 'mature', and is only comfortable with the modified term as a form of biographical representation. Another group perhaps acknowledge a hybrid or liminal (learner/'student') identity, what Bhabha (1994: 219) described as 'neither One nor the Other, but something else besides, in-between'.

James (1995) suggests the notion of mature student as a 'species' of learner at university is inappropriate, and I would agree. Mature students being a distinctive but fairly homogenous group with specific attributes and needs was the dominant portrayal within early research literature on the subject (for example, NIACE, 1993; Woodley *et al*., 1987). The term or label is too general, too inclusive and insufficiently nuanced to be of much practical use. It is probably as much for institutional convenience than for a meaningful method of representing peoples' experiences, as I seek to do.

Instead, as discussed in the introductory section above, I find Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000) suggestion of a 'learning career' valuable since it assumes a (learner) identity in a state of flux and under constant (re)construction and reconfiguration. Crossan *et al*. (2003) develop this further by suggesting it is fragile, experimental and contingent component of someone's identity, and not necessarily a permanent one either. This recognition that 'learning careers', can go both forwards and *into reverse* helps us to understand the experience of Meg here, probably now with a weaker learner identity than before returning to study by virtue of having dropped out of university. It also acknowledges that the (frequently contested) process of constructing learner identities is a complex one, as Burke (2002) reminds us, since mature learners are 'multiply positioned' in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and numerous other social factors.

Warmington (2002b) has also usefully written on mature student identity, from a position influenced by the 'biographical trajectory' ideas of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), and incorporating the discourse of mature students referred to by Avis (1997). Warmington (2002b: 583)

proposes (mature) studenthood to be a 'surrogate occupation', characterized by 'a quasi-vocational … instrumental, transferable and discursive technique, employed to make (people) viable actors in further and higher education'. For the students in *his* longitudinal study of an Access cohort, identification with, and adoption of, such a 'mature' approach is deemed necessary to succeed on their study programme. Those who do not adapt their behaviour accordingly are, he found, more likely to fail the course. This is akin to an informal directive – contained within the hidden curriculum perhaps – '*conform to the requirements of the course or suffer the consequences*'. There is ample evidence from my research cohort that adopting such a role, and reconstructing one's biographical make-up accordingly is a widespread practice, and whilst not necessarily *essential*, certainly aids the successful transition into full-time studies as an adult learner.

NOTES

1 The respondents chose their own pseudonym. One or two minor biographical details have been changed in some instances to further disguise their identity.

2 Prior to 1992 degrees gained through polytechnics and colleges of HE were awarded by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA).

3 Akhtar fared well academically, finishing with a borderline 2(i)/1st class assessment profile at the end of year one. All but one of his peers from the wider study who progressed to university (13 of the 20) also got a 2(i) at the end of the year, a better than average profile of results.

4 This incidentally has interesting implications for what we/she mean(s) by 'identity', but is rather beyond the remit of our discussion here.

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