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Life history approaches to access and retention of non-traditional students in higher education: A cross-European approach

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Abstract

Higher education participation has become an important focus for policy debate as well as for scholarly research. Partly this results from ongoing attempts to expand the higher education system in line with wider policies promoting a 'knowledge economy'; and partly it results from widespread policy concerns for equity and inclusion. In both cases, researchers and policymakers alike have tended to focus on access and entry to the system, with much less attention being paid to the distribution of outcomes from the system. This paper reports on a multi-country study that was aimed at critically understanding the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education, and in particular on the factors that helped promote retention. In doing so, the study straddles the sociology of social reproduction and the psychosociology of learner transformations.

Keywords: higher education; adult students; retention; Bourdieu; Winnicott

Introduction

Higher education participation has become an important focus for policy debate as well as for scholarly research. Currently, for example, the Council of the European Union has adopted a series of policies around the 'social dimension of higher education' as part of the Bologna Process, aimed at 'raising aspirations and increasing access to

higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds' as part of the process of university 'modernization' in Europe (Council of the European Union, 2010, p. 6). Until recently, discussions of equity and inclusion in higher education tended to focus on access and entry to the system, with much less attention being paid to the distribution of outcomes from the system. This paper reports on a multi-country study that was aimed at critically understanding the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education, and in particular on the factors that helped promote retention. In doing so, our study straddled the sociology of social reproduction and the psychosociology of learner transformations in an attempt to examine the relationships between agency, structure and identity as they play out in students' lives.

The paper draws on the experience of the RANLHE project, a seven-country study of retention and access for non-traditional learners in higher education. Our main concern here is to reflect on the value of life history approaches in tackling this subject. We have reported elsewhere on other analyses of student, academic and administrative staff and institutional data (see the project website at <http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl/>), and will therefore provide only a brief summary of our overall approach. Each partner researched three case study institutions which reflected the different types of universities in their countries, for example, reform or elite; public or private. The prime focus of the research is on the student experience and how adults perceive themselves as learners. Using biographical narratives we interviewed students from four different categories: those in their final year, those who leave but return to study later, those that drop out as well as following a cohort, longitudinally, from first to final year, over three cycles of interviews.

The paper presents reflections on the life history approach that we adopted, with illustrations taken from our student data from Britain, in order to extend our presentation of the method. While the project was transnational, each national team analysed the data it had collected for its home country; and because of the challenges of translation and comparison across languages and systems, we are not yet in a position to offer a transnational account of students' experiences. However, brief reference is made to the wider context and significance of the study towards the end of the article.

The RANLHE project

Although our evidence here comes mainly from Britain, the research involved eight partners from seven different countries: England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden. The main research questions concerned (a) the relative position of non-traditional students in different European systems; (b) the extent to which access and retention of non-traditional students are treated as distinctive policy concerns; and (c) whether particular interventions are believed to affect successful access and retention for non-traditional students. While we do not accept all of Tinto's arguments about retention and success, like many other researchers we see student integration as critical in understanding retention, which therefore led us to focus on the extent to which people see themselves as belonging in university, and as inhabiting comfortably the transitional status of studenthood (Tinto 1975, 1987).

This interest in integration led us in turn to explore what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity among non-traditional adult students. Our definition of 'non-traditional' was pragmatic, recognising the variety of 'normal' pathways into seven different higher education systems. Issues of class, gender, ethnicity and age were important in our definition of 'non-traditional' students, which primarily rested on

easily-defined categories such as adult entrants, first-generation students, or single parents; and some categories whose definition is problematic, such as people with disabilities. An identity as non-traditional may in itself form part of the integration process which enables people to become effective learners and which promotes or inhibits completion of higher education (HE), so we were also interested in how our learners defined their own position as students.

The following section explores the theoretical and methodological approaches used by all the research partners. Theoretically, we adopted an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on a number of key concepts from sociology, psychology and social history. In particular, we adopted a small number of 'sensitising concepts', which were intended to offer the eight teams of researchers 'a general sense of reference and guidance', which we could 'use to think with' across the project, but not follow blindly through the eight different sets of national experiences (see Blumer, 1954, p. 7). From sociology we took Bourdieu's ideas of *habitus* as a way of exploring the social and cultural worlds – dispositions, in Bourdieu's terms - of non-traditional students, and from psychoanalysis we drew on Donald Winnicott's notion of *transitional space* as a way of understanding the university. While we do not discuss his work further in this paper, we also drew on the writing of Axel Honneth (1995, 2007), who has explored the idea of *recognition* as an important aspect of full community membership. To achieve this, the project partners developed in-depth life history methods to illuminate and theorise the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in adult student's lives.

Life history methods in transnational research

Life history or biographical research (and for present purposes we are using these terms interchangeably, which can be a point of contention for some (Merrill & West, 2009)) is by no means a single, unified field, with its own clearly defined and universally accepted methods. It has its origins in a number of different disciplines and theoretical approaches. While life history methods were pioneered in Znaniecki's early work on Polish peasant immigrants in Chicago, which belongs broadly within the interpretative tradition of symbolic interactionism, similar approaches were developed within disciplines such as anthropology and social history, often inspired by semi-political desires to record lives and cultures that are seen as neglected or misrepresented for one reason or another (see Thompson, 1978, p. 52-60).

This approach has become remarkably popular in recent years, for a number of reasons. Partly, biographical research has benefited from the wider 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, with its focus on language and narrative. It speaks to a humanist emphasis on 'lived experience', as well as to interpretative concerns with understanding meaning and subjectivity as key dimensions of people's identity (Merrill, 1999, p. 45-51). It may have a particular appeal for adult education researchers who are also adult education teachers, identifying strongly and personally with their students.

Second, biographical research is highly compatible with other approaches to analysing the life course. This can be very helpful in helping to explain why significant episodes of learning are often most apparent at turning points. These are particularly so at significant moments of personal change, which tend to foreground issues of identity for the person (Biesta, Field, Hodkinson, Macleod & Goodson, 2011); or even more fundamentally, perhaps, can pose ontological questions of selfhood (West, 1996). The most charged turning points may help promote reflexivity about identity which then provides a basis for what we have described as narrative learning. They are therefore

extremely important in our account of significant changes in someone's experiences in prompting or constraining learning.

Biographical approaches thus allow researchers to explore the meanings and importance that people attach to particular changes in their lives, including those that have to do with transitions between different life stages, which we probably expect to go through at some time as we grow older, and those that involve significant and often unexpected challenges to someone's status and role. Both force us to ask who we are, and who we should relate to and how, requiring us to reconsider more or less explicitly our capacity for learning from and for our lives (Field, Gallacher & Ingram, 2009).

The method's popularity also reflects the broad socio-cultural changes that such contemporary sociologists as Giddens and Beck have emphasised in their work on institutionalised reflexivity. While people have always experienced their biographies as a field of learning, in late modernity 'transitions have to be anticipated and coped with, and ... personal identity is liable to be the result of long and protracted learning processes' (Alheit, 1995, p. 59). Moreover, these learning processes take place in circumstances where routine and habit have been devalued: we cannot use templates inherited from the past to anticipate an uncertain and rapidly changing future. Biographical learning therefore becomes 'a self-willed, "autopoietic" accomplishment on the part of active subjects' (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 17). If we wish to understand learning as a fundamental and pervasive human activity, then we need to see it as integral to people's lives and the stories that they tell about their lives in their attempts to understand and shape their situations.

Biographical or life history research is therefore an important and powerful way of seeing learning as a fundamental dimension of living. There are, though, risks of an excessive methodological individualism, for at least two reasons. The first is the extent to which learning and narration are still conceived as primarily an individual capacity and/or process. Although many life history researchers insist emphatically that their approach is not solely individualistic, the approach nevertheless clearly focuses on the individual's capacity for narrating their own life in such a way as to reflect on their own experiences. However, cultures and their dominant discourses speak through individuals, and the development of a broader narrative repertoire, including the capacity to play with other narratives, and to revise the stories we tell about ourselves, in the light of new experience, can be seen as part of embodying more agentic ways of being in the world.

The second issue is the emphasis placed on the story as a distinctive account; yet narration never takes place in a social vacuum. On the contrary, life stories are inseparable from 'the relationship of teller and audience in which it is occasioned', a relationship that is always particular to a given time and place (Tonkin, 1995, p. 2). In our study, the life histories, at least for some of us, were recounted in the relationships of dialogue that constituted the research itself, which may include the shaping of the story in the here and now. A focus on the process alerts us to the ways in which the reflexivity of the researcher, as well as her attentiveness, can influence the quality of the story-telling, and foregrounds the importance, in the words of Liz Stanley, of the auto/biographical or relational dimension of research (Stanley, 1992; Merrill & West, 2009). For other researchers in the team, greater emphasis was given to minimising the influence of the researcher, in the interests of building reliability in generating data. While the former enriches our ability to understand the complexity of stories and experiences, it can also lead us, as some colleagues perceive it, to focus on uniqueness and difference at the expense of our understanding of common, shared human conditions. This is a continuing debate in the biographical research community.

Methodologically, then, there are tensions in developing life history research in the context of comparative educational research. One particular issue for the research team was the ‘embeddedness’ of people’s stories in specific contexts and experiences. The particularity of the data, which were produced by life history interviews, means that we cannot simply treat each individual story as ‘representative’ of a wider, national story. Yet cross-national comparative research is commonly undertaken on the basis of a number of assumptions, one of which is that the ‘national’ framing of educational systems and institutions provides a way of organising data so that they can then reasonably be compared with one another. There is no easy way of balancing the particularities of student experiences and narratives with the relatively clear-cut divisions between national systems and policies. Nevertheless, clearly there are ways in which national policies and institutional forms shape the experiences of students, as well as ways in which the category of ‘non-traditional’ includes some groups who are excluded from higher education in most national systems. Arguably, though we are keen to avoid an essentialist view of nationhood, national identities and cultures are also to some extent ‘lived’ in distinctive ways in each country. This, though, can be overstated; students from the popular social strata can confront remarkably similar procedures and structures when seeking to enter university and develop survival strategies within higher education. And as researchers, by adopting shared ‘sensitising concepts’, we aimed to provide common ways of seeking to understand the student experiences and stories, in all their particularities but also commonalities.

Narration, and the experiences that we try to make sense of when we tell our story, is embedded in a particular habitus. We have drawn on this term, which was used by Pierre Bourdieu to point to a social milieu in which a great deal of everyday life is conducted on the basis of shared values, norms and routines that are largely taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 169-173). Life history research can, as suggested above, help us understand where storying not only serves as a ‘site’ of reflection and learning, but as a ‘site’ of reflection and learning that clearly has an impact on action and agency. Yet if we take the ideas of structure and resources seriously, we also need to examine the positions and dispositions that people occupy within a particular social space and Bourdieu’s ideas are particularly helpful here.

Habitus and the transitional space of higher education

Bourdieu distinguishes between the idea of *position* as a specific social, economic and cultural locus in the social space; and that of *habitus*, which comprises a set of *dispositions*, or propensities towards particular values and behaviours. Our interest, clearly, lies in the relationship between position, disposition and learning. In his work on taste, Bourdieu argues that a particular disposition – for example, towards a type of music or film - has to be learned. Yet although these competences are closely associated with educational level, he believes they are less likely to be learned consciously, by formal effort, than from the ‘unintentional learning made possible by a disposition acquired through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 28), so that their cultural taste is closely related to the social milieu that they inhabit. Bourdieu, of course, defined this acquisition of taste as a form of capital; he also noted that people could reproduce privilege by the use of personal connections, which he defined as a form of social capital.

In the case of university students from non-traditional backgrounds, there is likely to be a mis-match between the student’s cultural capital and the taken-for-granted

cultural capital of the dominant groups within the university. There is similarly likely to be a mis-match between the social capital that students have found helpful in their previous environments, and the networks that might prove valuable in the new context of higher education. Our expectation was that such mis-matches, and the way that they are handled by the actors concerned, would be an important factor in explaining retention. We also wished to expand the notion of capital, adding to Bourdieu's potentially rather reductionist classification. We prefer to separate out familial ties from other network assets; while Bourdieu treats both as elements of social capital, we see them as playing different roles for adult learners; not all families are identical, nor are family ties always aligned simplistically with other network assets, nor do they necessarily work in the same ways.

We were also interested in the idea of psychological capital, which we understand as the qualities that may be forged as an individual encounters and deals with life crises such as divorce, unemployment, bereavement and so on, and which may result in the individual developing new capabilities such as resilience, flexibility, or determination. To some extent, we see this as related to what Côté refers to as 'identity capital', a concept that he developed initially to refer to school-work transitions among young people (Côté, 2005). Finally, we also drew on Jocey Quinn's concept of 'imagined social capital', which refers to the resources people may derive through their imagined connections with – say – inspirational others who are known to them (Quinn, 2010).

Another factor in understanding retention was, in our view, the nature of the university as a transitional space. Here we drew on work by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who developed the idea of the 'transitional object' in his work on early childhood development. For Winnicott (1971), the transitional object was something that enabled the child to make a transition from complete dependency towards partial autonomy, particularly in its relations with his or her mother, by providing a degree of continuity and thus security. By extension, we can see the university itself as a kind of transitional space, in which everyday life is organised on the assumption that most of the actors will leave after a more or less fixed period; in such cases, the *normative* transition concerned will also be experienced as part of the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Viewed as a transitional space, university study can be seen as a process of constant negotiation and renegotiation of self in relation to others and in relation to the socio-cultural world of the university. The experience of studenthood can pose basic questions of who a person is, who they have been, and who they wish to become. This in turn may provoke intense anxiety about one's ability to cope with change, or about whether a person is good enough in the eyes of significant people, whether fellow students or lecturers; or conversely, it may provoke excessive (and often ill-founded) confidence about these things. Like all new transitions, studenthood may encompass movements of 'unconscious memory in feeling' that in turn evoke connections with earlier transitions. At such times, past and present may elide, creating considerable tensions and stresses if past ones were fraught or traumatic; or if they were problem-free, encouraging excessive confidence that higher education will be similarly problem-free. Some of these processes have been chronicled, in considerable depth, in earlier biographical research (West, 1996).

Illustrations from the research

Belonging in this space

Entry into university was often understood by students as a challenging transition in itself. One woman, a single parent at the end of her first year, said that ‘the hardest thing with being an adult [student] is you’re always waiting on someone to kind of say you don’t belong here, and I’m hoping that’s something that’ll go - but I still have it’. ‘Anna’, (all names are pseudonyms), a mature student at a Scottish university, told us that: ‘I think well done, although I know it’s happening, it’s surreal, it’s as if it’s not happening’. We can see the interplay of her dispositions as a highly motivated learner, and the new habitus into which she had moved and felt herself an outsider. We can also see how this ‘surreal’ experience is connected to the discrepancy between her status as an outsider, who had not pursued the normative route taken by most students: ‘I don’t think younger, you know, students coming through from school, would be – ‘cos it would just be next step for them’.

At the same time, we can see that Anna understands university as a community, and she clearly aspires to membership. By the end of her first year, she felt more at ease with her new milieu:

We had our culture shock last year ... we had this big building, with thousands of students, and, you know, the library, to find your way about, and how everything worked ... we’ve done that now.

A number of other students mentioned the physical and mental challenges of navigating a university campus, and in two of our three case study universities, students specifically mentioned the library as an especially complex site. ‘Suzie’ used the metaphor of walking into a party to convey her sense that people saw her as an outsider:

Once you kind of know where things are, you don’t feel so conspicuous, and I mean that’s what happens if you walk into somebody’s party or, you know, it’s the same sense of “Oh, goodness, everyone’s looking at me”. No, they’re not – get on with it, you know.

For these students, a sense of being physically lost became a metaphor for their student identity more generally; once they started to ‘know where things are’, they were able to negotiate a new way of interacting with this still-unfamiliar world.

Ontological questioning and doubt

By definition, non-traditional students are less likely than more conventional higher education entrants to possess the cultural and social capital that enable successful integration within the dominant academic culture. This affects their experiences of the dominant academic culture, particularly in so far as a transitional space like university encourages a questioning and open orientation, and forms part of the process of ‘demystification’ of habitual behaviours and accepted beliefs.

Several students in our study reported that they had started to question their identity and behaviour more broadly while at university. One way in which this was experienced was through the medium of language. Britain may be unusual in the variety of accents, dialects and variants of English that are used, but often these are class-based. One man, an Education student, explained how he had been struck by watching a recording of himself, taken as part of a micro-teaching exercise:

[84] John Field, Barbara Merrill and Linden West

you see yourself on video, you never speak how you sound, and I seemed to develop into, whilst I'm speaking in front of children, I don't know if it's just children, I've been told it's not, a few friends have said that it's not just children, you do it when you're - when you're speaking to say other people as well, people you don't know well, people who are in a position of authority and should be in a position of respect. . . . and I seem to develop an accent and a way of speaking that is, is from the streets.

The convoluted sentence structure here conveys something of this person's sense of embarrassment that he 'seemed to talk in quite a rough kind of accent for some reason', and he worried that he might 'come across as being someone who - who -who is maybe dumbing down'. He speculated 'whether subconsciously I thought I would get more engagement from pupils by speaking like them'. Be that as it may, he worried that his accent might damage his career as a teacher.

Distancing mechanisms

Often, interviewees used humour and self-deprecation to describe the ways that they related to their new social connections and cultural context. Suzie, a first generation student in her first year of a degree in design, expressed her sense of distance from her fellow students: 'When I came in here, they all looked like stockbrokers. I mean, the girls are so cute and the boys are so smart, I mean it's just so funny'. Mags, who was hoping to become a painter, said that she had not even applied to one of the major universities in this area because 'they don't take the Individual Learning Account, which is really important . . . so it's no riff raff - no paupers'. Of course, we need to bear in mind that people deployed such humour during the interviews, so we can also understand it as a way of handling the experience of being interviewed by a stranger!

People also used irony and self-mockery as a way of helping to reinforce informal support networks. One mature returner said that she and her friends called themselves 'the front-row students', or the 'oldies', while another called her group 'the ladies who lunch'. By contrast, younger students were often able to develop new networks through membership of student sporting, political or leisure associations. Some younger students, who were non-traditional entrants in less visible ways, spoke about their social ties with fellow students without any such irony. For them, it was a taken-for-granted pattern of student life.

The benefits of dissonance

Integration is clearly different in different disciplines. In professional fields, there is a relationship (and sometimes a tension) between academic integration and professional integration. Usually, this was simply a felt mis-match between initial student expectations of the profession and actual experiences during practice placements. Nursing students, for example, said that workplace colleagues tended to dismiss university teaching as excessively academic, while university lecturers sometimes disparaged the culture and practices of nurses. Professional students sometimes spoke of a particular challenge in dealing with academic requirements for 'critical analysis' that they saw as conflicting with more practical professional demands. One Education student told us that he simply couldn't understand why his lecturers criticised the Scottish Government's curriculum policies when what he wanted to know was how to implement it.

Sometimes, though, non-traditional students felt that they were at a relative advantage in that their experience added to their subject knowledge. Nursing students from mature age backgrounds were proud of their ability to integrate practical

experience into clinical practice, and students from working class backgrounds felt themselves in a majority in this area. Comparable experiences were narrated by students in Education and Social Work, particularly by those with experiences of working with children and vulnerable adults as parents, volunteers or care workers. Equally, a number of lecturers in our sample recognised the value of such experience. Pedagogic strategies that draw on relevant experiences, and relate them to academic knowledge, are likely to enhance integration and promote completion.

Understanding early leaving

If life history interviews proved a fruitful way of exploring student identities in general, they were particularly productive in helping understand early leaving. Some of our interviewees had been unnerved by the experience, even where they had left because of institutional failings. One wheelchair user, who had dropped out and then later entered another institution, identified a number of problems at her first university, but did not 'want to be known as a campaigner or a moaning person. I don't want to get somebody in trouble - and I also don't want to be known as a disabled person who complained'. Younger students who dropped out often did so because they felt that had selected the wrong subject. Interestingly, this appeared less of an issue in Scotland (if by no means absent), where most universities allow a degree of flexibility in subject choice, particularly in the first two years of study.

The interviews also led us to question the general applicability of terms like 'drop-out' (see also Quinn, Thomas, Slack, Casey, Thexton & Noble, 2005). All the students who dropped out stated that they had benefited from the learning. One woman who left in her third year because she could not face doing exams said that she had no negative feelings about doing the degree and added that she would have completed it if it had been fully assessed. She feels that the experience has changed her in terms of being more confident and she looks at 'things' in a different way and is able to discuss issues in more depth. Jenny (outlined above) explained and reflected:

I do feel knowledgeable. I feel very privileged to have actually done that. I'm pleased with myself that I did well in the first year. I'm not cross but sad that events took the course they did and in a way I know myself, I know very well that the confidence issue would have been awful, would have become a problem. I really don't think I could have resolved that one. ...I've reflected a lot as you can appreciate. I think Open Studies (pre degree courses) was more my bag. Maybe trying to do a degree was a little bit too ambitious but then on the other hand I think no Jenny you did well in the first year. There's no reason to think you wouldn't, as time went on. I'll never know.

The younger and adult students who stayed all mentioned that they had changed as a person and growth in confidence was a common benefit that they identified as well as becoming more knowledgeable and critical. Some of the adult students felt that studying at university had an impact upon their children's education and encouraged them to study at school and think about going to university.

Extending capital

We have already mentioned the notion of capitals as expressed in Bourdieu's work. While we have found ideas of social and cultural capital helpful in allowing us more precisely to explore learner habitus, we also recognise the importance of psychological capital and – in respect of social capital – the familial resources that many learners draw

on. We can also recognise students as themselves being agents, who (re)negotiate their way through higher education, and can exploit and sometimes even challenge the human and symbolic capital of the university. What people bring, psychosocially, and how they make use of particular constellations of resources, can be understood as shaping the way they manage transitional processes, including transitions into, through, and out of higher education. Change processes are iterative, relational and often subtle – including in the individual’s relationship to the university milieu, to their own habitus, and finally in their own identity.

Sue, for example, is a passionate student of Law, based in an elite university. Divorced with two children, she has lived on welfare benefits, and was her father’s main carer in the period before his death. She then returned to her childhood ambition of practicing law. Her biography embodies determination to overcome difficulties, which include poverty, divorce and emotional vulnerability. She perseveres with the challenges of learning in higher education, and – although deeply disturbed by social class and its manifestations in the academy – is resilient. We noted with interest that while the class system bothered her, she saw gender as relatively unimportant. She looked for recognition in the academy, feeling awkward and ill-at-ease in lectures and in the Inns of Court, but felt comfortable when being an adviser in a law clinic and a trainee advocate in a court, especially when representing marginalised and stigmatised people. She spoke about her relative ‘lack of education’ and constantly found herself asking in seminars for someone to explain particular words that she did not understand. She described herself as having learned ‘the confidence to speak up and say, “Oh, what’s that then”...and I’ll look it up later’.

Sue spoke at length, across three interviews, and over three years, about her background. She thought of the law as ‘just part of your everyday life’, having grown up in South London where arrests, even murder, were – as she put it – everyday events. She also mentioned feeling herself an outsider in the community, ‘not wanting to push buggies down the High Street’. She worried about moving between the different milieus of the university and the street, and over what others might think about the way she came across to them:

I’ve really agonised over the way I speak and stuff, I think you know, I’m not going to be able to speak how I would wish to speak, and I’ve got to be comfortable with that and if I make slips so be it, I’ve got to say this is me and here we go . . . and you know you do get, I mean when I’ve been in many courts and listened to advocates and you get sort of international words of English together. So I think, well, never mind, I can’t speak English – neither can you [laughing].

A local accent, Sue said with pain, might be equated with negative qualities:

. . . to ignorance and bad manners, and you know all of that, and lack of intelligence. . . . I’ve got to understand that it is natural, and just think and overcome that with my own abilities. It’s like an inner turmoil, almost every walk of life comes with prejudice and - you know – discrimination, and I put it akin to racial discrimination, it’s no different really from social discrimination, you know, but that’s not recognised.

We have already noted the importance of language to some of our learners; such anxieties about such a powerful marker of status appear to be widespread.

Family and imagined ties provided counterbalancing resources. On the one hand, family expectations could help to hinder change. In this instance, Sue had been fearful of ‘messing it up, and then you’ve humiliated yourself because you’ve pretended to be something you’re not’. She no longer attempted to speak in a particular way; anyway, if

she changed, 'then I would have all my family ridicule me'. Nevertheless, she thought of the law as a 'kind of close knit community', and imagined herself as a future member of it; for two years, she had been subscribing to the *Times*, which routinely carries regular court reports. While this imagined space was not easy to penetrate, she was inspired by her family to persist, and by her father in particular. She talked in her second interview of her Dad and his struggles against injustice by the authorities, including the police, and saw him as an important influence and model. His influence thus provided a resource that was both familial and imagined. Finally, Sue can be understood as having developed psychological capital that was both vulnerable and strong. She had been a successful business woman, and had endured difficult circumstances, including a divorce; she was also something of a lifelong learner. She was managing her learning transition rather well, drawing on a range of resources that also included her teachers, her own biography, and indeed the opportunity to talk and reflect with us, the researchers, about the changing stories she told.

Comparisons and generalisation

The distinctive findings from the UK data centre on issues of class. Many of the non-traditional adult students, particularly in the elite universities, like Sue and Anna, perceived themselves to be different to the 'other' younger students and many of the lecturers. This was manifested in a variety of ways. They lacked confidence in their learning and stated that 'they didn't belong' at university and felt like 'fish out of water'. In seminars this sense of being 'other' was highlighted by language differences between themselves and younger middle class students. Campus buildings, and in particular the library, also created unease and anxiety as they are unfamiliar spaces. For many their classed experiences were also related to ones of gender, and for some, ethnicity. These factors were not as pronounced in the other countries in this study.

One common factor across the countries, except for Poland and Germany, was the importance of support from staff and institutions in helping to raise their confidence as learners and as a source of help with personal, health and financial issues. For some the role of one particular lecturer was critical in keeping them going on with their studies. In Poland on the other hand adult students receive little institutional support but still manage to complete their studies while in Germany students prefer to be more autonomous. Family support was also a significant factor in the partner countries although there were differences between the countries. Such support was particularly important in the Catholic countries of Spain and Ireland while for some of the English working class adult students partners or parents did not understand why they wanted to become 'educated' and this led to a distancing with their family members. Mental health issues emerged as another common theme as the study progressed. This was expressed by feelings of anxiety and stress as they navigated the challenging process of moving into and through the transitional spaces of the learning environment.

Despite the diversity of the European higher education system the stories told by the adult students from the different countries revealed some shared experiences and understandings of what they would like higher education institutions to do to enhance their learning journey. However, the cross-national findings are tentative as the project team are still in the process of analysing the data at this level.

We have also alluded to the fact that biographical research is often criticised on individualistic grounds: producing fine detail, but without wider relevance. However, individual case studies, like Sue's, illuminate complex features of the interplay of

structure and agency, old and new narratives, that would be lost or obscure in other kinds of research: of the subtlety of the habitus, as subjectively experienced, in which there were places, like a free legal advice centre, in which she worked voluntarily, where the capital she brought – including life experience – was valued and of direct utility. We are also given glimpses into the complex interplay of selfhood and recognition – of acceptance by tutors and significant others, in the past as well as the present – that were important to her keeping on keeping on and in taking risks.

Clearly, Sue's narrative cannot simply be generalised, but we begin, interpretively and theoretically, to make interdisciplinary connections between inner and outer worlds, self and other, immediacy and memory, in subtle ways that can be explored across other cases, and in other countries. Moreover, such a case takes us into the Bourdiean territory of the interplay of dispositions and capital in elite contexts such as a law faculty: and we begin to understand more, psychosocially, of why some students survive and prosper and others do not. In all these senses we can observe how what is more universal is played out in particular lives, but also how this can be challenged and changed by particular people in ways that are of general interest. Theoretically, this is important as part of a wider effort to avoid reducing biographical narrative material to either the social or psychic; we cannot talk of one without the other (Clarke, 2008).

Conclusions

When adults and other non-traditional students articulate narratives of their HE experiences they often tell stories of increased self-confidence and self-esteem. These findings are consistent with the results of other recent studies of the wider benefits of learning. However, they are narrated within a particular set of storylines that are familiar from other qualitative studies of adult learners within tertiary education. Those who leave early, without completing their qualification, appear not to have any such access to existing storylines; their life histories offer few common clues to the experiences of what is conventionally referred to as 'drop out', and often the story is narrated through experiences of rejection, failure and shame.

Conversely, some of those who had dropped out were able to specify benefits from their period of study. Those who had left for practical reasons (usually funding or family crises) were particularly likely to say that they had proven that they were capable of study at university level, and see this as a positive reason for returning later on. However, in a system with high completion rates, drop-out carries a risk of stigma. Those who cited academic reasons for withdrawal shared negative views of the process, with two expressing a degree of bitterness against academics who they thought had failed them, and others expressing a strong sense of shame and loss; none in this group was thinking of returning later on.

The significance of this is that the enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem that successful students who have been interviewed talk about is not only an important developmental experience but also provide part of the habitus (or dispositions) that enhance access and retention in higher education. Our work has aimed at understanding the anxieties and joys that students may experience but also the resources and processes they may use, often unconsciously, to manage transitional processes in higher education. These include the importance of significant others, such as teachers, who can make us feel understood and legitimate, alongside new and creative forms of storytelling – like feminism, for instance - to symbolise new biographical possibilities. Our findings in respect of withdrawn students are still highly provisional, but they

Life history approaches to access and retention of non-traditional students in higher education [89] suggest the difficulties first of developing a compelling self-identity as a member of the ‘imagined community’ of university students; and also the apparent impossibility of then constructing a positive narrative of leaving tertiary education without completing a qualification.

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