

# **What is the value of higher education for white working class women in England?**

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For my parents, Petar Novakovic and  
Hermine Novakovic (née Giwisser)

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## Abstract

This is a study about nine women graduates, including myself, who come from white working class backgrounds and it considers the enduring influence of higher education in our lives. I was interested, firstly, in why research to date has paid limited attention to the *experience* of higher education generally and to that of graduates in particular and, secondly, in why white men and women from working class backgrounds remain under-represented in higher education despite a decade of policy interventions aimed at increasing their participation. Since I also come from this background I have chosen to take an auto/biographical life history approach to look back at my experiences and at those of some of my contemporaries in the light of what we might have expected from our participation in higher education. My commitment is to doing reflexive feminist research which has an ethical aim and a moral purpose. To this end I have used Sen's capability approach as the basis for analysis. This led me to crafting life histories as counter-narratives to de-humanising accounts of working class participation in higher education. They address instead the value of higher education to lives lived over time. I have concluded that analyses of the value of higher education must also account for heterosexual norms and for the problematic nature of conceptualising value itself. My aim was thus to contribute to a new way of talking about the value of participation in higher education and to inspire further research inquiry from the perspective of students and graduates.

# Introductions

## **Warning**

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple  
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.  
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves  
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.  
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired  
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells  
And run my stick along the public railings  
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.  
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain  
And pick flowers in other people's gardens  
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat  
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go  
Or only bread and pickle for a week  
And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry  
And pay our rent and not swear in the street  
And set a good example for the children.  
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practice a little now?  
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised  
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

(Jenny Joseph)

*Geertz* (1983) contends that doing life history (and to that I add reading life history) is like interpreting a poem. Let this poem serve as your touchstone to the reading of this thesis.

## Preamble

My research originated in a question I have asked myself at various times, in various ways and for various reasons since graduating in 1981. 'What good did going to university do me?' Over the years my interest grew until finally I decided to submit a

proposal for funding for a PhD that would allow me to do feminist, auto/biographical<sup>1</sup>, life history research around the value of participation in higher education (sometimes referred to as HE)<sup>2</sup> for women 'like me', white women from working class backgrounds who graduated in the late '70s and early '80s. Thus my research was motivated by my desire to interrogate my own experience. In my view, there can be no overarching 'grand narratives' because particular experiences are always contextual and mediated by a complex amalgam of external forces and by us as agentic beings. Nevertheless I also wanted to ask if my experience was unique or if there were commonalities in the stories of other women graduates 'like me'<sup>3</sup>. Interest in graduates in general seldom endures more than a few years after graduation or reaches beyond issues of social mobility and the labour market. There is a lack of curiosity about the integration of the experience of HE into the rest of a life. Moreover, there is an even greater paucity of research that looks specifically at what happens after HE to girls like me, who were handed a script their childhoods had given them little reason to expect (Goodson and Sikes 2001).

My research also found focus as result of working as an Aimhigher co-ordinator in a college of further education (an FE college)<sup>4</sup>. This role left me decidedly uncomfortable with widening participation policy and I wanted to understand why. It was not that I wanted to *discourage* people from considering HE, but it seemed to me that young working class kids<sup>5</sup> were being *encouraged* to

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<sup>1</sup> Proceeding from Stanley (1992), I use the term auto/biographical research because the slash stops the 'flow of the word which might have the effect of making the reader pause to consider issues of authorship and voice' (Parker 1998, p.117). I would say it is not a term used by those located outside the field of sociology. Smith and Watson (1996 and 2001) are situated in a literary tradition and write about the uses and interpretation of 'autobiography'

<sup>2</sup> In my thesis I consider a particular type of HE experience, that is leaving school and going to university to do a traditional degree because that is what I did. Unfortunately there is a tendency in HE discourses for this conceptualisation to subsume and obscure other forms of higher education. It is not my intention to follow suit and I position this, albeit dominant, understanding of HE as only one among many forms.

<sup>3</sup> I refer specifically to the nine participant stories that appear in this thesis as 'life histories' to signify they are not to be read as idiosyncratic but as located in and embodying particular contexts, about which I say more in Chapter 5. I use the term story when emphasising that it is more individual and personal.

<sup>4</sup> FE colleges offer post-compulsory and continuing education in the main and most now offer degrees and degree level courses.

<sup>5</sup> In much of my thesis I refer only to working class experience, particularly that of white working class girls, even when I am making points that could be equally applicable to other groups currently under-represented in HE. I do this only in recognition of the specificity of my research and to acknowledge that, whilst there are commonalities, there is sufficient difference to make overarching arguments inadequate. Paradoxically, resorting to the grand narrative would have worked to render invisible the range of experiences mediated by race and ethnicity, by class and by gender and would have undermined principles at the heart of my understanding of feminist research.



'participate' on no more solid a foundation than it might lead them to a dream job, more money and a richer cultural scene (Aimhigher 2010a and 2010b). I knew from my own experience that this might not be the case. But I did not know if my own failure to 'realise the dream' on offer was due to personal deficiencies, or if there were other more complex narratives in addition to the official accounts. My research was thus motivated by personal and political reasons, where each is imbued with the other, and by my desire to understand the interplay of public issues and private troubles (Mills 1959). Over the course of time I have had to reign in my ambitions to impact on policy, concentrating instead on understanding the reasons why 'the dream maybe doesn't work out for everybody', as Fiona, one of my co-participants, put it. I feel conflicted about the decisions I have made to concentrate on telling stories about experience and speaking indirectly to policy through positioning them as counter-narratives to dominant official and popular discourses, rather than explicitly troubling widening participation policy. However, it is done now, fixed on paper for all time. My hope is that it will be read as a point of departure and not a conclusion.

This is not an introduction *per se* because I am drafting it to fit what I have already written. I did originally start my thesis by writing an introduction which served as a template for everything else I wrote. It was in other words, my introduction to **writing** a thesis. This is **your** introduction, much abridged, to **reading** my thesis.

## **Overview**

I have organised my thesis in the following way:-

### ↓ Introductions

Taking the form of a guide, a resource and a point of reference for readers, I provide a brief description of the content of each chapter and introduce some of the key themes and ideas that run through and have shaped my thesis. I also address and trouble the notion of 'positionality' and outline my approach to representing research.

### ↓ Scoping my research

I do three things here. First I relate the origins and the genealogy of my research interests and explain how I set the parameters of my study. I state my aims and

objectives, explaining how I arrived at them through a detailed account of my research questions. Thereby I also introduce a pivotal idea in my thesis, namely that we need to ask different, counterfactual, questions about working class participation in higher education because (I shall argue) dominant discourses seem more interested in the value of working class participation to HE, rather than vice versa. Indeed, on these terms, 'What is the value of higher education to white working class women?' is itself a counterfactual question. Thirdly I situate my study in relation to other proximate research, although I agree with Cole and Knowles' (2001, p.62) contention that it is 'unnecessarily demanding' and even 'ludicrous' to begin any study by undertaking an exhaustive search of the sum total of scholarship in a given field. Thus I do not undertake a 'review of the literature', which, Haywood and Wragg (1982) warn, could end up resembling a 'furniture catalogue' anyway, distributing relevant readings among the various chapters instead.

#### ↓ My research philosophy

I introduce my research philosophy to do feminist research with an ethical aim, a moral purpose and a reflexive impetus, explaining what I mean by each of these components. I simultaneously problematise and argue for the importance of having a research philosophy to guide my research act(ion)s.

#### ↓ Method/ology<sup>6</sup>

Lather (1991, p.11), after Bottmore (1983) describes praxis as 'philosophy becoming practical'. In this chapter I delineate my understanding of method/ology as the bridge between philosophy and practice and thus the lynchpin of praxis. I also introduce other ideas underpinning my method/ological orientation, including an explanation of why I use the term method/ology.

#### ↓ Life history research

Framing my discussion as an interruption to method/ology, I detail my understanding of life history research, expanding this into a consideration of memory and of truth and lies. This culminates in the development of the concept of 'honest fictions', underpinned by ideas of aesthetic, narrative and contextual truth. I also focus on temporal issues and explain my interest in diachronic temporality, contrasting this

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<sup>6</sup> I use the term method/ology to indicate that I am not able to effect a separation between my methods and the underlying principles that guided my choice of those methods. I do use the word 'methods' when referring specifically to what I did and methodology when referencing other work or appealing to a more generalised or theoretical concept. And of course I was unable to adequately police the borders between them.

with the role of time and memory in oral history. I complete the chapter by summarising my understanding of context in life history.

#### ↓ The '70s zeitgeist

I argue for a reading of the stories in this thesis that locates them in and considers them products of a particular historical epoch, namely the 1970s. Drawing on an analysis by historians Black and Pemberton (2009) I argue that contemporaneous and retrospective analyses of the particular conditions that pertained at that time are characterised by strong reference to the concrete and cultural, but also by absent-mindedness and partial awareness. I also argue that HE policy (particularly in respect of expansion and widening participation) in the latter half of the twentieth century also suffered from an absent-minded and piecemeal approach, the legacy of which still endures.

#### ↓ Methods

The discussion of my methods is an extended answer to questions about whose words are used to tell the graduate stories. I conclude by positing the crafted life histories as co-construals, tracing the roots of my contribution to my decision to talk to women 'like me'. I draw attention to the underpinning ideas that influenced the way I went about crafting the life histories (namely social mobility, work/career, relationships with others and identity) and position this as a prelude to the life histories themselves. In particular I emphasise that I have been at pains to avoid fragmenting the life histories by embedding analysis in the life histories themselves and by the provision of 'analytic spaces' in which to read them wholesale rather than piecemeal.

#### ↓ The life histories

These number nine in total, including my own. Some of my co-participants asked to be allocated pseudonyms (none chose their own although they were given this option) but some did not. Thus you will read the life histories of Alison, Fiona, Heather, Jen, Julie, Linda, Liz, Sally, and Yvonne and, other than Yvonne, you will not know whether this is a pseudonym or not. I removed most other proper names (of family, home towns and institutions attended for example) although the determined reader may make their own deductions. I did this not so much in the interests of anonymity, as clearly this was not an issue for all of us, and I am aware that this potentially creates 'significant absences' in the life histories (McMahon 1996). However, I am satisfied that not providing proper names does not erase the person and this danger was also outweighed by the potential of detail to distract

readers. The main exception is in Sally's story, because the fact she attended a prestigious art college in London is part of her story.

#### ↓ Reading the stories

Whilst I have taken pains to embed analysis in order to leave the life histories whole, this does not mean I have left you, the reader, to your own devices. This would be a dereliction of my responsibilities to my co-participants and to you. I agree with Piirto (2002a, p.413) that doing social science research entails entering a 'social contract' with readers. I am mindful of her argument about not making readers work too hard by delivering something for which you may be unprepared. However, the strict enforcement of the contract that Piirto advocates precludes blurring the lines between the social science and literary worlds which I have done here as part of a wider commitment to avoidance of 'vicious binaries' (St. Pierre 1997, p.176). I also include participants in the contract and reconciling my obligations both to them and to you requires negotiation rather than imposition of rules. That notwithstanding, I introduce two conceptual spaces to assist you in reading the stories. The first is the capability approach of Amartya Sen (inter alia 1993 and 1999). On pp.133-138 I set out my understandings and application of the approach particular to this thesis, but in essence the relevance of the capability approach here is as a tool for evaluating the success of policy interventions. It takes as its unit of measurement the extent to which those policies have expanded an individual's substantive freedoms (or capabilities) to achieve beings and doings (or functionings) they value and, moreover, have reason to value. This contrasts with other evaluations that focus on an increase in a person's income, resources or primary goods and hence it enables me to sidestep purely instrumental conceptualisations of value without also saying that the value of higher education is or should be solely transcendental. The second, proceeding from Hockey, Meah and Robinson's (2007) idea of mundane, socially constituted heterosexualities, is the theoretically informed space of compulsive heteronormativity which I discuss on pp.221-226.

### **Key methodological motifs**

This thesis has been shaped, patterned and coloured by several key ideas. I will outline them now in order to avoid having to constantly repeat them throughout my thesis (as I found myself compelled to do in previous iterations) but I recommend that you regularly return to this chapter to remind yourself of their influence. You might also simply re-read the poem 'Warning' which instantiates and encapsulates

them all, as well as serving as a key to understanding my interpretation of the life histories.

### **Relationships with readers**

I have scoped an expansive role for readers. In addition to the usual duties of critical appraisal I rely on you to hold me to my ethical intentions and to my professed research philosophy, which I shall outline anon. The ethical relationship between reader and author is not included in ethics review protocols, at least not explicitly, but I see it as a crucial part of knowledge production. I do not agree with Barthes (1977, p.148) that the 'birth of the reader must be at the death of the Author'. We are in this together. I will therefore be explicit about the role I envisage for you which itself is a manifestation of the obligations this entails for me. You may resist my imaginings as a kind of forced positioning based on culturally specific assumptions. That said, writers usually write for an imagined audience and I believe my assumptions are reasonable ones to make of a reader who picks up a thesis.

My imagined reader is, after Sparkes (2009), a connoisseur. Connoisseurship requires 'risking one's prejudices when encountering something new or unfamiliar' (p.315) while still reserving the right not to be persuaded. The connoisseur remains generous in their criticisms and avoids an 'uncharitable academic three step' of dismissal, judging 'other' against 'self' and setting up hierarchies of competing knowledge claims, with their own as superior to that of others (Stanley and Wise 1990, p.46). This generosity pertains whether the reader references a set of (possibly foundational) criteria for the purposes of critical evaluation (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, Hammersley 2009a), or not (Smith and Hodkinson 2005 and 2009, Bochner 2000, Patricia Clough 2000). I also imagine a committed reader, one who reads with heart and soul as well as mind. This reader is aware of their role as an accomplice in meaning-making processes and in knowledge production. They are appreciative, but wary, of my claims that I have avoided the production of 'an intellectual assault course which only the especially athletic can get through' (Stanley and Wise 1993, p.22) and that I have tried to make my writing accessible and interesting in deference to them. They know my motives cannot be wholly altruistic because it is not in my own interests if reading this thesis becomes intolerably difficult instead of enjoyably challenging.

## Non-violent research

Redwood (2008, n.p.) maintains that

the project of research could also be understood as violence insofar as it grasps hold of the other and manoeuvres it in a particular ways (sic) in order to satisfy a desire for knowledge. The strange is made to appear familiar thereby forcing the otherness of the other into some kind of order, and transforming the unknown into the knowable.

In order to mitigate the possibility of doing violence to others I therefore:

- ↓ eschew dichotomies or binaries or polar opposites. As St Pierre (1997, p.176) argues, binaries can be vicious. I thus use Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) concept of a soup, in which ingredients may be added in different quantities, and one or more may more strongly flavour the soup, but only inasmuch as they also blend with the other ingredients.
- ↓ avoid categorisation, preferring instead to highlight the dialectically relational aspects of recognition and naming.
- ↓ disclose tensions and contradictions in my thesis and in the life histories rather than creating a semblance of unity and glossiness (although I also take pains over readability).
- ↓ emphasise the context, the specificity and the particularity of my research.
- ↓ attend to the iterative nature of knowledge production in general and writing this thesis in particular. For a time I kept a blog (<http://www.phoenixrising-mindingthegaps.blogspot.com>) and I refer to this process as akin to riding on 'swings and roundabouts' because I was not aware of the term 'iterative process' at the time.
- ↓ admit the presence of:
  - transgressive data - emotional data, dream data, sensual data and response data – that are out-of-category and not usually accounted for in qualitative research (St. Pierre 1997, p.175).

Some of (if not most of) my arguments and ideas came to me this way. Some of what I heard in the participants' stories was not expressed in words. Meanings were also made in nuanced silences (McIntyre 2001) in looks, in sighs, in laughter and tears and in interruptions and digressions.

- ↓ Include various types of 'grey' literature,

In the context of a thesis this often means any academic work that has not been published and peer reviewed and my thesis contains examples of those. However, I agree with Jones (2004) that fidelity to qualitative inquiry requires rethinking what counts as evidence. I have therefore expanded the concept to include works of fiction, poetry and non-academic writing in addition to visual and audio sources and references to popular culture.

### **Medical school**

I lie on the dissecting table.  
To you I am organs and body parts.  
You know your incisions (I would call them cuts)  
Do not hurt me.  
How do you know?  
Or do you hope they do?  
What do you learn about me?  
Where is the rest of me?  
Should that not also be brought to the table?  
And the others that are me,  
Why not cut them too? (Yvonne Downs)

- ↓ use interjections, interpellations and intercessions to interrupt the hypnotic effects of a text that seeks to persuade readers of its plausibility (and Harvard referencing of course helps to disrupt the smooth flow of text).
- ↓ re-cast decisions that might otherwise be seen as purely technical or practical as having ethical or moral import.
- ↓ take an approach to theory that is neither purely grounded nor imposed top down, but which is a synthesis of participant stories, extant scholarly thinking and my own ideas.
- ↓ produce messy texts

### **Messy texts**

I am aware this is a much used term (Clifford and Marcus 1986 and Denzin 1997) and what I offer here is only my interpretation. That said, importantly for me, a messy text is one that seeks to avoid the violence of taming the wild profusion of things (Redwood 2008). A messy text is thus one that incorporates diverse forms of representation. I have used written texts such as stories, vignettes, a short didactic performance, poems (some self-authored), conversations, unedited extracts from

correspondence, edited and unedited extracts from my reflexive journal, bullet pointed lists, footnotes and appendices and a blog. I have also included tables and visual (video, photographs) and tangible artefacts (a patchwork). This is not art for arts sake. Whatever I write tends to start its life as straight, academic, no-frills writing. Only when I become dissatisfied with that as a means of expression do I grope my way to something that better serves my purpose. A messy text is therefore difficult to achieve because, lacking uniformity, it nevertheless requires coherence. The potential for producing a dog's breakfast is great. Struggling with this requirement, I wrote:

Whenever I think ahead to when I will have to 'write up' my research and present it for examination I get an image of trying to herd a variety of livestock into one pen. Not only does each animal require different herding techniques but their co-existence is simply not compatible.

(Downs 2008, p.25)

Inspired by Lather and Smithies' (1997) messy text about women living with HIV/AIDS, I finally resolved this dilemma by returning to a metaphor that I had used when talking about the crafting of my MA (Ed. Res.) dissertation (Downs 2007a)<sup>7</sup>, namely the patchwork quilt.

### **Patchwork Quilting**

The patchwork quilt is a powerful metaphor and is suffused with a rich history of collective and subversive meanings. Krouse (1994) for example argues that the AIDS memorial quilt ([www.aidsquilt.org](http://www.aidsquilt.org)) was also a symbol of resistance for gay communities and Campbell (2004) uses the metaphor of quilting in a feminist re-conceptualising of entrepreneurship. Even a cursory search will reveal its significance in feminist and other dissident epistemologies. The reason it had served me well in the past is encapsulated here by Frye (1964, p.11):

The motive of metaphor... is a desire to associate, and finally identify, the human mind with what goes on outside it, because the only genuine joy you can have is in those rare moments when you feel that although we may know in part, as Paul says, we are also part of what we know.

In short, the patchwork quilt is a hermeneutic device signifying the relationship of knowledge to the means and sites of its production. Hunt (2006a, pp.315-316) thus points out that metaphor:

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<sup>7</sup> I refer most often to a dissertation I did for my MA in Educational Research, abbreviated to MA (Ed. Res.). However, I occasionally allude to one I completed for an MA in Women's Studies at the University of Bradford (Novakovic 1993).



can provide a vital and much-neglected link between the personal and often idiosyncratic world of felt-reality and the propositional world (Heron 1996) of theories and concepts in which most academic and professional discourses are related.

The metaphor of the patchwork quilt thus allowed me to bring together disparate elements which I conceptualised in terms of patches harmonising through pattern and colour (such as my methodological motifs and certain key arguments), configured in a particular way and held together by the common thread of my research philosophy. That said, as you may gather even from the previous sentence, the work I was expecting this metaphor to do stretched it to breaking point. I realised I would need to also sew an actual patchwork so that the two, metaphor and object were mutually fortifying.

I resisted this insight for some time because I did not feel I would meet either the artistic or craft standards required. Just as Piirto (2002b) argues against poetic representation of research unless researchers are also good poets, so Irwin (2004) maintains that artistic representation requires a certain level of craftsmanship. Although I would argue against the policing of methods, I took as a moral issue Irwin's point that enthusiastic amateurs may be undermining the aims of arts based research with their well-intentioned but ultimately self-indulgent efforts. The more I read about arts based research in general and a/r/tography in particular the more my respect for its aims grew. Originating in Canada, a/r/tography is a form of research that unites art, research and education (<http://artographicinquiry.ning.com>; Springgay, Irwin and Kind 2005; La Jevic and Springgay 2008; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo and Gouzouasis 2008). I was concerned about my own competence as this did not seem even to equal that of others who do not come from an arts background but who nevertheless have done arts based research (Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis and Grauer 2006, Berridge 2008). An even greater issue was whether I could justify appropriating these methods as a support for my narrative project (Skeggs 2002).

Rippin's (2008) work persuaded me to try. Rippin amalgamates quotes torn from the Financial Times and textiles as a subversive strategy to interrogate current thinking on business practices (Rippin (2009) has also produced a sewn response to Bukowski's *Post Office* to critique organisational sexism). My reaction to Rippin's work confirmed Sameshima's (2007, pp.87-88) argument that:

When a picture is seen, the whole is seen. We catch a flavour, a theme, a feeling, a tone. When we read a book, we can only enter sequentially, physically opening the book starting from the beginning, reading from the top left, following the order of language. A visual rendering has air, rumination. The audience connects.

Ultimately I decided that I was not doing arts based research per se which mitigated the potential for me to undermine its aims. I was simply representing my research in a way that united process and product. I thus set aside my concerns and proceeded to sew my patchwork.

There just is not the space here to give a full account of the way in which doing my small (tiny) patchwork transcended my original purpose, although I have included a summary of and commentary on my journal notes as an appendix to this thesis (Appendix 1). In short, the act and process of sewing (by hand as I was unable to retrieve my sewing machine from a former home) was a transformative experience. Concentrating on manual rather than intellectual production and on a visual and tangible artefact enhanced my congress with thoughts and ideas. I experienced the power of art and of craft based thinking in a realm where thinking through is not a conscious act. It creeps up on you unawares. You know, long before you know you know. It is the portal to transgressive data. Sewing the patchwork also allowed me to do something even my messy text foreclosed. Messy it may be, but my text is not raw or unpolished, not least because I want to get my doctorate. However, I have left my patchwork unfinished. The back reveals crooked seams, unaligned corners, loose threads and mismatched yarns and symbolises how much has been erased, cleaned and tidied up in my written account, although it has not been sanitised into blandness. It is also a concrete reminder that the provenance of our ideas is sometimes invisible, hidden or forgotten (Ricoeur 2004).

### **Positionality**

I belong to the school of thought where researchers' values and beliefs (particularly those of which they are not conscious) influence their ontological, methodological and epistemological leanings and consequently their research. Therefore I also believe that there can be no such thing as research that is objective, neutral, value-free or impartial. Claims for the latter simply reveal a particular ontology, particular beliefs and particular values. Of course at this point I could become embroiled in debates about values in research (Gewirtz and Cribb 2006 and 2008, Abraham 2008 and Hammersley 2008) but in my view this diverts attention away from some

fundamental issues that inhere and are articulated in the concept of positionality. It is clear from what I have just said that I am not critical of this concept per se, but I am disturbed by some aspects of its interpretation and application. Leaving aside the issue of its amalgamation with the concept of reflexivity which I address elsewhere, my concerns are as follows:

- ✚ It has assumed the status of orthodoxy (Patai 1994). Every researcher has to make their positionality clear to their audience. Hence...
- ✚ this requirement is sometimes realised through a statement made at the start of a research report.

My problem with this is:

- ✚ It suggests a unitary self that is known to itself, that can be trusted, and that can be pinned down and revealed to others, particularly through its attachment to particular identities.
- ✚ The sound 'positionality' makes suggests fixedness, standing still, being rooted to the spot.

I have already detailed why this troubles me (Downs 2007a) and will not repeat myself here. Instead I will outline how I interpret and apply notions of positionality in this thesis.

- ✚ I draw on Geertz's (1988) metaphor of the parade, with the researcher as observer of the parade itself. Even if we, as observers, stand still, our view will always be changing because the parade moves on. Moreover, we need not be rooted to the spot. We can shift positions, follow the parade. Thus the notion of positionality is both expansive and constraining. We cannot be everywhere at once, seeing everything. All we can do is describe what we have seen and, more importantly, why we took note of it. This carries with it the requirement for researcher humility in recognising there will be things she has simply missed and reader vigilance in identifying what these might be.
- ✚ Rather than a definitive statement at the beginning of my work, references to my positionality comprise of many statements distributed throughout the thesis. These may be explicit and consciously included, or they may have

been made unwittingly. Their purpose is to tell readers more about the research than about the researcher because they *alert* readers to the assumptions which the researcher wittingly or unwittingly brings to her research and thus *assist* the reader in identifying what the researcher might be missing. They cannot claim to *describe* in what way and to what extent positionality impacts on research. Their only claim is to be part of the interpretive toolkit that is made available to the reader and to the reflexive researcher. In short, they help the reader identify the gap between professed intentions and act(ion)s.

Although I present this thesis in a particular order you are at liberty to ignore my suggestions and read each chapter as you see fit. Whilst this may lead you to construe my research differently than if you followed my guidance, I am confident that the internal coherence of the thesis will nevertheless ensure that it still does make sense, even if read out of order.

# Scoping my research

## Origins of a research interest

### Researching

Why start looking now?  
Have I nothing else to do?  
Not at the moment.

(Yvonne Downs)

This poem does not imply that I am dismissive of my research. I am suggesting instead that the reasons we start to research a particular topic at a particular time may not be explicable. Thus the following account of the origins and genealogy of my research is merely the one that serves to make sense to me now. That said, looking back and reflecting on its unfolding I am persuaded that I have been steadfast in my original intentions, although my project has shifted on its axis. Despite regular interrogation, I made only one change to the original working title of my thesis, adding 'in England'. That I took the specific location of my research for granted for so long and, by implication, expected others to do the same, tells readers much about the gulf between my good intentions and their translation into practice.

I did scale down the scope of my project. I originally had the twin aims of troubling prevalent understandings of the value of HE *and* of contributing to research, debates and policy on widening participation. This downsizing is the result of a number of factors. Firstly, like many novice researcher, I was too ambitious (White 2008). Secondly, I discovered that there are particular difficulties attaching to analyses of the '70s which would militate against building a bridge between then and now. Thirdly, whilst research on HE comprises 'a complex and diverse field of studies' (David 2007, p.675), there has been little written about the *experience* of *graduates* to date, so there was much ground to make up here. That said, in terms of encouraging working class participation in HE, certainly since the turn of the twentieth century, it has been a matter of 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose' - the more things change the more things stay the same, (Reay 2001, McNicol 2004). Thus I have not downsized my claim that my research *could* make a contribution to understandings of widening participation, although it now glances off and is tangential to it.

My research has unfolded over time and, because I hold that its processes and products are closely aligned, I want now to provide readers with a sense of that unfolding. My account starts with four vignettes, which I call scenes. The term 'vignette' is used by various research communities, quantitative and qualitative, and is understood differently within each (Barter and Renold 1999 and 2000). The vignettes here represent the unconscious, piecemeal and prolonged germination of my ideas and epitomise my auto/biographical approach. That said, they must not be taken literally because each scene is only based on the memory of an event and I have embroidered and imaginatively reconfigured my recollections to fit my current purposes. Moreover, even a vivid memory of an event does not signify it actually took place.

### **The origins and genealogy of my research**

#### **Scene One**

*It is the last day of term before Easter, the end of March 1984. I am driving back home in my ancient Ford Escort Mark 1 which would not be on the road if not for my uncle's tender ministrations. I am a teacher at a 'good' school in North Yorkshire but having no classes this afternoon, I left school at lunchtime. It is such a glorious day and the scenery is beautiful; greener and gentler somehow than West Yorkshire where I live. Although I thought Wordsworth a bore when I studied him for 'A' level, I now remember some lines from his Prelude. 'Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze/a visitant that while it fans my cheek/doth seem half conscious of the joy it brings from the green fields and from yon azure sky'. This expresses exactly how I feel. I'm so lucky. What could my life have been like?*

This scene draws the reader's attention to a positive construal of the value of HE. It suggests that being a graduate, with a graduate job, contributes in no small way to my feeling of wellbeing. It introduces the notion that quality of life is to be judged against the potential for living a life we value and have reason to value and the extent to which this is realised. It thus detaches value from narrow material, utilitarian, instrumental, financial and mercantile understandings of the same, which is not to say that materiality is unimportant to quality of life, epitomised by reference to my car. All these ideas allude to my use of Sen's capability approach. Reference to my car also alludes to the importance of historically situated cultural objects which will feature strongly in my contextualisation of the stories at the heart of my thesis. Reference to my uncle is a metaphor for the retention of bonds with past lives which

will later feature in a troubling of 'social mobility'. Finally, it points to an important function of stories which is to posit the notion of 'alternative lives' (Goodson and Sikes 2001)

## **Scene Two**

*It is the first week in August 1991. I am writing a dissertation for my MA in Women's Studies which has to be in at the end of the month and a month after that I will give birth to our second child. I have enjoyed being a mum so far, although I did not envisage the hard graft it entails. My mind drifts to thoughts of what to do after the MA. I feel conflicted. I don't want to go back to teaching in a high school. This National Curriculum is the final straw. If I go back to teach at a sixth form college I will have to teach French as well as German to A level, which means a double workload as, contrary to popular perception, they are separate subjects. Two subjects, two children under two, too much. Given the cost of childcare it would not be worth the stress. I should apply for funding for a PhD, as I'm being encouraged to do. But a stipend wouldn't cover the cost of childcare let alone mortgage rates at around 14%. I start to feel dizzy and nauseous. My husband is painting our stairwell, so maybe it's the smell of paint coupled with pregnancy anaemia and low blood pressure. However, I think it's the sudden realisation that, despite all my education and qualifications, my choices seem little different to those that were available to my mother. This makes me feel both trapped and adrift and the resulting tension has induced a sense of doom and panic. How can this be so?*

This scene troubles the transcendental notions of value evoked in the first and connects with a cost-benefit-risk analysis of value (Archer Hutchings and Ross 2003). Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980) are critical of the good/bad dichotomy that is a feature of much educational research and this scene highlights my intention not to create an either/or argument by entirely dismissing the importance of the material to lived realities. It also introduces one of the analytical spaces in my study, namely 'mundane heterosexualities' as an ordering social force (Hockey, Meah and Robinson 2007) and how that articulates with the value of HE through and in the every day experience of being a graduate. Hockey et al argue that heterosexuality is a social rather than sexual category and its structuring influence is exercised mainly through a myriad of unproblematised quotidian practices and actions. Analysing the

stories in this space therefore also necessitates steering a course through arguments about structure and agency. I am also showing that it is vital to take into account historical context, here epitomised by reference to the National Curriculum and high interest rates, and the way that translates into life choices and material realities, a refrain I take up when writing about life history. Finally I incorporate a sense of the 'epiphanic moment' (Denzin 1994, McGettigan 1998, Goodson and Sikes 2001, Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Epiphanies are 'conceptual "revolutions" that permit the transition from inadequate to newly constituted paradigms' (McGettigan 1998, n.p.) and are accompanied by strong emotions. Thus I am also tracing the contours of one of my methodological and theoretical leitmotifs, namely that emotions and thought are different aspects of the same phenomenon (Nussbaum, 2001).

### **Scene Three**

*It is 8<sup>th</sup> September 1998, very early morning. I know this because there is dew on the lawn of the house outside which I am parked and the birds have just started to sing. There is no other sound. I am thirty-nine years old and this house was my home when I was married but my marriage ended eighteen months ago. Yesterday I quit my job as a financial adviser. It used to fit in well with having children but now it means I rarely get to see them and this also sours the times I have with them. Little wonder I have been told to limit my contact with them. For the past two months I have been living with a new partner in his home to save money until we buy something together, but I miss my children so much it has put a strain on our relationship. Last night when he was working I put all my stuff in the car and drove off and have been sitting here since then because I don't know what else to do. How on earth did I get here?*

This scene continues, consolidates and fleshes out themes introduced in the previous two. Firstly, I use references to the natural world in this scene as a linking device to the first, in order to suggest the importance of a long term and diachronic view when talking about the value of HE. I thus also highlight the significance of considering the value of HE as situational, contextualised and relational rather than isolated and absolute. Secondly it animates the concept of heterosexuality as a structuring force and its impact on lived realities, an impact which is often articulated in the participant stories through examples of happenstance and serendipity. Thirdly



it animates the necessity of engaging with the relationship of structure and agency and why I have incorporated the capability approach into my thesis, as this is a key concern of the latter.

#### **Scene Four**

*It is June 2005 and I am working as Aimhigher co-ordinator at an FE College but feel increasingly conflicted about my role.*

*Anticipating questions that might arise (because they are my questions too) I have been postponing a training session for staff about student finance. Toe-ing the party line will at best be counter-intuitive and at worst hypocritical and dishonest. Why introduce fees and loans at the same time as encouraging kids into higher education whose families have no history of going?*

*Pragmatically I have no objection to charging for higher education and the financial adviser in me sees it simply as a tax on graduates. But for many reasons I have moral objections to it, not least because the reasons for charging students for their education are not being made explicit and because it reflects a commodification of higher education. More than this even, I am uncomfortable about the claims made on the Aimhigher website about graduates earning more 'on average' than non-graduates and suspect this hides differences along various axes, not least regional.*

*I am also troubled by implications contained in statements on a government website about the benefits of higher education ([http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/WhyGoToUniversityOrCollege/DG\\_4016998](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/WhyGoToUniversityOrCollege/DG_4016998)) such as, 'University or college lets you experience a rich cultural and social scene, meeting a variety of people while studying something you love' because it diminishes alternative 'scenes' by implication. I don't want to discourage our students from going into higher education. In fact I wish more was being done to make it more accessible. On the other hand encouraging them to buy into a dream is like advising them to buy a lottery ticket. What is more, few of the 'official' reasons for going seem to strike a chord with me. I have no regrets about going to university or major grumbles about my life and would do the same again. It was a great experience and it enabled me to take advantage of opportunities I would probably not have had if I had not gone to university, such as living in Germany. My contract runs out at the end of August and although I could stay*

*on if I wanted to, I don't think I'll be able to suspend my disbelief any longer.*

In a previous iteration of this scene I included a number of references. However, I had not read any of these at the time so I removed all but the reference to the government website, to which I would have had access at the time. I will cite all missing links in the fullness of time. Keeping you waiting now instates the position I was in then, on the cusp of inquiry, straining to understand, to include theoretical perspectives, made unhappy by my ignorance. It also shows that the motivations for my research were intensely personal (What was the value of higher education for me?), but also political (What can be said in the gap between widening participation rhetoric and the experience of 'non-traditional' students?). Because I am not 'myself' in this scene but am playing the role of Aimhigher co-ordinator I want to indicate that I think these motivations are embedded one within the other. I also demonstrate that I was still groping my way towards an understanding of what troubled me about the presentation of HE to those whose family histories did not make it a foregone conclusion or natural progression.

## **Introduction to my aims and objectives**

Were I to continue scene by scene through the dawning of my understanding and the unfolding of my aims, hinting and alluding in piecemeal fashion about how this translated into my research project, I know I would lose my audience. The time has come to talk turkey and to introduce my research questions and the aims and objectives they engendered. After each question I give an account of what my engagement with each led me to conclude although you will get no sense of the gradual dawning of those realisations. You may need to prepare for this change of tone and pace and thus I bring the curtain down for a short interlude. It rises on the following scene.

*The stage is bare but for a small table with two chairs at either side, set sideways to the audience. Silence. Enter Yvonne Downs (YD) stage left. She struggles to carry a number of large, rectangular pieces of white board but eventually reaches a chair and sits down, balancing the boards against a table leg. When she is seated a figure enters stage right carrying one small board on which is written INNER CRITIC (IC). YD rises and IC stands at the other side of the table and places the board on it. They embrace across the table and IC sits down while YD turns over one of her boards that reads:*

<p><b><u>Aim</u></b></p> <p><b>To contribute to a new way of talking about the value of participation in higher education and to inspire further research inquiry from the perspective of participants in higher education themselves.</b></p>	<p><b><u>Objectives</u></b></p> <p><b>To trouble prevalent conceptualisations of the value of higher education.</b></p> <p><b>To ask participants to reflect on how the experience of higher education and of being a graduate has articulated with subsequent life experiences.</b></p> <p><b>To craft counter-narratives about the value of higher education from the perspective of being a graduate and in the context of a life lived over thirty years.</b></p> <p><b>To outline a conceptual language in which to express notions of value that resonate with experience and lived realities.</b></p>
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*IC and YD are in profile to the audience, the latter barely visible above the boards when seated. YD speaks.*

I am revealing my aims and objectives from the word go but I must tell you that arriving here was a gradual, iterative process.

*YD rises and rearranges the boards thus:*

<p><b><u>Research Question 1</u></b></p> <p><b>Why is it so difficult to ask questions of the value of higher education?</b></p>	<p><b><i>Four conflatons</i></b></p>
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I knew this was a big topic and that it would necessitate reading widely and grappling with ideas outside my disciplinary comfort zone, but I was not prepared for the degree of difficulty I would encounter just by asking the question ‘What is the value of higher education?’ It was like trying to gain a foothold on a glacier. I suspected that HE has hardly been theorised. Scott (1995) and Archer et al (2003) offer explanations of how changes from an elite to a mass higher education system has impacted on its meanings but as I outline below I do not agree with parts of their analyses. However, this did not account for the absence of a conceptual language with which to counter the assumptions that fill the theoretical vacuum. Why was it so

difficult to talk about the value of HE other than from entrenched and polarised positions? I concluded this was the result of a process of 'conflation' which simultaneously collapses, condenses and confuses ideas and creates hybrids that in turn disguise the ideas that give rise to them. It is therefore to these conflations I now turn.

*YD places a smaller board in front of 'Four conflations' thus:*

<p><b><u>Research Question 1</u></b>  <b>Why is it so difficult to ask questions of the value of higher education?</b></p>	<p><b><i>Four conflations</i></b></p>
	<p><b>Conflation 1 - <i>Higher education is good because education is good</i></b></p>

The first conflation, and the mother of them all I think, is of higher education with education in general. Because education is generally understood as being intrinsically good and having value in and of itself (Wilf Carr 2002), to question the value of participation in its 'higher' forms is tantamount to an attack on the value of education. And yet:

Just because something is valuable, it does not follow that yet more of it is by definition a good idea; that any addition, any increment, must be welcomed. Yet in practice this is what we seem to believe (Wolf 2002, p.xi).

I must emphasise this is not an argument against education or against HE but I am asking *whether* HE is always a good thing, a risky business because, as Wolf colourfully points out, to do so 'places one somewhere between an animal hater and an imbecile' (2002, p.xi). Although it is absurd to think HE could be completely disinterred from its wider educational contexts, it is nevertheless valid to question it discretely and to do that without criticisms of it being construed as an attack on the notion of education as a good. As Michael Watts (2009) reminds us, whilst Sen and Nussbaum have developed the capability approach along different lines, they are in agreement that the transformative potential of education makes it a basic capability (Sen 1992, Nussbaum 2000) and I certainly would not disagree with that.

Thus the challenge is to create a space in which to interrogate HE and one way of doing this is to follow Wolf's lead and undertake an interrogation of *the claims* that are made for it, rather than attempting to grapple with *the idea* of higher

education, although this also risks over-emphasising HE as a means to an end. Thus Wolf challenges the link between HE and economic growth and despite this being a major rationale for the expansion of HE, concludes this is myth rather than fact. Fitz, Taylor and Pugsley 2005 conclude similarly in the Welsh context. Others have interrogated the link between HE and social justice (Archer 2007, Watts, 2008, Furlong and Cartmel 2009) and Walker and Unterhalter (2007) frame social justice in education generally in terms of whether we are being taught that we are all equally human. Blasko (2002), Brown (2003a and 2003b), Brown and Hesketh (2004), Furlong and Cartmel (2005) and Adnett and Slack (2007) focus on HE and employability; Hart (2004), Bridges (2006), Michael Watts (2009), Aynsley and Crossouard (2010) on HE and aspiration; Trow (2005) and Shavit, Arum, Gamoran with Menahem 2007 scrutinise HE and social mobility. My project was to trouble the claim, or rather the inference, that going to university is the gateway to a 'better' life, embedded in statements such as:

**Aimhigher (2010a):**

- Higher education could boost your career prospects and earning potential
- Higher education is about taking your education to the next level: learning new things and getting to where you want to be.
- A higher education qualification can also lead to increased earning potential, a wider range of opportunities and a more rewarding career.
- And on average, graduates tend to earn substantially more than people with A levels who did not go to university. Projected over a working lifetime, the difference is something like £100,000 before tax at today's valuation.

**Aimhigher (2010b):**

- It may give you a completely new perspective on where you want to go in life.
- Higher education can open up new career options and help you find your dream job.

*YD gets up at this point and positions another small board thus:*

<p><b><u>Research Question 1</u></b></p> <p><b>Why is it so difficult to ask questions of the value of higher education?</b></p>	<p><b><i>Four conflations</i></b></p>
	<p><b>Conflation 2 – Higher education is going to university.</b></p>

Despite recent research which shows that higher education is not a unified concept across the sector either on an experiential level (Bhatti 2003, Reay 2003, Thomas 2005, Thomas and Quinn 2007, Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander and Grinstead 2008a and 2008b, Bathmaker and Thomas 2009, Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009a and 2009b) or on policy and organisational levels (Garrod and Macfarlane 2007, Parry 2007a and 2007b, Bathmaker, Brooks, Parry and Smith 2008), the model most readily associated with the concept of HE is three years of study for a degree at university (and not two years of study for a foundation degree, or an apprenticeship leading to a degree for example or a degree taken at an FE college). Thus Crozier and Reay (n.d., n.p.) state that they want to 'explore working class students' experiences of higher education' in 'different types of universities/higher education institution (HEI)'. However, and almost in the same breath, they state one of their aims is to 'discern the impact of *university* experiences' on identities (my emphasis). Obviously Crozier and Reay are using 'university' only as shorthand here, but it is telling that they do, because it shows that they know it will be widely understood and accepted. Nor is this phenomenon confined to popular thinking. Parry (2006) for example points out that the most recent expansion of HE in England did not lead to a fundamental re-think about what shape this was to take and was almost absent-mindedly and in piecemeal fashion modelled on the idea of a first degree awarded at a HEI. Stevens (2004) and Naylor (2007) but lament the outcome rather than arguing for the recognition of diversity as Parry does.

However, a caveat is that this conflation does not apply in assessments of the value of *institutions*. Here it would seem that a more nuanced awareness of diversity translates into (often hierarchical) value judgements about the suitability of certain kinds of institution (Reay 1998, Reay, David and Ball 2005). So it is not just a question of seeing Oxford as being quite a different sort of institution to a further education college that also offers higher education qualifications, but of making value judgements about that (Michael Watts 2002). I think it is also telling here that polytechnics were re-designated as 'universities', suggesting that 'elite instincts and mass forms' (Scott 1995, p.9) still exist coterminously. A second caveat is that I deliberately focused precisely on the prevalent understanding of HE I critique above, the reasons for which I set out later.

*YD then changes boards so the audience now see:*

<p><b><u>Research Question 1</u></b></p> <p><b>Why is it so difficult to ask questions of the value of higher education?</b></p>	<p><b>Four conflations</b></p> <hr/> <p><b>Conflation 3 - An elite higher education system is one that is concerned with ends and a mass system is one that is concerned with means.</b></p>
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Talk of means and ends suggests an engagement with philosophy it would be foolhardy for me to enter into. Newman's (1853) consideration of what a university is still stimulates debate today (Tolley 1975, Pelikan, 1992, Turner 1996 and Graham 2002). Nevertheless it is to the work of philosophers I must turn first. Thus Blake, Smith and Standish (1998) in their critique of the Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE] 1997), which they also position as 'critiques of more widespread assumptions about higher education' (p.1), maintain that the report gives no proper thought to the ends of higher education and that Dearing considered higher education only as a means to an end. Inherent in this assessment is the assumption that the importance of ends, the intrinsic value of higher education, is left behind. In order to briefly outline the nature of those ends I turn to Boethius (2008). Awaiting death in his prison cell, Boethius argues that all that is truly worthwhile in life is the search for wisdom because wisdom is the appreciation of what is truly good and, once attained, it can never be taken from you. Thus the purpose of education (at whatever level) is ultimately transcendental, ethical and moral and detached from notions of power, fame, wealth and so on because such things as these are subject to fortune and hence mutable (Personal correspondence with Dan O'Neill).<sup>1</sup> However, in development or progression narratives of higher education the story is of a move away from the importance of ends towards emphasis on means. Moreover, within these narratives, this shift was not a stately progression but was given momentum by Robbins (NCIHE 1963) and another shove by Dearing (NCIHE 1997).

These narratives thus associate 'mass' higher education with a focus on means, that is on the usefulness of learning to the individual, to society and to the

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<sup>1</sup> Dan O'Neill took the time to discuss Boethius' ideas with me. Lest readers consider this a somewhat esoteric diversion, our conversions were prompted by Julie's story when I presented a paper to my peers in a departmental seminar. Dan heard echoes of Boethius' philosophical position in it. I take full responsibility for any misinterpretation either of Boethius or of Dan's analysis.

economy and posit an 'elite' system of higher education as one that foregrounds ends, intrinsic value and learning for its own sake. The prevalence of this view can be detected in discourses of 'grief for lost intimacy' (Scott 1995, p.7) such as echo through the following:

(T)he historical conception of higher education as standing for intrinsically worthwhile ends - essentially the idea of liberal higher education- is being *lost from sight*. The question, therefore, I want to address is: Can the idea of a liberal higher education be *recovered*, and be implemented?

(Barnett 1990, p.x, my emphasis).

The corollary of this lament for the past is that such a system was better and a mass system is not as good. This is detectable for example in Evans (2004), although she positions this as deriving not 'from a nostalgia for the past, but a fear for the future' (p.3). In this way discussions tend to gravitate to dichotomised positions. Hence Barnett wants elite purposes to be applied to mass systems (with the implication that these purposes were better) whereas Scott (1995, p.2), arguing for a 'reflexive' mass system, maintains that a 'liberal education' was 'rooted in subtle and stealthy socialization and acculturation rather than explicit intellectual formation'.

*YD rises and positions another small board thus:*

<p><b><u>Research Question 1</u></b>  <b>Why is it so difficult to ask questions of the value of higher education?</b></p>	<p><b><i>Four conflations</i></b></p>
	<p><b>Conflation 4 – ends and means</b></p>

This conflation is closely allied to, but not the same as the third conflation. In this case there are no elite/ends or mass/means associations. Here we are concerned with the conflation of ends with means per se, regardless of the system in place (perhaps we should use the term 'mends').

*At this point YD stops talking and begins a whispered conversation with IC. YD then leaves the stage, returning some moments later carrying a jug of water, two glasses and a marker pen, all of which she places on the table. She occupies herself with pouring water then comes to the front of the stage and addresses the audience directly.*



I want to interrupt myself for a few moments here. After discussions with my learned colleague I will now present a brief historical analysis, as it is pertinent to the discussion of ends and means, rather than delaying it until I introduce the life histories. I will be reminding you to return here prior to reading those.

*YD uses the marker pen to inscribe the following:*

<p><b><u>Research Question 1</u></b>  <b>Why is it so difficult to ask questions of the value of higher education?</b></p>	<p><b><i>Four conflations</i></b></p>
	<p><b>Conflation 4 – ends and means</b>  <i>Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.</i></p>

So far I have focused on a progression narrative; the development of HE from an elite to a mass system, the former associated with intrinsic worth and the latter with extrinsic value. This narrative does have some currency. Bhatti (2003) found that those who study for instrumental reasons (because it leads directly to a particular job for example) were more likely to achieve their desired outcomes, whereas those who studied for knowledge acquisition per se 'find themselves *drifting* into a disconnected ambivalent world outside the university' (p.65, original emphasis). However, it does not explain why motives for participation in higher education identified by Bhatti ran along class lines 'intersected by gender, learning disability and ethnicity' (p.68)<sup>2</sup>. Nor does a narrative of *impeded* progress have superior explanatory powers. Thus interpreting my son's decision to study theology as an example of 'elite yearnings' that act as a drag on progress to a mass system (Scott, 1995, p.7), overlooks the particular reasons for his decision. It also assumes a degree of middle-class *savoir faire* with HE (Ball 2003) and/or employment markets (Devine 2004). Being a graduate ostensibly facilitates a more sophisticated level of decision-making in choices about HE. However, it would be a mistake to make this assumption because first generation working class experience of HE does

<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of learning disability has personal resonance for me. Negotiating support for my children I realised my access to professional networks through personal contacts and my own teaching background meant that the dire predictions about their learning trajectories have not been realised. My experience gave me cause to reflect on my own perceptions of the 'classing' aspects of learning disability and I was heartened to see it's inclusion by Bhatti here.

not necessarily translate into ease or familiarity with the habitus of the education market (Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000, Reay et al 2005).

An historical perspective, partial and underdeveloped as it must be in the hands of someone with only 'O' level history, serves here to unsettle the notion of progress along a continuum, impeded or otherwise. McNicol (2004) maintains that commitment to encouraging greater participation in HE by people from lower socio-economic groups is not a recent phenomenon but has existed for more than a century. Furthermore, similar barriers to access identified in policy documents in 2003 were also listed in those from 1908. A historical perspective thus interrupts the story that HE has 'progressed' from an elite to a mass system because, whilst numbers may have increased, 'there has been a persistent, consistent and continuing tendency to recruit students from the middle class' (Ross, in Archer et al 2003, p.73). It also undermines the conceptualisation of higher education as an elite core with a mass periphery (Scott 1995, p.24) because both are predominantly middle class.

An historical perspective also uncouples notions of means and ends from particular systems of higher education. At the turn of the twentieth century and before massification of higher education:

it was not expected that working-class university graduates would use their education to improve their own social position and raise themselves into the middle class (McNicol 2004, p.168).

However, this did not mean that higher education was seen as an end in itself. It was instead a 'method of maintaining industrial harmony and social control' (McNicol 2004, p.168) as graduates would remain in the same trade but would, for example, take up positions within trades unions. Moreover, by 1919, whilst personal fulfilment was seen as having a role to play in encouraging participation in HE, this had an instrumental purpose because 'the whole process must be the development of the individual *in his relation to the community*' (Ministry of Reconstruction, Adult Education Committee, 1919, p.4, quoted in McNicol 2004, p.168, my emphasis). Such conceptualisations go further than dissolving the elite/ends, mass/means associations, moreover. Ends and means themselves are also conflated here, in that the intrinsic worth of higher education becomes synonymous with personal fulfilment/being a good citizen, which itself is indistinguishable from acceptance of the status quo, of the social order. In contemporary understandings this conflation

has persisted but has rotated on its axis. I do not agree that this was a simple shift in focus from social control to economic efficiency but I will stay with this idea a while longer because some attribute this shift to Robbins (NCIHE 1963) rather than to Dearing (NCIHE 1997), or to later policy shifts (McNicol 2004 and Bradford and Hey 2007 both look to 'new Labour' policies for example. This is salient to the contextual background of the participant stories in terms of conceptions about the purpose of HE that were prevalent in the '70s.

Stevens (2004) argues that in the '50s it was not in political (or popular) consciousness that universities should contribute to economic success but that this changed with Robbins and some of the '70s literature on higher education also identifies Robbins as focusing on economic aspects of HE (Lawlor 1972, Adamson 1974-1976, Verry and Davies 1976, Crick 1979, Roderick and Stephens 1979, Lawlor 1979, A. Maynard 1979). For Stevens it was inevitable that Robbins would introduce an economic bias to his review of higher education simply because the latter was an economist. Hence he views Robbins' insistence that '(t)he aim should be to produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women' (para 26) as mere 'camouflage' for his economic orientation. However, Stevens does not credit Robbins with a *deliberate* sea-change in political thinking or policy orientation because he also contends that higher education policy decisions in the UK are often made 'absent-mindedly' and in a piecemeal fashion rather than consciously or with a coherent vision of the future. This view has some support today (see Parry above) and in writings on higher education at the time. Stewart (1972) states for example that, '(i)t would be a misnomer to speak of a 'system' of higher education in this country' (p.107) and Pitt (1975) goes even further, calling higher education not so much a system as a 'ramshackle connection... produced by frustration, confusion and irreconcilable conflicts' (p.7). Having already written a chapter on the '70s, I cannot but see this absent-mindedness and confusion as being of a piece with the times and with a contemporary re-membering of those times.

If we accept then, that Robbins did bring economic effectiveness into sharper focus, contemporary higher education discourses and policy have gone further than he did through the equation of economic effectiveness with social justice. This is not simply a matter of the interests of the individual being reduced to the economic as Bourdieu (2004) suggests and which inheres in the terms 'investing in oneself' and 'the knowledge economy'. Nor is it simply that when Dearing talks of higher education by its very nature being life-enhancing (para 1.1), what he actually means

is that it produces 'economic success, competitiveness and 'effectiveness'' (Blake et al 1998, p.52). Nor is it that the 'question of what higher education is for has been abolished, as it were, by bureaucratic decree' (p.50, with reference to The European Commission 1996). Nor is it that the fundamentally economic cannot be recognised because it is *euphemised* into something else (Bourdieu 2004) such as concern with social justice. I am persuaded that in contemporary conceptualisations of higher education economic prosperity and social justice are conceived of as indistinguishable and inseparable. They *are* the same thing. Therefore and moreover, individual economic 'success' is equated with that of the country.

It thus becomes the civic duty of the individual to be economically prosperous and to engage in activities (such as higher education) that are linked to the achievement of that prosperity. This sentiment is enshrined in the following policy statement:

Our vision is to build a new culture of learning which will underpin national competitiveness and personal prosperity, encourage creativity and innovation and help to build a cohesive society  
(DfEE, 1999, p.13, cited in Bradford and Hey 2007).

Furthermore, the findings of a study by Brooks and Everett (2009), albeit one that differentiated largely on the type of degree obtained rather than on class of origin or gender, on the value of a degree and its articulation with lifelong learning show how this 'vision' of learning becomes irresistible and incorporated into the graduate psyche:

(O)ur respondents seem to have taken on, not an awareness of a lifetime *entitlement* to learn, but what Levitas (1998) has argued is the lifetime *obligation* to learn and maintain one's marketability (p.347, original emphasis).

Implicit in most of the stories I heard in the course of my research (including my own) is the sense of an 'addiction' to learning and I also detect this in the statement above. In accounts such as these the notion of 'bettering' yourself thus becomes a more psychically and emotionally charged enterprise than that of simply weighing up risk, cost and benefit as Archer and Hutchings (2000) suggest.

As Bradford and Hey (2007) point out, these days 'it seems impermissible for the citizen to be anything other than successful' (p.596), although they imply rather than specify what success might mean. I understand the reason for eschewing normative concepts of success because, as Bradford and Hey remind us, in order for success to be recognised it also requires to be 'understood as coming from the

shadow of its 'other': *failure*' (p.598, original emphasis). However, with regards to the value of HE, it is only this kind of normative description that has sufficient clout to counter the idea that success is doing what the market requires. I asked all the participants in my study what they thought success meant and whether they consider they have been successful. It was interesting that we all consider ourselves successful (in different ways) but most of us also consider that we have under-achieved, which was invariably construed in economic terms.

In its articulation with higher education, late twentieth and early twenty-first century notions of success are both less and more individualised than in the first half of the twentieth century. They are less individualised in the sense that success is not simply for oneself but for the greater good (albeit in a mercantile, economic and utilitarian sense). It is more individualised because, so the story goes, widening participation enables each person, regardless of their background or their class, gender or ethnicity to 'realise their potential'. Structural factors no longer have salience (Beck, 1992, Giddens 1991). On this logic, failure to take advantage of these opportunities must be an (almost wilful) individual failing, such as a lack of aspiration or ability because institutions and policy are committed to smoothing the path for individual success. The sentiments embodied in this narrative can thus be detected in the following:

Aimhigher is a national programme which aims to widen participation in higher education (HE) by *raising the aspirations and developing the abilities* of young people from under-represented communities. Overwhelmingly *these are people from lower socio-economic groups* and disadvantaged backgrounds. Aimhigher partnerships build cross-sector relationships which break down the barriers which institutions and systems can *unwittingly* create for learners. (HEFCE 2009, my emphasis).

It is precisely the conflation of economic prosperity with social justice that I do see as marking a sea change in conceptualisations of HE. Like David (2007) and Blake et al (1998) I also think this is likely to be attributable to the phenomenon of globalisation. Although it is way beyond the parameters of my research to fully engage with the nature of the global economy, in brief it requires amongst other things a flexible, *consumable* and above all disposable workforce, a point to which I return later. For now I turn to arguments for inclusion of a different *perspective* on conceptualising the value of HE and of a different *language* in which to express this

re-conceptualisation. I address these below through a discussion of two more of my research questions.

*YD pours more water, drinks then positions and re-positions her boards so that they now appear thus:*

**Research Question 2**  
**Why is there so little interest in graduates?**

On my understanding, asking questions about the value of HE necessitates asking about what happens to graduates who come from working class backgrounds and how the experience of higher education articulates with, influences and impacts on other life experiences over the long term. I thus searched for references about the long term experience of being a graduate in the UK. I found that I was fishing in a very small pool, that the pool itself was sparsely stocked and furthermore, that I was only interested in certain fish. My insistence on specificity worked to proscribe my search, although I have crossed several disciplinary borders. Out of necessity I therefore considered work that runs tangential and parallel to my research rather than dovetailing with it. Thus my arguments about the purpose of HE were indirectly informed by Louise Morley's (2003) interrogation of the notion of 'quality' as it pertains to higher education institutions. Similarly Acker and Warren Piper's (1984) study about whether higher education is fair to women enabled me to consider gender issues that were salient at that time compared with their meaning now in the light of current gender parity in the academy. On the other hand I eschewed some work that would have lent further weight to some of my claims. I will illustrate my reasons for this with a particular example.

Kelsall, Poole and Kuhn (1970) conducted a survey of ten thousand graduates from British universities six years after graduation. Their subsequent report (Kelsall et al 1972) proceeds largely from the vantage point of 'career' and social mobility, even when it deals with events such as marriage and having children. That notwithstanding, their findings connect to feminist analyses of the

material outcomes of gendered relations more generally, as well as to the formative influence of heterosexuality specifically:

(S)ocial class, marital status and the arrival of children had a limiting effect on the career opportunities of our sample. On the other hand, the women themselves appeared to be relatively satisfied with this state of affairs, as a result (as we hope to show) of their acceptance of prevailing attitudes about the 'place' of women in contemporary society. (1972, p.141)

It would therefore have been useful to incorporate them into my own research. However, the barrier to this incorporation consists in the description of graduates as an 'elite'. Kelsall et al do problematise this conceptualisation and my objection is not that this label is anachronistic but precisely because it still applies in some cases (to someone who has a degree in PPE from an Oxbridge College, say). Coupled with the requirement for some, non-elite, students to be successful/economically prosperous, the conditions are created for the latter being pathologised in certain contexts as contaminating, deficient, even deviant. As Bhaba (1994) argues, in contemporary society difference is created not by the distance between groups but through their proximity. Drawing on the work of Kelsall et al would bring my participants into proximity with an 'elite' and would also, I reasoned, require me to justify why we (my co-participants and I) were 'different', were *not* elite, were deficient, (although doing a PhD may also be considered an elite activity). Thus I did not engage with or eschew works solely on the basis of their substantive relevance to my study but on the basis of criteria that link to notions of praxis, of which ethical considerations are part.

That said, I agree with Archer, Hutchings, Leathwood and Ross (2003, p.199) who state that '(w)ithin current widening participation and social inclusion rhetoric, there often seems to be a conceptual end point after graduation'. Moreover, any interest in what happens to graduates over the long term tends not to be concerned with experience per se but as 'data' for assessment of the effectiveness of higher education curricula (Jenkins, Jones and Ward 2001, Gedye, Fender and Chalkley 2004). Likewise Powell (1985, p.127) in an Australian study, found that whilst there is a:

substantial body of research, mainly conducted in the United States, concerned with the impact of higher education, this focused on 'socio-political attitudes and values during the years between enrolment and graduation' and not on '(w)hat enduring changes take place in the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of students as a consequence of their experience of higher education'.

But again his concern was to interrogate the effectiveness of institutional arrangements in general and teaching and learning in those institutions in particular.<sup>3</sup>

The oversight here is thus specifically of the *experience* of graduates, or perhaps we should say the experience of HE because, as Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander and Grinstead (2008a and 2008b) point out, there is barely any concern for the experience of *undergraduates* either, at least in Britain. Studies that proceed from the question, 'what good did higher education do you?' rather than 'to what use can we put your accounts of your experience of higher education' are rare. Moreover, studies about women graduates, whilst acknowledging the structuring force of gender, tend to overlook class. Thane (2004) does address this point, justifying her study of middle class graduates from Girton College from the 1920s to the 1980s by saying that researchers usually focus on the working classes. However, she does not point out that interest in the working classes is not generally as graduates but as potential students. Thane also focuses on the notion of career and her findings dovetail with those of Dyhouse (2002a) who found that the 'value' of HE for women in the early to mid twentieth century lay not in their increased earnings potential, which continued to suffer from gender specific constraints, but in other ways, not least 'fostering inter-generational mobility among their own children and grandchildren' (Dyhouse 2002a p.325).

Aiston (2005), also highlights gender as the major influence in the lives of women graduates, but she is unusual in considering 'personal lives' as worthy of study and she separates this from 'career biographies'. I do support the premise that 'career' (meaning a trajectory through paid employment) has a different meaning in women's lives and I also maintain that as a 'unit of analysis' it has been applied both too restrictively (as the standard measure of 'success') and too liberally (everyone can follow the same trajectory regardless of their starting point). However, I do not concur that such a separation can be so cleanly effected. Nevertheless Aiston's research comes closest to mine in asking 'how was it for you?', asking about the difference being a graduate makes to women's biographies and about whether lives have been more strongly influenced by other factors. Thus she offers a more finely grained picture of being a graduate and how it articulates with other life experiences than is usual. For example one of her respondents says her second husband is not

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<sup>3</sup> Ward, Jones and Jenkins (2002) present a collection of the life stories of their sample which are allowed to 'speak for themselves'.



a graduate which, she says, curtails her freedom (p.414). The common thread I see running through the work of Thane, Dyhouse and Aiston is something I have called 'compulsive heteronormativity', that is the almost irresistible drive to conform to socially inflected norms of heterosexuality, a concept to which I return later.

In general, however, the desire 'to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world' (Mills 1959, p.4) seems curiously lacking in terms of research on the experience of being a graduate. How can we account for this? I offer three main, interdependent reasons. Firstly and recursively it is due to the paucity of research in this field because it is difficult to develop analyses if the foundations are not there. Secondly the conflation which I set out above play a role. Thirdly it can also be attributed to the way the presence of working class students in HE is conceived of and perceived. This is a complex and multi-faceted contention which is set out in Reay (2001) and expanded in Skeggs (2004, pp. 62-78). Reay (2001, p.336), drawing on Bourdieu (1993), argues that education is increasingly being positioned as 'the new panacea for the masses' (p.336) and that 'capitalist privatized education is consuming the working classes rather than the other way round' (p.335). Skeggs, more generally, makes reference to this kind of consumption as the transformation of the working classes into subjects or objects of value (human capital). In other words, on this understanding the question to ask is not 'what is the value of higher education to working class young people?' but 'what is the value of working class young people to higher education'.

This strategy of inversion is akin to that set out by Žižek (2008). Žižek likens this challenging of taken for granted understandings through inversion to donning a pair of metaphorical glasses in order to bring into focus the 'obscene supplements' of a situation or phenomenon. The obscene supplement to 'widening participation', to 'giving' young people from working class backgrounds the 'opportunity' to participate in higher education, is that they serve the interests of national economic prosperity. The advantage of Žižek's strategy is that it sets fresh criteria for the terms of engagement and thus avoids direct and overt criticism of widening participation per se and, more generally, it sidesteps the good/bad dichotomy. As Acker and Warren Piper (1984) point out it is all too easy to fall into the trap of operating on your opponent's terms, of being sucked into a game of claim and counter-claim. The following example illustrates this argument.

John Denham (2008), then Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, made a number of overtly challengeable statements such as, 'there's been a profound shift within universities over the past ten years' which McNicol's historical analysis contradicts (Dyhouse 1995, 2002b and 2006 also undermines this assertion with specific reference to gender). He also asserts that change 'continues to move in the right direction' which Ross' (2003) statistical analysis countermands. Finally Denham states that 'most progress has been made on widening participation' rather than on 'fair access'. However, research by Vignoles, Goodman, Machin and McNally (2008) strongly suggests that exclusion happens as a result of earlier inequalities and not because of barriers erected at the gates of higher education institutions themselves. What is more, this insight is not new but was also reported by Halsey, Heath and Ridge in 1980 (which I would designate as a generation ago). But where does such a strategy of claim and counter-claim lead? The underlying message, that widening participation is a good thing, remains untroubled.

In contrast, the effectiveness of Žižek's approach is apparent in the next example. Archer et al (2003) report that both the National Audit Office (2002) and Woodrow, Yorke, Lee, McGrane, Osborne, Pudner and Trotman (2002) have suggested that government targets for higher education participation could be met entirely through recruitment from the middle classes, which ostensibly supports official rhetoric that widening participation policy is pursued because of motives of social justice (it is partly, but I re-iterate that social justice is now indistinguishable from economic motives). Thus directly challenging official rhetoric would put one in the position of seeming to argue against social justice and for the perpetuation of inequality. However, through Žižek's glasses it is possible to argue that the obscene supplement here is that working class participation in higher education is expendable. Using Bourdieu's (2003) metaphor of the game, the working classes are allowed to join in but they do not own the game or set the rules, nor do they participate on an equal footing. In other words, HE is considered by the middle classes as a resource which can be and is mobilised to maintain positions of privilege and control but is not a working class resource by right (Skeggs 1995 and 2004 considers the mechanisms of entitlement and Lury 1997 the way these mechanisms work in the appropriation of culture as property).

Readers may by now have guessed at the main disadvantage of the strategy of bringing obscene supplements into focus, namely that it leads to the use of extreme language and to arguing in extremis. Whilst this is sometimes necessary,

here it is also difficult to accomplish without the accompanying idea that there is a global conspiracy to oppress the working classes or that working class students are hapless victims. I am not arguing that oppression does not exist, or that it is always unconsciously exercised. But it is not right to aver that higher education is an unmediated experience visited upon working class students for ends unconnected to the amelioration of their lived realities (and this point will be richly illustrated by the participant stories). Moreover, in terms of widening participation I have argued that policies have generally not been so much thought through as absent-minded. I am not persuaded that a radical approach would be as effective in addressing that as more subversive methods might be; those that do not so much interrupt as cut across the dominant discourses.

This brings me now to a discussion of how this requires not only a shift in perspective but also a different language with which to speak about the value of higher education. The words of the master narratives (about the progression of HE from an elite to a mass system) are inadequate for this purpose because they tune in to discourses that perpetuate those very narratives.

*YD rises again and busies herself with the boards to reveal the following:*

**Research Question Three**

**How can we talk differently about the value of higher education?**

This chapter is inspired by two unpublished papers written in the course of my studies (Downs 2008 and Downs 2009a).

Nobody who has an interest in modern society, and certainly nobody who has an interest in relationships of power in modern society, can afford to ignore language.

(Fairclough 2001, pp.2-3)

My lifelong fascination for language(s) goes back to Christmas 1967 (I know this because I got a book that year which my mother dated). I became aware that my parents were speaking in a way I could not understand. 'What are you saying?' I

asked. 'Just stuff,' came the reply. I knew better than to press. In my family you did not query what adults did. Just over two years previous to this incident I would have been able to understand what they were saying because my mother had spoken German to us in the hope that we might be bilingual. A traumatic incident, when I got lost in a department store and in my panic could speak only German, put an end to that experiment. However, I could remember enough to know that they were speaking German to discuss Christmas presents. Being the nosy parker I am, I was burning to know for sure what I, tantalisingly, could only half guess at. So as soon as I could, I learned German (and French) and my love of languages continues to this day. However, my initial interest was piqued not by love but by the knowledge, gleaned in that moment in 1967, that language was power.

This reference to Fairclough, whose specialism is discourse, might suggest to the reader that this is where my own interest in language has taken me. It is true that I considered the possibility but ultimately I wanted to know what language could do, not how it could do it. Reading to get a general overview of discourse analysis (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates 2001 and 2005), of discourse and education (Bruner 1996, MacLure 2003) and of language and gender (Jule 2008) disorientated me. I felt that I was becoming the servant of something I initially intended to serve me in coming to a conceptual language with which to talk about the experience of HE. I felt conflicted and write in my journal on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2009 that I was 'thrown from my craft into stormy seas, fearing I would drown' and that the 'stormy seas were not external to me. They were my desperate inner struggles to understand'. Fortunately help was at hand. Firstly Bakhtin (1981) insists that studying language is not an abstracted undertaking but at heart the study of lived realities. Secondly Daly (1991) reminded me that we can approach a matter in ways that address the Foreground or the Background. I realised that analysing the texts as an example of discourse would be the former whereas my interest was in the latter, in why there was barely a conceptual language in which to talk about our experiences in the first place. Thirdly Bourdieu (1991, p.109) contends that by:

trying to understand the power of linguistic manifestations linguistically, by looking in language for the principle underlying the logic and effectiveness of the language of institution, one forgets that authority comes to language from outside

Thus the relevance of the story I related in my opening to this chapter lies not in the fact that my parents were speaking German, but that they knew in doing so I could be kept in the dark about my Christmas presents. I did not need to deconstruct their

utterances to know the power of language here. Likewise if I was to find a way of talking about HE that would allow me (and others like me) to make sense of experience, the way forward lay not in a deconstruction of the language used in participant stories but in sensitivity to what was said and why.

This brings me now to the role of contexts in bestowing meaning (Geertz 1973 and Ryle 2009). Daly highlights the salience of context when talking about her book *Gyn/Ecology* which was first published in 1979. She states:

I believe this book could not have been written earlier, because before that time there was no context which would have allowed for the possibility of its becoming

(Daly 1991, p. viii)

Thus cognisance of the parameters of *permissible* discourse, of what is say-able at any given time in any given circumstance, is fundamental to understanding and interpreting situated meaning (Plummer 1995). I thus incorporate the idea of 'prevailing discourse' when contextualising life stories in order to transform them into life histories because what is said (and say-able) at any given time is situated in and relational to particular social, cultural and historical moments. Bourdieu (2004) likens the success of any 'performative utterance' to an act of 'social magic' that relies on the authority of the speaker to emit the words uttered, an authority which itself is 'dependent on the combination of a systematic set of interdependent conditions which constitute social rituals' (p.111). Having struggled for a while to find a word to encapsulate all of this I was not able to find any better than 'discourse', which I use as a shorthand to signify the articulation of a particular set of conditions in which language is situated *and* to signify the relationship of language with those conditions.

Whilst there are at any given time a host of different discourses that describe the parameters of permissible utterances, I have focused specifically on two in particular in my research and have done so because they are generously scoped and particularly prevalent and influential. The first is rhetoric around participation in HE (or official discourse), the second is the articulation of popular perceptions of mass higher education (popular discourse for short). Official rhetoric and popular discourse share certain features. Unsurprisingly, if my contention about the conflation of the social with the economic is right, both share the language of free market enterprise expressed in financial and economic terms and manifested in expressions such as '*investing* in oneself', 'the knowledge *economy*', '*realising* your

potential', access to the 'jobs market' and 'credential inflation'. Indeed I decided not to stay with Bourdieu's ideas of capitals as a lens through which to read the participant stories precisely because I did not feel his language was sufficiently differentiated from mercantile and economic lexis that dominate talk about HE. Secondly they are difficult to challenge. Official rhetoric is difficult to challenge simply because it is official and has the power of the inherently authoritative (Bourdieu 2004). Gaining traction on popular discourse is also arduous because it does not necessarily proceed from fact but from perception, from doxic knowledge, from that which 'everybody knows', or that which 'goes without saying' or which 'common sense dictates'. What is ignored here is that such doxic knowledge is situated and subject to social and political influence. At certain times in history everyone knew the world was flat, that the sun revolved around the earth and that educating women would make them infertile. Bourdieu (1991, p.239) summarises my arguments thus:

In the symbolic struggle for the production of common sense or, more precisely, for the monopoly of legitimate *naming* as the official – i.e. explicit and public – imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world, agents bring into play the symbolic capital that they have acquired in previous struggles

Moreover, both these discourses have significant reach via access to different channels of communication. Official discourse is disseminated through the media and, importantly, can also use educational channels as a conduit through which to inform popular discourse. This is not to say that popular discourse is simply a reformulation of official rhetoric. Popular discourse is inflected by others such as 'who will do the crap jobs?' (Nicky Watts 2009) or 'you need a qualification for everything these days' (Warmington 2003), which in turn are informed by macro factors such as class, gender, race and ethnicity and then filtered through hearsay and broadcast through the grapevine. What makes both discourses so dominant and powerful is that they have the means to recursively perpetuate themselves, in different but mutually supportive ways. The following example illustrates this contention and demonstrates how a circuit of logic is created that is almost impossible to interrupt.

Below is part of one lesson in a programme ostensibly designed to 'raise awareness' of the benefits of HE, one of a number of activities that fall under the auspices of Aimhigher:

**Activity 6:** Encouraging people to get into HE Suggested time: 10-20 minutes

**Resources:** Tutor's notes 6a.

**Activity:** This activity is partly to *recap the content covered earlier in the pack* and also to raise awareness about Government policy and why the Government is encouraging more people to go on to HE.

Throw this question out to the class:

'Now you've found out more about HE and explored some of the benefits, why do you think the Government wants to encourage more people — like yourselves — to go to university or college?'

*Get the class to work in small groups to come up with three reasons each.* The Tutor's notes 6a should give you some ideas of possible answers.

(Teachernet 2009, my emphasis)

I would argue that the thrust of this lesson plan is not to raise awareness or encourage debate about the merits of HE from the point of view of the students, but instead to promulgate government policy. The role of the teacher here is not to facilitate critical thinking and to enable students to come to their own conclusions, but to funnel students down to pre-determined conclusions. Of course teachers do not need to unquestioningly follow this lesson plan. However, thinking back to my own experiences as a teacher, it was not uncommon for me to feel overwhelmed by my workload and if someone had handed me a lesson plan in this way I would have probably felt relief and gratitude, even were I to be troubled by its content (I refer readers back to the fourth vignette). What is more, there are no resources made available with which to query the claims made and, due to the equation of higher education with education in general, to do so would be a risky business anyway. Imagine the headline: 'Teacher discourages pupils from bettering themselves'. In this way the dialogic relationship between official and popular discourses works to create an almost impenetrable logic.

Another commonality in official and popular communications is the pathologising of working class participation/non participation albeit in different ways. I am aware that 'pathologising' is a strong word. However, I defend its use here as follows. Popular discourse uses the language of *excess* to construe working class *participation* as contaminating and devaluing of HE experience and qualifications. Echoes of these popular understandings can be heard in some of the participant stories and in the question posed in Nicky Watts' (2009) paper ('If they train everyone up to do these high power jobs, who's going to do the crap jobs that we do

now?'). Whether expressed in the vernacular or in more formal terms, the underlying message is that working class kids are disturbing the natural order. The veracity of such statements is contested. Elias and Purcell (2005) for example in a comparative study of graduates seven years after graduation concluded that different kinds of graduate jobs are evolving to accommodate increases in numbers, although these findings are not supported by other studies (Dolton and Vignoles 2000, McGuinness 2006, McGuinness and Bennett 2007, Dolton and Silles 2008). However, the point is not whether these aspects of popular discourse are refutable or supportable, it is that they are unavoidable and irresistible.

In the same vein but from a different angle, official rhetoric deals in the language of *deficiency* to pathologise working class *non*-participation, casting it as a sign they are lacking in aspiration. It does this, I would argue, by recourse to the language of 'dream-weaving' (Goodlad and Thompson 2007). I have included some examples of the latter earlier and I take just one of these to support my contention here, reference to a 'dream job', So the sub-text might read, 'If higher education can lead to a 'dream job', who but those *lacking* in aspiration would refuse it?' I have referred to work that challenges this claim but it is interesting to note that *middle-class* self-exclusion from HE is not similarly construed as a problem or a failing (Whitty 2001). Again it seems that it is working class participation that is *required* here, and official rhetoric ignores the fact that non-participation may be the result of a decision to do something else that the individual values more and has reason to value more. I am aware that aspiration is a complex concept. I am not disputing for example that it can be circumscribed by 'adaptive preference', (Elster 1983, Teschl and Comim 2005, Bridges 2006, Watts, Comim and Ridley 2008, Michael Watts 2008 and 2009) that is, matching your desires to what you think you might reasonably expect to get from life given your circumstances or alternatively reconfiguring something that is out of your reach as not worth having anyway<sup>4</sup>. I justify presenting my argument somewhat strongly and simplistically, however, because at issue here is not simply that working class participation *and* non-participation are problematic but that the mechanisms in play, the alignment of seemingly incompatible positions or characteristics, are precisely those that are present in processes of 'othering' (Said 1991).

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<sup>4</sup> Pat Sikes alerted me that some newspaper reports appearing after A level results came out were reassuring parents (middle class being understood) that if their offspring failed to get a place they should not despair – higher education was not the be all and end all. This is a very specific re-working of the fable of the fox and the grapes (see Elster 1983 and Watts 2008) and an example of this understanding of adaptive preference.



My challenge was thus to find a way to trouble these discourses and to address the processes of othering, to talk about working class participation and non-participation in HE in ways that sidestep notions of contamination and deficiency. Direct challenges necessitate arguing in extremis and even then this barely creates a ripple on the smooth surface of powerful and prevalent talk about the value of higher education. Therefore, after much deliberation I decided to use a three-pronged approach in my research rather simply shouting back or shouting down. Thus I have, firstly, used a life history approach, placing the stories I heard into their historical, discursive and narrative contexts. Goodson and Sikes (2001, p.7) maintain that 'life history data disrupts (sic) normal assumptions of what is "known" by intellectuals in general, and sociologists in particular'. To that I would add that they also disrupt what 'everyone knows' and/or what powerful interests are able to broadcast. Life history is thus a 'methodological sidestep' (p.8) that has enabled me to avoid directly answering to the claims made in prevailing discourses.

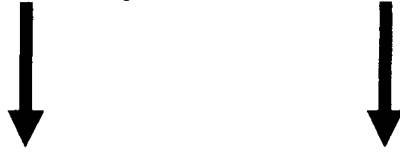
Secondly I position the participant stories as 'counter-narratives' to run alongside the master narratives of official and popular discourse. The possibility exists of course that the noise these master narratives make may drown out alternatives. However, despite the case I have argued above, they do have fault lines that occur along their focus on the short term, on abstracted ideas, on what *might happen* in the future and on the limited spheres of interest of employment and social mobility. The participant stories on the other hand relate what *has happened* and focus on the integration of the experience of HE into other life experiences and lived realities over the course of several decades. Whilst the story of a life does not equate to life itself, I would argue that this lends them a certain weight and volume which will enable them to hold their own.

The third prong consists in the instigation of a conceptual language that sidesteps that of prevailing discourses and allows for the expression of experience and lived realities. The question is therefore, what kind of language can do this?

*YD rises again and adds something to the board with the marker pen. The board now reads:*

### Research Question Three

**How can we talk differently about the value of higher education?**



*A different language*

Tamsin Haggis (2003) argues that what is required is a 'second language' with which to talk about higher education. I am in general agreement with Haggis' sentiments, but I doubt whether any one other language will do here. I am persuaded that different languages are required to articulate the experiences of different kinds of people. However, all languages through which the experience of HE is conveyed and which allow sense to be made of a life lived will share certain features. Stories gather people around them (Plummer 1995) but only if the languages of storyteller and listener are mutually comprehensible. For instance, Mahony and Zmroczek (1997, p.5) appreciate that:

What it means to have a working class background is different in each case. But it is not so different that we do not recognize each other and not so different that our connectedness (at least on this issue) disappears.

I was persuaded that it is emotional, psychic and visceral inflections and resonances in the language used that facilitate recognition and connectedness across differences. It was not so much that the contributors to this volume (I use the word consciously) saw each other *reflected* in the accounts given, which would make sense in visual representations. In textual representations it makes more sense to me that commonalities of experiences were heard in the cadences and tones of the words<sup>5</sup>. Thus, whilst contributors expressed their diverse experiences in many different ways (Skeggs (1997a) includes little auto/biographical detail, Karen Sayer and Gail Fisher use letters and Jo Stanley plays with language), something at the

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<sup>5</sup> Reading the participant stories I referred to these as 'points of recognition' but I knew even as I used it, this term was not quite up to the mark. Now I would use a term such as 'echoes'. By chance I peer reviewed a journal article which referenced Leggo (2008) who compares this to the mechanism of echolocation by which bats navigate their flights. Sound waves are sent out which bounce off objects and back to the bats which perfectly describes the idea I have in mind. I am grateful to the writer of this article even though their identity is not known to me and I am unable to acknowledge their contribution by name.

heart of their modes of expression struck a chord with other contributors (and with me).

I have found two concepts useful in substantiating what I mean. Firstly Reay (2005, p.913) argues for an 'affective lexicon' with which to talk about class because:

emotions and psychic responses to class inequalities contribute powerfully to the makings of class. In contemporary British society social class is not only etched into our culture, it is still deeply etched into our psyches.

I believe this concept can be diversified into affective lexica and expanded to apply to other phenomena apart from class. This is a language with/in which to articulate the inclusion of emotions, the unconscious and the visceral, for expressing ideas rooted in experiences that have touched us deeply. Literary works often avail themselves of affective lexica but it is rarer to find this in academic writing. Examples of academic writings that employ an affective lexicon are Steedman's (1986) about her mother and social class, Kuhn's (1995) exploration of growing up in a working class family, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody's (2001) study of girls growing up and Ellis' (2009) writing about her childhood in a small town in Virginia. Andrew Sayer's (2005) mapping of the moral significance of class is also the start of a thesaurus of the vocabulary and grammar of an affective lexicon.

However, Reay also warns that treatments of emotions and psychic responses to class can be 'individualized, pushed out of the wider social picture' (p.912), risking a retreat into internal, individualised realms. She advises that an 'affective lexicon' of class experience also needs to be cognizant of 'how social class is actually lived, of how it informs our inner worlds to *complement* research on how it shapes our life chances in the outer world (2005, p.913, my emphasis). I proceed from Reay in adopting the idea of an affective lexicon to support the articulation of experiences of higher education but I expand the concept into 'affective lexica' to account for my earlier contention that there is no unitary experience of HE. But I also go further in conceptualising the relationship of inner and outer worlds. I see this not simply as complementary, indeed I refute that experience can be divided in this way. I acknowledge that attention needs to be paid to the specificities of the dialectics of their relationship but if it is the case, as Reay contends, that inner processes shape exterior worlds, it seems perverse to treat them as separate. Thus on my terms affective lexica are imbued with analytic, explanatory and interpretative power at the level of 'felt knowledge' and contribute to

the language of emotional cognition (Nussbaum 2001), a concept to which I turn later .

Here I align myself with Berlant (1997, p.9) who states categorically that the distinction between the 'merely personal and the profoundly structural' is a false one and Skeggs (2004, p.350) that 'it is precisely through the telling of the self that 'social processes (of positioning, of value, of moral attribution) are put into effect', although Skeggs says this to critique such processes and I to champion them. To my mind the social significance of autoethnographic and auto/biographical writing can only be understood if the interior and exterior worlds are both seen as manifestations of the experience of life. Critiques such as that which Delamont (2009) makes of autoethnography, succeed only if the two worlds are seen as entirely unrelated, or if one holds, as Delamont (2004) seems to, that the social world is entirely observable.

The second concept on which I rely to support my idea of different languages with which to talk about higher education is borrowed from Lyons' (2000) notion of rhetorical sovereignty. Lyons uses this concept in respect of Native American writing but I am recasting it as salient to stories about the experience of HE. 'Sovereignty' is perhaps an unfortunate word because it has associations with imperialism and with colonial rule. However, Lyons rehabilitates it and contends:

Attacks on sovereignty are attacks on what it enables us to pursue; the pursuit of sovereignty is an attempt to revive not our past, but our possibilities. Rhetorical sovereignty is the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse.

(2000, pp.449-450, original emphasis)

This explication resonates with my understanding of life history which asks questions from the perspective of those usually 'acted upon' rather than that of those with power (Goodson and Sikes 2001). I was also drawn to this concept because it is explicit in confronting public discourse and in offering alternatives to that. In other words I saw it as a fitting underpinning concept to that of the counter-narrative and, moreover, one that is compatible with the notion of affective lexica.

In terms of higher education narratives therefore, rhetorical sovereignty means the freedom to express lived experience in ways that have the potential to undermine powerful discourses. It entails speaking in a language that draws on

affective lexica and sidesteps the language of excess, of deficiency and of dreams. It results in different ways of talking about HE that neither privilege nor pathologise participation/non-participation. Lest readers think I am getting carried away here, I am not suggesting that alternatives to pervasive discourses will come about simply through positioning the participant stories as counter-narratives. In the first place, my co-participants and I are just as susceptible to the influences of dominant discourses as anyone and in more than one of the stories you can detect a struggle to reconcile personal experience within the storylines available to us. Rhetorical sovereignty might well insist on the right of peoples to determine public discourse in their own way but I have set out how official rhetoric and popular discourse work together to form a powerful circle of logic that is difficult to resist. That said I am claiming to at least sow the seeds of alternative ways of conceptualising the value of HE and to perhaps provide a catalyst for developing this further.

*YD stops speaking and rises from her seat. She crosses to IC and says a few words which are inaudible to the audience. IC nods enthusiastically and YD turns and leaves the stage. She returns some moments later with a tray laden with tea-making paraphernalia, places the tray on the table and proceeds to make tea. Wordlessly IC indicates a preference for milk but no sugar, as does YD. YD takes a mug of tea and a plate of biscuits to IC. She returns to her seat and for the next ten minutes they both sip tea and eat biscuits without speaking. YD then loads and removes the tray from the stage. She returns and positions another board before taking up her position opposite IC.*

#### **Research Question Four**

**What can the specific experiences of white working class women contribute to understandings of the value of higher education in general?**

The term 'white working class women' can be read in two main ways. Either one can focus on its constituent parts so that it speaks (in the context of a study on higher education in *England*) to issues of 'race' (see below), ethnicity, class and gender. Or it can be understood in its entirety, in which case it seems to become a predominantly classed term (Skeggs 2004). Reay, David and Ball (2005), in their study of 'choice' in higher education, treated race, class and gender as individualised phenomenon, which of course also entailed cognisance of their inter-

relationships. However, I decided (in the main) to treat 'white working class women' as a whole, and thus also to foreground class as the main 'unit of analysis'.

*YD turns to the audience.*

Sometimes I just can't avoid these positivist terms but be assured I continue to struggle to do so.

*She turns back again.*

I am aware that it may seem I am privileging a certain perspective, and in terms of race a pervasive one at that. However, I justify my choice because my research grew out of my desire to understand my own experience and out of my belief that structural factors were an inalienable part of that. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that 'white working class women' are thought of as a distinct category. Whilst the white working classes in general are configured as the ultimate block to the progress and modernisation of the nation (Collins 2004 – in an albeit hegemonic representation of the white working classes that reads a particular male, metropolitan experience as normative), it is white working class women who are now the 'constitutive limit for what is valueless... the abject of the nation' Skeggs (2004, p.23). Skeggs maintains that the middle classes effect recognition of their own value in comparison with an Other who is fixed in particular locations. Thus white working class women are fixed in 'sink estates' for example (David Morley 2000). Skeggs also concludes that:

the ultimate issue is not who moves or is fixed but who has *control* – not only over their mobility and connectivity but also over their capacity to withdraw and disconnect.

(2004, p.50)

This argument explains why both working class participation and non-participation in HE is pathologised, whereas middle class non-participation is not. Higher education is considered by the middle classes as a resource they can utilise or not (hence the lack of interest in middle class self exclusions), but which is not a working class resource by right. Thus it should come as no surprise that in higher education '(w)hite people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, both men and women, are the most under-represented group' (National Audit Office 2008).

Without pre-empting the participant stories, I thus felt that a focus on the experiences of white working class women would contribute to understandings of HE in general, throwing all these issues into the sharpest relief by dint of the

extreme positions in which white working class women are currently fixed. This is not to say that the participants in this research see themselves as 'white trash' as it was once suggested to me. You will of course judge for yourself, but this assessment was a view not shared by any of us (and most of us have read and given our opinions on all the stories). But, importantly, our capacity to resist this label and the resources we now have to do so have been secured in no small measure by our graduate 'status'.

Having shared why I chose to focus on the term 'white working class women' in its entirety, I still feel I need to explain why I did not focus on gender or 'whiteness' per se apart from the obvious fact that focusing on more than one of these areas would probably be a stretch too far in a thesis that was already being pulled in several disciplinary and method/ological directions. But there are also other reasons to add here. Briefly, *turning again to the audience*, Oh so maddeningly brief all of this, *turning back again*

I do not focus specifically on gender because women have now achieved numerical parity with men in higher education. This is not to say that women are no longer disadvantaged (Evans 2008, Jameson 2010). Quinn (2003) has shown for example that higher education is now a 'paradoxical space', not a male space but not unproblematically female either.

Women are there, numerically, in universities all over the developed world, but closer inspection reveals that they remain marginalized in myriad ways.....Whilst a woman-dominated university is a significant cultural phobia, women look to the university to generate a vision of themselves as powerful, and to provide a protected space to think the unthinkable.

(Quinn 2003, p.148)

Moreover, these paradoxes seem set to continue as Louise Morley (2007) has identified a 'gender silence' in planning for the future of HE in the UK. And they endure after graduation, Elias and Purcell (2005) concluding for example that there is a significant gender pay gap between graduates. That notwithstanding, the numbers suggest that it is not gender per se that acts as a brake on access to HE.

There are two reasons why I do not focus specifically and solely on the experience of race or ethnicity. The first is that whiteness as a 'tincture descriptor' (Crosby 1997) is a complex, problematic concept that has been under-theorised because it has generally been construed as a 'neutral' marker (Frankenberg 1993)

and a 'natural identity' (Hurtado and Stewart, 1997), not a racially explicit concept. Secondly, whiteness only becomes *visible* through the lens of class and gender and at its intersections with ethnicity and nationality anyway (Phoenix 1997).

*YD rises again and rearranges the boards.*

<p><b><u>Aim</u></b></p> <p><b>To contribute to a new way of talking about the value of participation in higher education and to inspire further research inquiry from the perspective of participants in higher education themselves.</b></p>	<p><b><u>Objectives</u></b></p> <p><b>To trouble prevalent conceptualisations of the value of higher education.</b></p> <p><b>To ask participants to reflect on whether, and if so how, the experience of higher education and of being a graduate has articulated with subsequent life experiences.</b></p> <p><b>To craft counter-narratives about the value of higher education from the perspective of being a graduate and in the context of a life lived over thirty years.</b></p> <p><b>To suggest a conceptual language in which to express notions of value that resonate with experience and lived realities.</b></p>
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I appreciate that I have written a story about the chicken and the egg but it could not be avoided. I also know that method/ological issues have leached into my account. However, I hope I have succeeded in giving you a clear indication of the ideas that guided my research. Whatever the case, I can tell you no more. I have exhausted myself and my topic and I can no longer resist an engagement with my research philosophy which has been tugging at my sleeve for quite some time now.



## My research philosophy

*I am doing feminist research with an ethical aim, a moral purpose and a reflexive impetus.*

I am barely aware of the provenance of the above, but my MA (Ed. Res.) dissertation acts as a record that it assembled itself some time between April and September 2007. Despite its nebulous beginnings, since that time I have frequently referred to it. If I ever become stymied or paralysed or reach a dead end or get lost, the way out of my troubles lies in reconnecting with it, although I still 'forget' this sometimes and consequently waste more time in confusion than I need to. My resistance is attributable to my ambivalence about the notion of having a research philosophy because, much as I recognise its importance, I cannot help feeling it is pretentious to have it, which I interpret in turn as a classed response. Skeggs, on the basis of empirical research (1997) and theoretical review (2004) argues that class positions are subjectively taken up and simultaneously resisted in a number of ways, one of which is for working class people to designate middle class practices as 'pretentious'. Sayer (2005) and Reay (2005), contend moreover that class is lived through our emotional responses, connecting with Nussbaum's (2001) view that emotions are 'cognitively evaluative'. Therefore I see my embarrassment as reflecting my reflexive response to a subjective experience of class (or my subjective response to a reflexive experience of class or my classed response to a reflexive experience of subjectivity...).

It is also problematic because it may read as an expression of my researcher identity. This contradicts my conceptualisation of identity and identity formation which is too involved to be reduced to a statement that resembles the strap line on a business card. 'Fixing' this aspect of my identity would also be profoundly unethical. Skeggs (2002) and Adkins (2002) both posit this a means of othering, a point I have explored more fully elsewhere (Downs, 2009b). In short it involves positioning others as Other. Whilst this can be interpreted as a method/ological concern (because I have included myself as a co-participant), it is also an ethical and moral issue because method/ology translates philosophical concerns into the specific research acts and practices constitutive of praxis. Of course, I could still have a research philosophy and at the same time avoid these tensions if I kept it to myself and just let it silently inform what I do. Does the reader have to know everything? Well, you

are already in the dark about so much. So much of what I have done does not appear here. It is not practical to put everything in (although I have included some 'outtakes' in Appendix 2). The word limit on a PhD is apparently only a guideline (University of Sheffield 2009-10) but printing costs and, more importantly, not wanting to over-burden you, constrain me. But I do think you have a right to know about something that plays such a pivotal role in what I do. So it may make me squirm at times and I may feel driven to prove to you that I am not precious, but I still have to tell you. Moreover, if I am explicit about what it is that underpins what I profess to do, you can hold me accountable to my own measures.

Having thus introduced my research philosophy, the reason I have it and why I articulate it, I will now go on to look more closely at its constituent parts, with the usual caveat that to dissect it in this way entails some loss of meaning of the whole. Some of what I write is also paraphrased from my MA (Ed. Res.) dissertation. I am mindful here of Sikes' (2009a) critique of self-plagiarism but the ideas with which I grappled in my dissertation are foundational and repetition is thus unavoidable.

## **Feminist research**

### **What do I understand by that?**

*'Feminists agree on so little'* (Ramazanoglu with Holland 2002, p.4)

If this were not the case I would gladly avoid involvement with explanations of what I mean by 'doing' feminist research. I would simply say that feminist research pays attention to what you have not been paying attention to (Reinharz 1993). Apple (1996) and Casey (1996) point out the connection between the 'narrative turn' in educational research and a renewed interest in identity politics. Skeggs (2002, p.349) also makes the connection between identity politics and research methods, arguing that it is 'the method that is constitutive of the self, not the self of the researcher that always/already exists and can be assumed in research'. Thus my contention that 'I *do* feminist research' rather than 'I *am* a feminist researcher' is not sufficient to distance myself from attachment to identity claims. My concern is that where there are claims for identity there is often violence (Sen 2006, Dowden 2008, Zizek 2009). That said, when I say 'I do feminist research', I do not uncouple that from 'being a *feminist*' because, after hooks (2000), being a feminist expresses a commitment to action rather than to an identity. Like Fonow and Cook (1991) and

Kelly, Burton and Regan (1995) I want to maintain links between scholarship and feminist 'activism', although ironically my interest in feminism was engendered through scholarship rather than through the latter. If I am to ally my research to feminism therefore I shall have to first explain why I use the singular and not the plural 'feminisms', which I also touch on in Downs (2007a).

Use of the singular can signify a 'global, homogeneous, unified' notion of feminism (Oleson 2000, p.216) that masks the reproduction and perpetuation of oppressions through race, class and colonialism as well as through patriarchy (Carby 1982, Lorde 1984, Mohanty 1988, Minh-ha 1989, Sivanandan 1989, hooks 2000). I am also mindful of Bhaba's (1996) argument that it is proximity rather than distance that can be the most effective creator of difference. On the other hand using the plural 'feminisms' is not a panacea and is insufficiently sensitive or powerful. In fact, to my ears, using the plural here does not 'produce new syntheses' as Oleson (p.216) states, but implies factionalism and fragmentation leading to criticisms from without that we 'cannot get our act together' (Letherby 2003, p.16). So much feminist energy is wasted defending ourselves to those whose project is to discredit feminism as Sommers (1995) does, or in countering the effects of its appropriation. For example, talk of the feminisation of the academy and the numerical parity of girls in higher education diverts attention away from the injustices that still pertain (Quinn, 2003, Evans 2008 and Jameson 2010). Thus I cannot help but agree with hooks (2000, p.18) that talk of feminisms is:

a despairing gesture expressive of the belief that solidarity among women is not possible. It is a sign that the political naïveté which traditionally characterized woman's lot in male-dominated culture abounds.

Many years ago Braidotti (1989, p.159) highlighted the way macro political conditions could reduce women to 'mere spectators in the theatre of our own destitution' should we persist as 'organs without bodies'. Thus in my view, talk of feminism does not assume uniformity. Neither does it preclude solidarity between those with common interests (Amos, Lewis, Mama and Parmar 1984). Sharing a space requires paying close attention to the effect of one's actions on others. Differences are thrown into sharp relief. Furthermore, someone standing next to you does not have to shout to make themselves heard and silencing other voices is equally possible *between feminisms* as it is *within feminism*. In short I agree with Smart (1996) that it is more fruitful to collectivise diversity than to atomise it.

In other words, my concept of feminism owes much to Levinas' (1957/1998) notions of totality and infinity. According to Levinas, totality is expressive of ideas that are closed and limiting, reductive, narrow and restrictive. Infinity on the other hand expresses expansiveness, openness and inclusion of ever more voices (and thus necessitates being mindful of how much noise you are making and sometimes staying silent and listening in order to avoid a cacophony). It encompasses heteronomy, the foregrounding of otherness and recognition of historical exclusions. There is nothing inherently totalising in using the singular term 'feminism' nor is the plural 'feminisms' necessarily an infinite concept in Levinas' thinking. I want readers to interpret my use of 'feminism' as an infinite term, akin to hooks' (2000) use of the term 'feminist movement' because it 'avoids linguistic structures that give primacy to one particular group' (p.32). In the past this meant white middle-class feminists from materially affluent worlds.

### **Why feminist research?**

Why do I say I am doing feminist research? Why do I not say I do qualitative research or post-positivist research? All these research movements share many of the same concerns about, for example, representation and about the ethical implications of research practices and acts, both of which are closely intertwined. As an example (based on my research) I was mindful of the impact on participants of all aspects my research, not just those parts in which they were directly involved. In terms of my acts this meant that I ensured participants saw the transcripts and the life histories prior to their inclusion in my thesis. It also meant that, with permission and if they so desired, they could read and comment on all nine life histories. They also had the opportunity to amend what I had written about them (although, if I felt strongly about something, I would have been prepared for the participant to withdraw rather than to omit or amend reference to it and I made this clear to each one at the outset). It also meant that any theoretical perspective I took also had to articulate with their stories. These practices are not unique to feminist research and do not equate to a general prescription for the conduct of research but they do provide some criteria to use in reflexive evaluations if we reject notions of an objectivity that is external to the specificity of what we are actually doing.

In addition to these complementarities, feminist research has long had links with other traditions, philosophical perspectives, epistemologies, theories and analyses. Thus Harding (1987) refers to 'feminist postmodernism', Haraway (1988)

to 'feminist objectivity', Lather (1991) to 'neo-Marxist feminism' and Stanley and Wise to 'feminist fractured foundationalism' (1993, 2006). Bartky (1990) has no fixed allegiances and has used phenomenology, existentialism, poststructuralism, critical theory and Marxism in the service of her feminist philosophy. Thus my later argument for 'bivalent theorising' (Walker 2003) does not make me part of the 'post-paradigmatic diaspora' (Lather 1991, p.121) but continues a feminist research tradition of making connections. However, despite having things in common with other traditions, there are also some underpinning principles which serve to position what I do specifically as feminist research.

### **Principles for feminist research**

Like Bochner (2000) I think debates about criteria can be distracting and applying foundational criteria can become a mere tick box exercise. I thus treat the ideas underpinning my approach to feminist research as principles to establish a connection to praxis and to the moral purpose of research. I base my feminist praxis on the ideas of Kum-Kum Bhavnani (1993) who taught research methods at the University of Bradford where I did a MA in Women's Studies at the beginning of the '90s (Novakovic 1993). Bhavnani's criteria emerge out of a dialogue she entered into with Haraway's (1988) discussion of feminist objectivity and I present them here not 'in the raw' but as a result of my long and enduring engagement with them. I acknowledge that Bhavnani may consider I have gone too far (in the wrong direction) and that my ideas no longer have any connection to hers. Nevertheless, as Delamont (2004, p.83) argues, failure to cite 'wipes people out of academic discourse'. Thus I acknowledge the lineage of these criteria back to Haraway, via Bhavnani, even if neither would now accept my interpretation. In this I come close to Delamont's (1989) approach using theory.

### **Interpreted principles for feminist research**

- ✚ Feminist research should not re-inscribe 'the researched' into prevailing representations (or subscribe to 'troubling assumptions that help re-inscribe the tyrannies they ostensibly critique'<sup>1</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to one anonymous reviewer of a paper I submitted for publication (Downs, in press for publication in 2011) for drawing my attention to this danger which could (re)produce the very effect it seeks to avoid.

- ✚ At the same time it should not down play structural subordination or valorise or romanticise the researched.
- ✚ The researcher should acknowledge and discuss the micro-political processes that are in play during the conduct of research and highlight how they are enacted.
- ✚ Research should also have a sense of the macro-political setting in which it is conducted.
- ✚ All aspects of the research process should address how it deals with 'difference'.

Please bear these criteria in mind, dear reader. They are those against which I assess my own research act(ion)s and those against which I would want you to judge me.

### **A reflexive impetus**

Much of my thinking around reflexivity was thrashed out in my MA dissertation and here I am able to cut to the chase, to present readers with a summary, with key features, the main points of my understanding. Presenting in this way, you will no doubt deduce, is a reflexive practice because it epitomises in its very shape and form (the bullet pointed list) how methods produce knowledge.

- ✚ Reflexivity is used simultaneously to validate *and* interrogate research practices and representations (Lynch 2000, Pillow 2003).
- ✚ This is made possible by four interrelated features inherent in the term (Taylor, Downs, Chikwa and Baker, in press for publication in 2011).
  1. It is conceptually overburdened.
  2. Conceptual elisions and conflation occur within it.
  3. This in turn hinders appreciation of how densely packed the term is and from teasing out and troubling what it means.
  4. Conversely this recursion leads to the assumption of unified understandings of what it does mean.
- ✚ The dominant understanding of reflexivity is that it is synonymous with 'self

telling' (Patai 1994, Pile and Thrift 1995, Skeggs 2002, Adkins 2002, Pillow 2003).

- ✚ Understanding selfhood as multi-faceted, inconstant and evolving as I do renders the possibility of self-telling problematic.
- ✚ I take reflexivity as an overarching term that encompasses a range of practices and actions that assist researchers in being 'vigilant about our practices' (Spivak 1984-5, p.184). The reason I use the term 'reflexive impetus' arises from a concept of reflexivity that requires action.
- ✚ The idea of reflexivity as a complex concept is not new. Latour (1991) for example differentiates between meta- and infra-reflexivity and May (1998) between what he calls endogenous and referential reflexivity. However, I do not consider it necessary to produce further layers of complexity when the conceptual language for refining understandings already exists.
- ✚ Reflexivity on my understanding has become a catch-all concept inhering the discrete notions of self-telling, self-reflexivity, positionality and doing reflexivity (which I sometimes call 'reflexivity as doing' or 'reflexing'). In my view these need to be treated as separate ideas.

### **Doing reflexivity**

My ideas about how I could get myself to stand on the sidelines and observe what I was doing, so that I had at least some degree of consciousness about how that was influencing what I produce, goes back to my days as a student of German. One of my A level set texts was the play 'Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder' (Mother Courage and her children) by the playwright Berthold Brecht. Brecht uses 'verfremdungseffekte', (alienation techniques) to remind actors and audiences that what they see is not real life or even a facsimile of it. He wanted audiences to be vigilant about the ways in which meanings were made on stage and in the complicity between playwright/actors/audience. Influenced by Brecht I construe reflexivity as the necessity of hanging on to our disbelief, of not being seduced by the plausibility of what we see, hear and read and of thinking beyond the immediate impact of what we are doing. Reflexivity is thus also a commitment to ethical practice. Brecht used techniques such as actors stepping out of role, slogans projected on to the stage, songs and loudspeaker interruptions of the action. I use the following in this thesis:

- ✚ Inserting non-academic text such as stories, poems (including some of my own) and citations from literary works.

- ↓ Using grey literature to support my arguments.
- ↓ Using different fonts for different purposes (my asides and interruptions in Comic Sans for example, *stories in Segoe Script* and poems and my reference list in Times New Roman ).
- ↓ Interrupting the 'flow' of my arguments (and there are few better devices for this than the Harvard system of referencing).
- ↓ Producing a messy text in the sense that I use different forms of presentation. I do not mean messy in the sense of slapdash or hotch potch. I work very hard to ensure I do not give readers a hard time. I may not always succeed in expressing my ideas and arguments clearly but I do not want you to struggle with the language or form in which they are expressed.
- ↓ Addressing the reader directly ('dear reader', 'you').
- ↓ Giving glimpses of other facets of myself. This is not the same as the concept of 'self-telling', whose implied purpose is to make oneself better known. In fact what I am trying to do is to remind you of precisely the opposite – that we can never know ourselves or anyone else because so much is absent at any given time (McMahon 1996 and see Appendix 3) and the more I fill in the less transparent I become. What we do, moreover, is not a synecdoche for who we are.
- ↓ Representing my research in textual, visual and concrete ways (this thesis, vignettes, poems, stories, a patchwork, photographs, 'movies' and a blog).
- ↓ Admitting transgressive data (St. Pierre 1997, p.179). Particularly in the latter stages of my PhD, when I was 'writing up' my thesis, I seemed to do much of my thinking when I was asleep. I woke on more than one occasion with clarity about what I needed to do. Once this involved a substantial amount of work because I became aware of ideas that had not yet penetrated my consciousness but which changed the way I construed my research (it was a piece of work about lives, not about higher education).
- ↓ Acknowledging wherever possible what I believe to be the lineage of my arguments and ideas and connecting to a knowledge community 'out there'.
- ↓ Including 'out-takes' and loose ends in Appendices whose significance resides in their presence rather than their substance, which is selective anyway. This sense of unrealised importance is also embodied in my patchwork.



## **An ethical aim**

The expression 'ethical aim' rather than 'ethics' signals a plastic concept rather than the static one enshrined in ethics review protocols and procedures. My view of the latter has been coloured by my first engagement with them whilst doing my MA (Ed. Res.) and finding they left me woefully under-prepared and undermined my ethical intentions. This is a bold statement but not an idiosyncratic one. Hammersley (2009b) and I have spent a good while grappling with it (Allen, Anderson, Bristol, Downs, O'Neill, Watts and Wu, 2009, Downs, in press for publication in 2011). In the intervening time I have grown in what Sikes refers to as 'ethical wisdom' (Sikes and Piper, in press for publication 2010) and I appreciate now that my fundamental problem with ethics review stems from the implicit and explicit assumptions about human nature that inhere in its protocols. The assumption is that we (participants and researchers) are simultaneously devious and not to be trusted and at the same time infantile, naïve and in need of protection, which runs counter to my feminist research principles not to re-inscribe participants into prevailing representations. This principle is there because these representations have long been implicated in systems of oppression (Said, 1991). For example, Bristol (in Allen et al 2009) has charted their translation into practice for scholars in the Caribbean through the re-designation of indigenous research acts as sites of ethical lawlessness.

Thus, whilst I know that researchers are not always concerned to increase the sum of the good, like Israel and Hay (2006) I proceed on the basis that they do. It is one thing to know that some researchers do wittingly behave unethically, and that more do so unwittingly, and quite another to then act as if no one is to be trusted. Believing in the human good and human goodness is not a sign of my naïveté but of my resistance to cynicism and a reflection of my axiological assumptions. This does not exempt me from thinking through *how* I might translate my ethical aims and intentions into ethical acts, something which involves appreciation of the particular circumstances in which the research is conducted (on both the micro and macro level). I agree with St. Pierre (1998, p.176) that:

ethics is no longer transcendental and clearly defined in advance for everyone in every situation. Rather, ethics explodes anew in every circumstance, demands a specific reinscription, and hounds praxis unmercifully

(St. Pierre 1997)

Thus, although my research sailed smoothly through ethics review I knew that I was on my own in terms of thinking through the translation of my ethical aim into specific acts and practices. Whilst others can assist you, can perhaps point out where you might come unstuck (and I was very fortunate indeed to have in Pat Sikes a teacher who has researched in areas that involve grasping very thorny ethical issues), and whilst there is now a substantial literature on which to draw, I felt the onus was on me to be very clear, ab initio, about what I wanted to do and how to realise it.

Here I am clearly aligning myself with Christians' argument that it is not sufficient to have 'extrinsic ethics' (2000, p.149) and that there is now a need to integrate it with human action and with conceptions of what is 'good'. I also support Wellington's contention that 'there is no logical reason why individuals should not have their own ethical code' (2000, p.54). This is of course problematic because Christians also states that it was insistence on autonomy and self-determination emerging out of enlightenment thinking that made ethics exterior to moral practice in the first place. However, I want again to differentiate between intention and act/ion. Here the act/ion of thinking through my ethical aims on my own was motivated by the intention to recognise my connection to others and to take responsibility for my contribution to the common good. Put simply, unethical behaviour diminishes us all so I needed to be wise to my particular and individual responsibility as a member of a community.

The first step in that (I am suggesting a linearity here that does not reflect how I went about it, but I need to maintain clarity) was to get a grip on the ethical traditions with which I was connecting. Ricoeur (1992, p.172) describes the 'ethical intention' as '*aiming at the "good life" with and for others in just institutions*', (original emphasis). I had been using this statement to express my understanding of research ethics since doing my MA (Ed. Res.) and had been struggling to articulate why it encapsulated my own ethical intentions. My struggles were ended by Sikes (2010, p.14) who, in stating that she takes a 'bricolage' approach to ethics, draws on (Kantian) deontological, (Aristotelian) virtue and (Buberian) relational ethics as well as situational and contextual awareness and consequentialist concerns to support her position. For me this read as a welcome deconstruction of Ricoeur's statement and a description of my own approach. However, as Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong (2000) remind us, translating ethical intentions into ethical acts is no straightforward matter. Behaving ethically towards one person may preclude ethical conduct towards another. Thus the next step was

to consider the particular act/ions through which I aimed to realise my ethical intentions in this particular study, and to encapsulate them in my method/ology which should in turn instantiate my ethical aim.

## **A moral purpose**

Embedded in this idea is the question 'For whom?' (Fine et al 2000). Whilst I agree with Goodson (1999) that a crucial role for educational researchers is as 'public intellectuals', at a time when educational research is ever more closely scrutinised (and not only by government but by practitioners and 'the public at large') for its 'impact' and 'usefulness' to policy and practice<sup>2</sup>, the space for doing research for purposes other than this becomes constricted. I have not for one moment underestimated my good fortune in having been funded to do research that can, within very broad limits, set its own agenda. It has been made very easy for me to be faithful to my moral purpose. It is not as easy for most. Hey (2004, p.37) writes for example:

The conditions of the contemporary academy put the ethical practice of feminism in extreme contradiction with the contrasting ethical practice and moral regulation of audit and accountability. Feminist academics live between these spaces.

Thus when I talk about moral purpose it is within a context of the compromises made on a daily basis between one's ideals and the exigencies of trying to earn a living doing that about which one is idealistic in the first place. I am not claiming moral superiority for research that does other than critique or inform policy. I am however arguing that sometimes hard decisions need to be made. Sikes and Piper's (2008) decision to proceed with their research on unproven allegations of sexual abuse by male teachers despite being warned of the risks involved is a trenchant example. Moral purpose has to figure somewhere in one's deliberations here.

Thus the second aspect of moral purpose is that '(w)e are always on the hook, responsible, everywhere, all the time' (St. Pierre 1997, p.176). Ricoeur (1992)

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<sup>2</sup> By chance, while I was reviewing this chapter of my thesis, I received an email inviting me to attend a course that spoke to these issues.

Want to be an academic researcher in the UK during the next 10 years? Then you need to actively pursue the impact of your research, because it will be a major element of how you will be judged.

Such a definitive answer to the question 'For whom?' (Fine et al 2000) makes my heart sink.

posits morality as the articulation of ethical aims in *norms*. I have taken this here to mean the quotidian stuff of doing research, the minutiae of honouring claims about its impact and usefulness. Focusing on the 'impact' of research after it is done can detract attention from the impact it has had while it was being carried out (Sikes Nixon and Carr, 2003). My approach to analysis and my decision not to incorporate statistical analysis in my research are thus method/ological *and* informed by ideas of moral purpose. Indeed, the two are indistinguishable. Thus I am saying that a purely consequentialist ethics is insufficient here. Furthermore, I used to think that whenever I was struggling to keep my research moving, it was a sign of my failure to think things through method/ologically when in fact it was invariably my failure to connect with its moral purpose. Thus I cannot agree with Atkinson (1997) that foregrounding ethical preoccupations rather than methodological ones is an inferior kind of social science.

## Method/ology

*(F)inding a good way to live our lives, to do the right things, to give voice to experiences that have been shrouded in silence, to bring our intellect and emotionality together, to merge the personal and the academic, and to give something back to others draws us to the poetic, moral, and political side of narrative work.*

*(Bochner 2001, p.154)*

### Locating the discussion

Most of the time I found I was tying myself in knots trying to differentiate between methods and methodology. I have written elsewhere (Downs 2010) that scratching the surface of seemingly practical or technical undertakings shows that they are saturated with ethical and value-laden judgements anyway. Stanley (1990) draws attention to the connection between practical and intellectual aspects of research and Nixon and Sikes (2003), maintaining that explanations about what is *educational* about educational research must expand their parameters to include not only technical but also moral and ethical considerations, also (re)define 'useful' and 'relevant' as evaluative criteria. Using the term method/ology is my, albeit imperfect, acknowledgement of all this. I will focus specifically on my methods later and I also use the term methodology when referring to other scholars who use this term or when I am paying heed specifically to the ideas that have underpinned my thinking.

That said, the account that follows moves towards rendering comprehensible, to myself and to you, a process that made itself up as I/it went along. In short, I followed my instincts and my intuition, doing what felt right at the time. Indeed this was the only way I could proceed. Every time I lost faith and told myself, 'You must do this now' the result was only frustration and tears, the outcome of separating the technical from the ethical and moral. Trusting my instincts did not obviate thinking through research decisions or proceeding with due care. However, I do not wish to mislead you by giving the impression that I knew why I was doing what I did at the time. I was reassured that St. Pierre (1997) had experienced this too, which underlines the importance to novice researchers of stories about experience such as those found in Wellington, Bathmaker, Hunt, McCulloch and Sikes (2005). But nor is this account a retrospective spinning of a web of meaning around my research conduct. Intuition is, on my understanding, not guesswork but the feeling of a thought that has not yet become part of consciousness, a

subterranean knowing. Here my 'intuition' was the assemblage (in a general rather than Deleuzian sense) of all the ideas at the heart of my thinking on methodological issues, but still working at a subconscious level.

The discussion that follows takes place in three key locations: method/ology and praxis, compelling method/ologies and holistic method/ology. I then contextualise a consideration of theory within the landscape of method/ological ethics and I illustrate how this plays out in practice by storying my decision not to include an analysis of official statistics. I then move on to a discussion of life history, the culmination of my 'grande tour' of method/ology.

### **Method/ology and praxis**

I have already outlined the key principles of my research philosophy but so far have not explained how these become translated into practice. I believe this is a two step process. Lather (1991:11, drawing on Bottmore 1983) indicates the first step by referring to praxis as 'philosophy becoming practical'. This definition of praxis resonates with my belief that the ordinary and everyday is simultaneously extraordinary, and conversely that the exceptional is also mundane. Indeed this was fundamental to my understanding of Ricoeur's (1992) definition of the ethical aim. Paying attention to the minutiae of everyday practice is not only a matter of routine but a means of realising the moral purpose of research. The second step therefore is *how* to translate 'philosophy' into everyday acts. I would argue that this is achieved in method/ology. So the reason I bring method/ology into close proximity with praxis is to ensure that it cannot lead to a 'sterile dead end of checklists' (Nixon, Walker and Clough 2003, p.91) and that practical decisions (which font to use, whether to record interviews, how to do transcription etc.) are similarly close to the ethical and moral aspects of research.

### **Compelling method/ologies**

I am not clear where the weight I give to method/ological concerns originated. Perhaps it is in feminist considerations of its importance to knowledge production (Roberts 1981, Bowles and Klein 1983, Harding 1987, Smith 1988, Stanley 1990, Maynard and Purvis 1994, Ramazanoglu with Holland 2002, Letherby 2003, and Hesse-Biber 2007). I also share Stanley and Wise's (1993) interest in matters of ontology and believe that method/ology is implicated in those, something which is made manifest along the contours of creative non-fiction/ethnographic

fiction/creative fiction (Sparkes 2002). I suspect, further, that undertaking a dissertation with a methodological focus for my MA (Ed. Res.) set the seal on my way of thinking about research. Whatever its origins, when Clough and Nutbrown (2002) maintain that your methodology should not (just) be appropriate and sufficient but should instead be 'unavoidable', necessary, persuasive and justifiable through the research itself, I read these as imperatives. Over time this has crystallised into the notion of a 'compelling method/ology'. What I mean by this is that every aspect of my research conduct, my practices, my acts and my actions, my processes and my products must be shown to be necessary to and justifiable through the research.

From this perspective the emphasis is not so much on the researcher *choosing* a particular method/ology but of the method/ology *finding* the researcher. Goodall, (2000) construes his pull to ethnography in this way and I was similarly compelled to do life history. Thus there is an element of constraint about compelling methodologies. For example studying lives, turning to a hitherto neglected decade (the '70s) and addressing questions that have largely remained unasked let alone answered, I felt I had to commit to an emergent and messy research process (Law, 2004) and to produce 'messy' texts even though this goes against my usual need to be orderly and tidy. However, compelling methodologies can also be liberating and exhilarating for precisely the reasons highlighted by Nixon and Sikes; that is they are educational. I can do things now that I did not know I could do and I know things that I could not have previously imagined and I find that deeply rewarding.

### **Holistic method/ology**

Heron (1996, p.16) argues for the 'holism of inquiry' and describes holistic method as 'the interplay within the co-inquirers of thought and experience' and the 'integration of cognitive with emotional and interpersonal aspects of learning'. I have already stated that I reject the kind of thinking that sets up dichotomies, so clearly Heron speaks my language. Whilst I do not always realise my desire to integrate the 'within and the without' (Heron, p.143), at least I acknowledge the desire is there. However, I am not serving Heron's ideas raw here. I have instead added three other ingredients, a methodology of the heart, 'emotional cognition', and personal experience, and have concocted a soup from them (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, Brady 2010) which I now dish up as my own re-conceptualisation of an holistic method/ology.

## **A method/ology of the heart**

The first extra ingredient I add is Pelias' (2004) notion of 'a methodology of the heart', which he says originates in:

the desire to write from the heart, to put on display a researcher who, instead of hiding behind the illusion of objectivity, brings himself forward in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study.... (it is) located in the researcher's body – a body deployed not as a narcissistic display but on behalf of others, a body that invites identification and empathic connection, a body that takes as its charge to be fully human. (p.1)

My interest in 'the body' in research goes back to the early 90s when I did an MA in Women's Studies. I read Braidotti's 'Organs without Bodies' (1989) in which she argued that (particularly, but not only) women were often reduced to the function of their body *parts*. This not only leads to fragmentation but also to an emaciation of what it means to be human. Extrapolating her arguments to a research and knowledge domain, the project of recovering what is profound and elusive about the human condition requires the presence of the body in its entirety. This is my (almost literal) understanding of the embodiment of knowledge. I agree with Jackson (1999, p.168) that our bodies are tenanted by our biographies, social locations and social identities, and would add, 'as much as the latter three are tenanted by our bodies'. Therefore I was at first unsure whether a method/ology that isolated the heart from the body would work for me and indeed it does only if the heart is taken as a symbol for embodied knowledge. I also use words to indicate embodied virtues (bones or gut for intuition, guts and backbone for courage, heart for trust and faithfulness). Thus for me holistic method/ology is cognisant and inclusive of the corporeal without effecting a separation from the ethereal or the spiritual.

## **Emotional cognition/Cognitive emotion**

The second added ingredient is Nussbaum's (2001) conceptualisation of emotions as 'upheavals of thought'. Nussbaum goes back to the Stoics in order to argue for the unity of emotions and cognition, arguing that emotions are 'intelligent responses to the perceptions of value' (p.1), part of creative reasoning *and* ethical reasoning (p.1), and are themselves 'forms of evaluative judgement (p.22). She also points out that emotions have a narrative structure (p.236) and a history that is narratively constructed (p.173) which is congruent with my own narrative approach. This is not to say, Nussbaum argues, that their link to cognition makes them less 'messy and ungovernable' (p.16) because 'people's sense of what is important and valuable is often messy, disorderly, and not in line with their reflective ethical beliefs' (p.52). I



found this statement reassuring because it expresses my own experience. I know that I do not consistently realise the heights to which I aspire and that I sometimes lapse into performances of academic cleverness rather than being fully human (and the point of doing reflexivity is to keep me alert to this and to the need to regularly reconnect with my aspirations). It is the reason why I take pains not to dissemble when I fall short of my ethical intentions and do not seek to alleviate the tensions and contradictions that arise from this.

That notwithstanding, I have taken Nussbaum's concept to places she might have problems with because she distinguishes between emotion and feelings which I do not and I also include intuition and transgressive data (St. Pierre 1998). Nonetheless her ideas can work at the level of theory for me, enabling me to make sense of what is happening.

*I was reading 'Upheavals of Thought' just after my mother died<sup>1</sup>. I found Nussbaum's description of mourning as the process of repeatedly encountering cognitive frustration hugely comforting at certain times because it explained what was happening to me. I might have feared for my sanity otherwise. For example, just over a week after my mother's funeral, my son got his A/S exam results in which he fared better than we might have dared to hope. I had already dialled mam's number to give her the good news before I remembered she was gone. Similarly, seeing my dad in town one Saturday, it was not until I had taken a few steps towards him that I realised he had died some months previously.*

Unfortunately I have no elegant expression for this concept, using the terms 'emotionally cognitive' or 'cognitively emotional' and variants of those, but I do distinguish it from the concept of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1996). The latter maintains the distinction between intelligences, emotional and cognitive, whereas on my reading of Nussbaum, emotion and thought are not separate entities. I am also mindful of the way emotions can be used as a means of creating classed (Skeggs 2004) and other distinctions (Ahmed 2004, 2010) but again both Skeggs and Ahmed rely on a concept of emotion isolated from thought (and from the body). An

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<sup>1</sup> I wonder if the subliminal story in this thesis is that I have used it also to come to an understanding of myself as part of the 'older generation', now that I no longer have parents who are alive? If I had known at the start what I know now I would have made ageing a leading motif.

integrated view of emotion thus goes a long way of circumventing the creation of distinction.

### **Personal experience**

The premise on which my adherence to holistic method/ology rests is that we make sense of the world through personal experience. This is not to individualise because we are social beings and will seek to find our experience echoed in that of others, which is why 'stories gather people round them' (Plummer, 1995, p.174). Moreover, there are powerful social and political forces at work which will impact in similar (but not exactly the same) ways on individual lives. That said we cannot do other than tell it from our own perspective, regardless of how that has been informed.

The origin of the statement 'the personal is political' is now unclear (<http://userpages.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/pisp.html>), however, before second wave feminism, Mills (1959) had pointed out the relationship between 'private troubles' and 'public issues'. Thus the idea that personal experience can tell us much about structural, political, ideological, historical and cultural forces is not new nor the preserve of any particular theoretical orientation. What does seem to be at stake is the prominence given to the knowledge claims made on the basis of that. Maynard's position (1994, p.24) probably summarises a range of other positions when she states that experience should only be a starting point because the forces that structure lives are invisible to us. I would like to step away from this debate because it seems premised on arguments about whether or not we, as researchers, get closer to the Truth of the social world through method/ologies that engage with personal experience. I have trouble with this on ethical and moral rather than epistemological grounds. Focusing on the Truth of what might be gleaned from *personal* experience tends to erase the *person* from the equation. Thus Cain (1986, p.265) distinguishes between 'their [other women's] experience', which she concedes we 'need to take seriously', and 'our [feminist scholars'] own theory'. I am not disputing that no one person knows everything. I wanted to set up conversations between my own experience, that of my co-participants and that about which I had read in scholarly works precisely because I think complementary knowledges are produced in each arena and each can be enriching of the other. However, unlike Cain seems to do, I do not privilege the scholarly.

It is a weakness in some feminist theorising to believe that, by dint of 'our' feminist orientation, 'we' understand lived reality better than those whose lived reality it is. hooks makes this point succinctly

Frequently, white feminists act as if black women did not know sexist oppression existed until they voiced feminist sentiment. They believe they are providing black women with 'the' analysis and 'the' program for liberation. (hooks 2000, p.11)

Such an approach embodies the oppressions it ostensibly claims to address as well as reproducing the 'god trick' (Haraway, 1988) of laying claim to seeing everything from everywhere. But more than this, like the concept of 'false consciousness', it makes absolutely no sense to me at all and I could not argue for it even if I tried. My challenge therefore was to find a way of proceeding from personal experience (because, I believe, try as we might, we cannot do otherwise) while simultaneously recognising that this experience will of course be a product of our complex engagements with forces of which we are ignorant and also with those of which we may be all too aware. I thought very hard about how I could avoid telling 'them' what 'their' experience means and why. This involved having the guts to answer the question, 'For whom?' (Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong 2000) with, 'For me primarily'. Paradoxically, this entails an intense degree of involvement with other stories and experiences as I listened for what I call 'points of recognition' (but wish I had called echoes) and also for experiences that collided with my own. Someone else's experience does not have to be the same as ours in order for it to make sense to us. Indeed, like Mohanty (1988, 1997, and 2003) I also believe that it is by paying attention to specific historical, social and cultural details that commonalities and connections emerge.

### **Holistic method/ology – a methodology of surrender?**

To recap then, my commitment to an holistic methodology means treating mind, body and emotions as indistinguishable parts of a whole. To this I now add spirit, a term which I am still inching towards understanding in its broadest sense (not only in its articulation with religion or faith) and which Hunt and West (2007, n.p.) associate with 'the capacity to be fully alive and connected to every aspect of existence', an association which clearly resonates with my method/ological allegiances. Incorporation of 'the spirit' also underpins my reasons for adopting the capability approach as an analytic space in which to read the stories because it too, certainly on Nussbaum's (2000) conceptualisation, concerns itself with what it is to be 'fully

human'. Specifically in terms of my research therefore I believe that my particular 'orientation to reflective practice' (Hunt 2009a) approaches what Lavia, Neckles and Sikes (2010) call a 'methodology of surrender'. The seeds of this concept were sown in my mind by Dr Jennifer Lavia in an informal discussion about the difficulty I was having in turning a conference paper into a publishable one. She advised me to see my struggles as necessary and not to be fought against and this was part of 'trusting the process'<sup>2</sup>.

The reason I have not given prominence to a methodology of surrender in this discussion of method/ology nor stated unequivocally that mine is a methodology of surrender, is linked to the fact that in academic writing:

(T)he spiritual is silenced through omission or sometimes becomes transformed into what might be considered more acceptable representations for the academic community.

(Lavia, Neckles and Sikes 2010, p.1)

In the UK we are far from the situation that pertains in the Caribbean where 'academic life is spiritual, simply because life *per se* is spiritual' (Lavia, Neckles and Sikes 2010, p.9). My sons, quoting the character Cartman from the TV animation *South Park*, have been known to call my 'spiritual strivings' (Lavia et al 2010) 'tree hugging hippie crap'. They say this in a good-natured and teasing rather than critical or disrespectful way. That said, it reflects a more general skepticism that would also position my 'spiritual strivings' as 'spiritual shopping'. In short, integrating spirituality into my research method/ology reflects the problematics of integrating it in to life in the particular context of the UK. My experience resonates with that of Lavia et al therefore, in that spiritual aspects of research will tend to enter conversations in a serendipitous manner.

However, there is also some evidence to suggest that interest in spirituality in and as research may be greater than those of us who stay (relatively) quiet may be assuming. When Hunt ran seminars that considered researching spirituality as a dimension of lifelong learning (Hunt 2006b), demand outstripped the number of places available. That said, I know that spirituality must be part of what I am about in my research because spiritual strivings are part of how I 'do' my life anyway and I have argued that, even if it were possible to compartmentalise different aspects of one's self, I do not seek to effect such delineations. Moreover, just as I believe I

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<sup>2</sup> I connected this with the advice to 'Let go and let God' that a friend, an evangelical Christian, once gave me when I was at a loss to deal with a difficult situation.

have grown in ethical wisdom as a result of grappling with ethical issues over time, I expect that in the future I will come to understand better how a methodology of surrender informs praxis. Hunt (2009b) posits spiritual strivings as part of the meaning of 'lifelong learning' anyway. Despite all this, in terms of my PhD it was a matter of 'too little too late'. I have not yet thought through my own position vis-à-vis the integration of spirituality into my method/ology and how that then informs praxis, in order to state with sufficient confidence that mine is indeed a methodology of surrender.

### **Mr T and me: theory, method/ology, ethics**

What kind of theory are you drawing on?  
What does theory do?  
Theories show underlying meanings and understandings.  
What does theory do?  
Why do I need it and what am I going to do with it?  
What does theory mean?  
Why is it important? (Dillow 2010, p.1339)

I am seeking here to highlight the very practical role of theory in research as a conceptual toolbox and means of analysis and a system of reflexivity.  
(Ball 2006, p.3)

White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state.  
(hooks 2000, p.4)

'all feminist work is theoretically grounded... it would be disingenuous to imply otherwise'.  
(Maynard 1994, p.23, I original emphasis)

It is worth remembering that everyone is a theorist: we all think, analyse, interpret and reflect in order to make sense of our lives...  
(Letherby 2003, pp.61-62)

I came to theory because I was hurting ... I saw in theory then a location for healing.  
(hooks 1994, p.59)

Each of the quotations above encapsulates some aspect of my thinking around theory. Dillow echoes my uncertainties as a novice researcher about the place of theory in a living breathing research project and Ball reassures me that it does have

a practical role to play. hooks (2000) highlights that it is precisely the place of theory in shaping lived realities that ensures theorising is not an innocent act but embedded in processes of power. Maynard reminds me that engaging with feminism is simultaneously to take a theoretical position and Letherby's view, whilst going some way to soothe Dillow's concerns, implicates us all in continuing injustices and oppressions and gives us all responsibility for change. I end with hooks because it connects the personal to the political and also because it points to the transformative potential of theory. So theory is not something 'out there', the preserve of expert theorists but part of what we do as humans. Both hooks (1994 and 2000) and Bourdieu (1977) emphasise that theory must also be a *social* (and not just an academic) practice. As such it has, of course, ethical dimensions, and on my understanding, for the very reason that we are all theorists, '(w)e can never get off the hook by appealing to a Transcendental Ethics.' (St Pierre 1997).

But to return to the place of theory in my research, like Dillow (2010) in the early days (YEARS!) of my research, I would sidestep questions about the theoretical frameworks I was 'drawing on'. I now see it was the question itself that was causing problems rather than my approach to theory. I did not want to impose a theoretical framework that was external to the stories. But nor did I want to take a purely 'grounded' approach where theory emanates primarily from the 'data'. It seemed contrary to the social in social science not to set up conversations between the stories I heard and extant theories. However, on a number of occasions I was reminded that mainstream social science still seems to expect researchers to work within pre-existing theoretical frameworks (and if this were not my thesis I would facetiously point out that if the framework has been devised by a white French man, preferably no longer alive, so much the better). I secretly, till now, personified this tendency to expect the erection of theoretical scaffolding (the language is a dead give away) as Mr T (Theory with a capital T).

I am being playful here (honest), not least because both Andrew Sayer and Diane Reay, whose analyses of class have been influential in my own theorising of the same, both draw on a reading of Bourdieu's theory of habitus, although a critical one in the case of Sayer (2005). I am, however, critical when it is seen as the *right* way to do things. So, despite feeling that I would be sparing myself a lot of

heartache if I could just start off my research with the words 'Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus....' I knew that Mr T was not my Mr Right.

(This section instates my arguments about manifestations of the socially ordering forces of heterosexuality that I set out later).

### **Picking rags and cherries – desperately seeking theory**

My problem (one of them) is that there is no one theory that seems to work adequately in all situations. Delamont (2004) would say this is not a problem and relates her own 'ragpicking' approach which involves mixing and matching different theories. For example in her study of the reproduction of elites (Delamont 1989) she uses Bourdieu's theory of 'capitals', Shirley Ardener's (1975) theory about 'muted groups' and Douglas' (1996) theory about pollution, purity and danger. Delamont's notion of ragpicking also includes a subversive acknowledgement that she might not be interpreting those theories as their progenitors intended. Thus ragpicking is clearly harmonious with my conceptualisation of research as a patchwork and, on Delamont's terms, I too am a ragpicker. However, this does not mean I see the approach as unproblematic, and I outline my concerns below.

Firstly, ragpicking is often confused with cherry picking even though I differentiate them. (Which you may think is nitpicking). Ragpicking involves selecting from *within* theories, taking scraps of theory and *adapting* them to make them serviceable to the whole. Cherry picking entails selecting *between* theories and *adopting* only that which is thought to fit already. Thus Hekman, with particular reference to the work of Foucault, reasons that 'we can and should appropriate aspects of a particular body of work that *suits* feminist purposes' (1996, p.9, my emphasis). Allen (1996) refines this notion in her contention that Foucault assists feminist theory on the micro level but not the macro level. I want to emphasise here that I am not singling out Hekman or Allen or Foucault for particular criticism. I am only using them as examples to illustrate my point. However, I agree with Stronach and MacLure (1997, p8) that 'strategies of containment', a belief that you can take the good bits of theory and leave behind the bad, do not work. I offer the following example to animate my point (Sorry - Foucault again. The contributors to Hekman did too good a job).

Deveaux (1996) points out that Foucault has influenced feminist politics on the themes of power, sexuality and the subject but she also draws attention to the way in which Foucault's separation of power from (male) force and domination disregards the way in which power becomes translated into violence in material settings. To illustrate her point she draws on Plaza's (1981) citing of Foucault's comments on rape in which he seems to argue that only the violence involved and not the sexual aspect of rape merits punishment. Thus Deveaux (1996, p.225) concludes that:

(w)omen's unfreedom (as victims of rape) is thus superseded by the need to maintain men's freedom; that is, their freedom not to be punished for sex, or to have their sex repressed.

Such a stance clearly undercuts a central tenet of feminism to end sexist oppression (hooks 2000) and it would require, I contend, quite an effort to pretend that it does not matter if you are only using other bits of Foucauldian theory here and there. A second problem, as Skeggs (2004) points out (with reference to methodology not theory but her argument still holds good), is that cherry picking reflects a doctrine of appropriation which in turn underpins a cult of the self that foregrounds the individual over the collective. I am not letting ragpicking off the hook here. It is beside the point in this instance whether one picks from within or between frameworks. The point is that focusing on the individual undermines my commitment to an infinite conceptualisation of feminism on Levinas' terms (I refer you back to the section on feminist research) which also impacts on the ethical aims and moral purpose of my research.

Whilst I still have not resolved these dilemmas Walker's (2003) argument for 'bivalent' theorising, that is theorising that takes a 'both and' approach is pertinent here and has helped me to make a start. Flyvbjerg (2004, p.432) also argues that 'good social science is opposed to an either/or and stands for a both/and'. With particular reference to the capability approach which has been criticised for being under theorised, she argues for theories that address both structural change and individual equality outcomes, and for research that is informed by modernist and postmodernist theories. What is interesting about Walker's argument is that she attaches greatest importance to the underlying motives and attitudes that accompany this bivalent theorising. She thus differentiates it from a generalised pick and mix because she sees the latter as being underpinned by a consumerist attitude. In other words bivalent theorising includes and foregrounds the values and the integrity of the researcher. My incorporation of bivalent theorising is expressed



most clearly in my insistence that the stories connect with lived realities whilst at the same time foregrounding the necessity of a different language with which to talk about higher education. That said, I include reference to bivalent theorising not as a silver bullet or golden rivet but to indicate that I am still in the process of searching to make my stance on theory more consistent.

## **Philosophy becoming practical. A story**

Deliberating about how to convey my ideas around method/ology and whether to use the term 'method', 'method(s)', 'method/s' or 'methods' I realised I was moving too quickly. As Nixon and Sikes argue, "method' ... was being pluralized before being grasped in its conceptual singularity' (Nixon and Sikes 2003, p.1). I end my consideration of methodology by addressing this omission, offering two versions of a story about my decision not to incorporate an analysis of official statistics into my thesis which animate and concretise ideas I outlined in the philosophy and method/ology chapters and pave the way to a consideration of methods.

### **Version 1. Lies, damn, lies. No rest for the statistics.**

*Patricia Clough (1992) and Jane Elliott (2005) both emphasise the narrative qualities of quantitative data. I also considered quantitative methods to be compatible with narrative research and I agree with Gorard (2003) that statistics pack a powerful punch by dint of the relative ease of access to a large amount of data. For example it took little effort for me to ascertain that the ward where I was born and lived for eighteen years (and which now no longer exists due to boundary changes in 2004) was ranked 1,500 in the Index of Multiple Deprivation for 2004 (where 1 was the most and 32,482 the least deprived), that it was the most deprived ward in my Local Authority and that my Local Authority was in the 'top 50' of deprivation. I also found out that there were only three 'schoolchildren or students living away from home during term time', all male and representing a figure of only 0.2% of the population of that ward. (Indices of Deprivation 2004). Moreover, official statistics were being used by other researchers to trouble some of the claims made for widening participation in HE that I was initially concerned to trouble such as 'social mobility' (Egerton 1998). That said, I was aware of the politically loaded provenance of statistical research (Downs 2007b) and the way official statistics*

could be misread and manipulated (Huff 1991, Dorling and Simpson 1999, Gorard 2008). The following illustrates the caution with which one needs to proceed. The entries on the right suggest a more positive state of affairs than those on the left.

<p>Socio-economic background remains a strong determinant of higher education participation ... People from lower socio-economic backgrounds make up around one half of the population of England, but represent just 29 per cent of young, full-time, first-time entrants to higher education. White people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, both men and women, are the most under-represented group. (NAO 2008)</p>	<p>The proportion of young people living in the most disadvantaged areas who enter higher education has increased by around +30 per cent over the past five years, and by +50 per cent over the past 15 years. (HEFCE 2010)</p>
<p>Young people in manual social classes remain under-represented in higher education in Great Britain. Despite increasing from a participation rate of 11 per cent in 1991/92 to 19 per cent in 2001/02, participation remains well below that of the non-manual social classes. Participation rates for the non-manual social classes increased from 35 per cent to 50 per cent over the same period. (Central Statistical Office 2004, p.45)</p>	<p>The increases in the young participation rate for those living in the most disadvantaged areas <i>have been greater</i> in proportional terms and, since the mid-2000s, percentage point terms, than the rises for those living in advantaged areas. (HEFCE 2010, my emphasis)</p>

*I concluded that incorporating this method would require great caution and probably attendance at one of the courses run by the National Statistical Office and I asked myself where I wanted to concentrate my time and efforts and how would it enhance my research.*

**Version 2. Statistics are human beings with the tears wiped off<sup>3</sup>**

*As a researcher I was impressed by the force of the statistical data above relative to the effort required to retrieve them and their confirmation of my experiential knowledge. But the data also had a*

<sup>3</sup> Linda B in Lather and Smithies 1997, p. xxvi

*physical effect on me. They felt like a stab in the heart and a punch in the gut. The label 'deprived' did not fit with my knowledge of some of the people in the neighbourhood where I grew up. I felt sick and angry that it was being thus designated. My parents and their neighbours, people I had known all my life, adults I respected and still address as 'Mr and Mrs'<sup>4</sup>, had for decades been living out their lives here and they would be mortified at such a label. I felt conflicted. I do not want to downplay the hardships and challenges of the 'lived realities' in this locality but a picture of a depressed area populated by hapless victims does not concur with what I know. I began to appreciate the need to ask whether statistics could be read in a cognitively emotional way and if so how I could go about doing this.<sup>5</sup>*

Both these stories present valid reasons for my abandoning a 'mixed methods' approach and I have not included them in order to set up hierarchies but precisely in order to illustrate once again the futility of trying to effect separations between practical, pragmatic, everyday concerns and moral and ethical considerations in deconstructions of method/ological decision-making.

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<sup>4</sup> Writing this story I constantly interrogated my summation of my old neighbourhood and the people in it. Was I romanticising and valorising it and them? Attending the funeral of one of my old neighbours recently I am convinced that I have remained faithful to the spirit of the place and the people and if anything have downplayed the strong feelings of regard that prevail. Numerous posts on facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) from people of my generation expressed respect and sadness at our neighbour's demise. My husband also remarked on the strong and enduring sense of community after attending the funeral with me. My feelings here have also assisted me in understanding the concept of diaspora.

<sup>5</sup> Since then I have continued to seek out research that marries analysis of secondary statistics and qualitative, particularly narrative research ([www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk](http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk)). Neale and Irwin (2010, n.p.) contend that QL (qualitative longitudinal) methods of research have 'enormous creative potential' when linked to QNL (quantitative longitudinal) methods using large scale datasets such as the 1958 National Child Development Study. This is a research avenue I would be interested in going down, particularly as I believe change over time is another theme in my research that would stand closer scrutiny.

# Life history research

*I know it, and I know it again, in an ever-widening spiral of Re-membering*

*(May Daly, Gyn/Ecology 1991, p. xxiv)*

This chapter has gone through numerous iterations and been housed in various locations. Here it provides the halfway house between a discussion of ideas and a discussion of concrete act(ion)s.

## Stories in context

Whereas the meaning of 'feminist research' is so fiercely debated it may seem that we 'cannot get our act together' (Letherby 2003, p.16), life history research is a broad church and life history researchers 'speak past each other' rather than disagreeing (Tierney 2000, p.539). I attribute this to two interlocking reasons. Firstly life history sits within the concentric circles (or maps on to the terrains) of qualitative, narrative and (auto)biographical research. Because each is itself a contested term, debates go on in these arenas and not within the parameters of life history itself. Secondly with specific reference to narrative research, its dispersal across several disciplines not only produces contestation but also militates against meeting on common ground or fostering a common language. Chase (2005, p.666) therefore concludes that the common denominator among narrative researchers is 'the practice of devoting much more space in their written work to fewer individuals than do other qualitative researchers'. Thus I appreciate that my understanding of life history glances off rather than engages with other conceptualisations.

Bertaux (1981) distinguishes between life stories and life histories, maintaining that life stories may be contained within life histories but not vice versa because life histories are life stories placed within broader contexts. Connecting with this understanding Goodson and Sikes (2001, p88) map a role for the life history stating that:

(t)he life history pushes the question whether private issues are also public matters; the life story individualizes and personalizes; the life history contextualizes and politicizes.

In other words, if the life story is biography, life history acknowledges its relationship to history and society (Mills, 1959). Reading two biographies of former footballers in succession clarified this distinction for me. Gary Imlach (2006) analysed his father Stewart's career through the lens of the stratified class positions that operated in professional football in the '50s. This is a life history because it depends for its sense on its particular historical and cultural location and on a critique of classed exploitation. Best (Best with McDowell 2007) tells a life story underpinned by her desire to rehabilitate her brother George's reputation (and that of the Best family) by interpreting experience through an implied familial genetic propensity to alcoholism.

The above are useful distinctions to make then, but I am also cautious about affixing labels too rigidly because it is then a short step to positioning either the life history or the life story as serving or conducive to the production of 'better' research and 'better' knowledge. It is one thing to say that life history is distinguished by a contextualised, political content and intent and another to conclude that life stories are never political. Indeed Fine et al (2000, p.126) seem to argue that the task of the researcher is to 'excavate' the story 'nested' within its historical and material conditions (and in the context of their paper to my ears this sounds like 'rescuing' the story) in order to foreground the political nature of those stories. Chase (2005) also reminds us that feminist scholarship and feminist activism posit a concept of personal narrative that counters the assumption of individual narratives divorced from political intent (Personal Narratives Group 1989, Gluck and Patai 1991, Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield 2000, David 2003), although this may require an engagement with and reassessment of the term 'political' itself (Jones 2005). Oakley for example politicised the previously 'private' spheres of housework (1974, 1976) and post-natal depression (1979, 1980).

Because I am taking a retrospective view it was obvious to me I could do no other than acknowledge the stories in their historical location (the '70s), the conditions of their provenance *and* the social location of their telling to me as a researcher in 2008/9. It is essential to account for the conditions in which stories are related because the specific nature of the political meaning of personal stories may change over time and according to the circumstances that pertain at any given time. Thus for example personal narratives of former slaves such as those of Jacobs (1988) and Douglass (2008) lent political significance to the civil rights movements in the USA in the sixties but of a different order to that which they had when they were written at the end of the nineteenth century.

## **An ethical practice?**

I have done no more here than summarise the main arguments of a lengthier engagement with the ethics of life history research (Downs 2009b), namely that any research method/ology has the potential to be translated into unethical practice. Therefore a twin-pronged approach to ethical considerations is required when doing research that is mindful of the way in which the 'historically oppressive structures being critiqued might subtly be perpetuated through deeply entrenched power relationships' (Lavia, 2007 p.117).

My approach to addressing ethical issues in life history research thus has an eye to the past and to the future. Firstly it involves getting to grips with life history's provenance in order to mitigate its potential to reflect or foster a colonial imagination (Lavia 2007a and 2007b). Bhavnani (1993) is also clear that feminist research has to be built on awareness of the potential of any kind of research to re-produce colonising thinking and that this requires not only vigilance about its future use but also an engagement with its historical antecedents. In tandem with this eye on the past I also engage with uncomfortable, often trenchant critiques, of narrative research, similarly to mitigate the possibility of reinforcing or reproducing past iniquities. Therefore I troubled the use of statistics as 'political arithmetic' (Downs 2007b) and tested the ethics of using the capability approach in a study of relative privilege (Downs 2009c). In terms of life history I started with Tierney's (1998, p.53) account of life history's history which, among other things, critiques Lewis' (1962) presentation of poverty as a given 'into which we step as if it is out there' and the culture of poverty, as 'a system supposedly devised by those within the culture as a design for living'. I have also from the first engaged with Skeggs' (2002) arguments against narrative research (Downs 2009b and Taylor et al in press). Although she frames her account as a critique of reflexivity rather than narrative research per se, Skeggs, with reference to Steedman (2000), follows a thread from the 'enforced telling' of tales of poverty in the nineteenth century to the ongoing practice of appropriating stories as the intellectual property of the researcher. She also argues that methods are used to 'shore up the composite of the academic reflexive self' (p.361) which Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield (2000) connect to by contending that subjectivity is a product of autobiographical practice and does not precede it.

In considering the ethics of life history research it is also useful to include Plummer's distinction between research that uses stories as resources to throw light 'on meanings, moralities and cultures' (2001, p.41) and that which treats stories as topics in their own right, although he adds that these should be seen as extremes at either end of a continuum rather than as entrenched positions<sup>1</sup>. I think that the distinction is a very fine one, more the outcome of a shift in emphasis than a change of direction, and I use it primarily as a heuristic device here. Thus proceeding from this distinction, it can be said that life history is an example of narrative research that uses stories as a resource. The term 'resource' strongly implies the *potential* of life history to exploit participants and appropriate stories for the researchers' own ends. However, it is essential to see this not as a given but as a possibility and to focus on life history research at its intersection with deontological ethics here; in other words to factor in why this research was undertaken. To illustrate my point I turn to the use of life history by researchers in the Chicago School in the early decades of the twentieth century and to some later examples that follow in its footsteps. It is also important to disaggregate criticisms made on the basis of the historical location of the research per se (and Tierney also emphasises this point in his critique of Lewis) and to keep in mind that what is at stake is the perpetuation of colonising practices.

On the one hand early life history research can be criticised as a way of getting 'insider stories' of exotic others to foster academic reputations and careers. However, this critique relies on a particularly cynical view of researcher intentions. On the other, Becker (1967) states that sociologists must take the side of the 'underdog' because otherwise they will be taking the side of the powerful by default. This is perhaps an extreme expression of researcher altruism. Nevertheless, Goodson and Sikes (2001) point out that life history is effective as a means of troubling 'normal assumptions of what is 'known' by intellectuals in general, and sociologists in particular' (p.7) and of asking questions from the perspective of those usually "acted upon' rather than from that of 'powerful constituencies within the social and economic order' (p.8). Thus it is reasonable to assume that life history researchers were concerned to exploit not people and/or stories but the potential of life history research itself (Zorbaugh 1929, Wirth 1956 [originally published 1928]).

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<sup>1</sup> The use of 'stories as topic' is often mapped along disciplinary lines and inheres in understandings of 'narrative' within the fields of psychology (Sarbin 1986, Mishler 1999, Polkinhorne 1988, Freeman 1993, Josselson and Lieblich 1993 and 1995, and Lieblich and Josselson 1994 inter alia), discourse analysis and sociolinguistics (Labov 1972 and 1997, Bamberg 1987 and Jordens, Little, Paul and Sayers 2001) and in the work of researchers who draw on these traditions (Riessman 1993 and 2008, Ochs and Capps 2001, Bamberg and Andrews 2004, Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou 2008).

Indeed the very definition of life history is epitomised in studies of individuals engaging in (usually deviant) behaviour whose purpose was to show that this was not simply the manifestation of individual pathologies but of the relation of individuals to the conditions of their existence (Thrasher 1963 [originally published 1927], Shaw 1966 [originally published 1930], and Conwell 1989 [originally published 1936] and see also Klockars 1975 for later example).

Engaging with the potential of life history to re-produce colonising thinking and practices also involves engaging with Chase's (2005) concerns about life history's euro and US-centric gaze. Ironically this may be due to its demand for specificity and cognisance of the cultural and societal contexts in which research takes place. For example Sikes (2009b) relates that some of her Chinese students had problems writing their own life stories because Chinese society foregrounds collective over individual experience. Moreover, 'we' in the west are versed in telling stories about ourselves to other people (Gubrium and Holstein 2001, Goodley, Lawthom, Clough and Moore 2004), knowing what to say, how to say it, to whom and when. That notwithstanding, life history research is not just a western phenomenon and is established in cultures where a strong oral tradition already exists. Chase is right to point out that it is interest in rather than the existence of life history research outside Europe and the US that is at issue here. Given the ascendancy of China in economic terms it will be interesting to see whether Chinese interest in life history (Ding <http://www.ses.ecnu.edu.cn/xsdw/dinggang/e-yiwz-lwz.html>) has a similar impact on ideas about the place of subjective, personal experience or whether the ingrained western notions I alluded to above become 'globalised' into Chinese life history instead.

## **Why stories?**

Firstly stories and storytelling are in my psyche and in my blood. My parents told stories, I realise now, sometimes to make sense of their lives, sometimes to survive and sometimes just for the joy of it<sup>2</sup>. When I am with my siblings (I have five), or even friends who knew my parents well, a one liner from an oft heard story,

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<sup>2</sup> Pat Sikes pointed out to me the historical and sociological connection with Thomas and Znaniecki's Polish Peasant here. Her comment has led me to wonder if my own Eurocentric gaze in terms of my life history research can be traced back to this early introduction to story telling via my parents. My dad in particular was born into a culture (Slavonic, South-eastern European peasantry) that has a strong oral tradition.



invariably one of my dad's, serves as a shorthand to more expansive communications ('I'm not wasting this', 'he clipped the cat', 'how generous', 'but you can't', 'we're almost related', 'my father had to comfort him'— I could go on and on). Secondly stories are compatible with social science because they are inherently social. Plummer's (1995, p.174) observation that 'stories gather people around them' signals not only a choice but a need to be social. Thirdly, stories are a fundamental form of human communication, letting us know that 'we are not alone, that other people have gone through the same things and have felt like we have' (Sikes 1997, p.23). Fourthly, stories connect reason with emotion (Emihovich, 1995), which supports my theoretical perspective that emotions are narratively constructed and 'cognitively-laden' (Nussbaum 2001. p.65) and my holistic method/ological orientation. I want to make a distinction here between simply identifying with a story and understanding its wider import in a cognitively emotional/emotionally cognitive way<sup>3</sup>. For example I identified with Yallop's (2009) story about the death of his mother and with many aspects of Ellis's (2009) story about assisting her elderly mother prepare for bed. More than this however, my emotional response to the stories enabled an appreciation of the politics of growing old and dying, of the social and political aspects of care and caring and of personal bonds forged over the course of a lifetime (see also Buzzanell and D' Enbeau 2009 for a consideration of the personal and political aspects of emotional reactions to motherhood in the academy). Finally stories make no grand claims to 'explain' definitively or to speak to a monolithic notion of 'Truth'.

### **Honest fictions**

At my primary school, asking a child if they had been 'telling stories' was a euphemism for ascertaining whether they had been lying through their teeth so I want to distinguish between telling lies and not laying claim to 'Truth', encapsulating this in the concept of honest fictions because I do not believe any old story will do (Phillips 1994).

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<sup>3</sup> My understanding here is similar to that of Barbalet (2001) who argues that for a long time explanations of human behaviour were made on moral rather than social grounds and that sociological theory can be read off and theorised in relation to particular emotions. It also connects to Sayer's (2005) mapping of the emotions attaching to the experience of class which I regard as a more detailed focus on particular aspects of Barbalet's exploration, particularly shame and fear.

**You must not lie, but you need not tell the truth.**

I cannot comment on claims that this is a Yiddish proverb but the underlying message here is that truth is not essentialist. **But what of lies? And are such understandings of truth transferable from personal to research arenas?** Sikes (2000, p.257) contends that telling lies is:

quite different to those instances where faulty memory, subjective perception, partial or erroneous knowledge, a desire to give the researcher what they think they want, or even where a 'personal myth' comes in to play because a lie is a conscious and deliberate intention to deceive.

I agree that it is this intention to deceive that marks the lie. Adams (2009) for example tells how his sister-in-law consistently tells 'false family stories' not to deceive but partly as a result of being deaf and thus mishearing the original story. However, deception itself may be motivated by fear of discovery and the shame this would entail which in turn may be a classed response. Sayer (2005) has charted some of the emotional responses to class which Reay (2005) has applied and expanded in analyses of her research. Other accounts also embody these ideas (Steedman 1986, Kuhn 1995, Mahony and Zmroczek 1997, Plummer 2000, Sikes and McLeod-Johnstone 2008 and Linda, Yvonne and Heather's life histories in this thesis). In terms of research outcomes it could be said that such distinctions are beside the point. False information, however designated, leads to erroneous conclusions. However, this is to overlook the potential of stories to ask 'what if it were true?' (Bochner 2000) and for contemplating 'alternative lives' (Goodson and Sikes 2001). In other words, as literary analysts know, stories have meaning beneath and beyond surface reality. But this holds up only if there is no deliberate deception. A pure lie is self-contained, self-referential. It is nothing *other* than surface reality and once this is disturbed the lie implodes.

That said, **how do we know if a story teller is telling lies, is deliberately out to deceive us?** Facts can be verified through recourse to documentary evidence say, or by other methods of 'triangulation'. Indeed Thomas and Znaniecki (1958a and b) argued that life records *should* be as complete as possible if used as sociological material. However, doing research with people always carries the possibility of being lied to because '(i)t is in the person, rather than the paradigm, that the potential for corruption or frailty lies' (Sikes 2000, p.258). Indeed some people may take part in research for the very reason of covering their tracks or to create acceptable identities for themselves. Moreover triangulation may not always be possible. Sikes and Piper's (2010) research with male teachers who had been

the subject of unproven allegations of sexual abuse of students is a cogent example. Even were it possible to establish whether someone is telling lies I am troubled by the idea that research relationships are built on a foundation of distrust. I am not saying that stories should always be left to speak for themselves, but I agree with Lenstead (1998, p.243) that 'when you can no longer tell the dancer from the dance, then it is pointless to ask questions about dances. We should be thinking about dancing.'

Thus inclusion of 'contextual data' should not proceed from motives such as checking up on the veracity of the story. **This must surely diminish research relationships as well as having ethical implications?** In terms of my own values (and pace Hammersley) I would not wish to be engaged in an endeavour that removed trust from my dealings with others. I do not think this renders me gullible or naïve. As a former secondary school teacher, fraud investigator and the mother of sons aged twenty and eighteen at the time of writing, I am perfectly aware that people can lie. That said, I would rather identify as gullible and naïve than cynical and mistrustful or even disinterested and emotionally disengaged. Being distrustful would seriously undermine the coherence of the story I tell to myself about myself. Therefore, rather than worry about whether the facts of a story are accurate to the letter, whether I am being lied to and whether this will 'skew the data', I want to invoke the virtues of honesty, integrity and trust and embed these into life stories themselves. This is in turn epitomised in the concept of life stories as honest fictions.

The concept of honest fictions is a virtuous construct. At its heart is an engagement with issues of truth (a slippery, complex and relational term) and Truth (a monolithic, essentialist, absolute term). However, demarcating thus can become recursive so instead I offer my 'Elvis story', which I have told in one form or another countless times over the years.

### **The day that Elvis died. An honest fiction**

*I remember Elvis dying the day I got my 'A' level results. I've been out all day and arrive home late from my celebrations with friends feeling dishevelled (mum for once not insisting I got the last bus home). One or two buttons on my denim skirt have come undone, my slash necked striped top hangs down one shoulder and my ankles must have swollen because the straps on my shoes are digging in. The 'big light' is on in the living room which is unusual*

*because my dad would insist we put on a lamp at night instead of the bright overhead light. I don't even have a chance to sit down before mam breaks the news. Mixed with my sadness I feel this portends the end of one stage of my life and the beginning of another.*

I was convinced this story was true. **How could I recall it in such detail otherwise?** Checking dates for this thesis confirmed Elvis died two days before my A level results. But it is an honest fiction because it works in three distinct spheres of truth.

### **Aesthetic truth**

I turn here to historical narrative rather than the arts or sociology. Thus Ankersmit (2010:30) argues:

(b)efore Kant and Schiller there was no clear demarcation-line between the domain of knowledge and that of aesthetics — with the result that there was nothing specifically odd or oxymoronic about the notion of 'aesthetic truth.' But Schiller radically pulled them apart. On the one hand, this elevated the arts and aesthetics to a status they had never possessed before; but, on the other, art had to pay for its newly acquired dignity the price of being expelled from the domain of Truth. Truth and beauty were from now on wholly different spheres and no bridge could be constructed between the two of them.

The notion of honest fictions is a move towards restoration of aesthetic truth. In my Elvis story, my recall of his death on the very day I got my A level results is valid on the plane of aesthetic truth because my remembrance of this event as portentous opens up an interpretive space regardless of factual accuracy. There is a beauty and symmetry to the story which draws the reader's attention to the wider significance of my remembering this as a time when 'everything was changing'. Elvis dying thus becomes not an event but a metaphor and window on the interiority of experience.

### **Narrative truth**

I turn again to historical narrative here, summarised by Ankersmit (2010). Mink (1987) sees life and narrative as separate entities, stating that 'lives are lived not told' (p.60). Thus we cannot assume that stories are accounts of what 'really' happened, although we can narrate life's story afterwards if we so choose (White,

1978). Freeman (1993) echoes these arguments in troubling the notion of personal/self development and positing the notion that there is ultimately no point to life. We merely write our text as if there were so that, recursively, we have a reason to live. However, David Carr (1986) disagrees with Mink arguing (like Ricoeur) that there is never a time when narrative is not present, that life itself is narratively constructed and that lives 'are told in being lived and lived in being told' (p.125).

**When and how and why do we story our lives? At what point is the story true?**

Strawson, as I do, agrees with both these positions but helped me immeasurably by articulating the ways in which he does and to what extent. Thus he agrees with Mink that we experience life non-narratively because the self of self-experience is 'episodic'. This provided a 'Eureka' moment because it spoke to my own perceptions. I find the view that life stories should have a beginning, a middle and an end problematic and the requirement to 'emplot' stories in this way turned me away from Polkinhorne's (1995) view of narrative analysis. I turned instead to Dorothy Smith (1988) because she argues that women's lives tend to be episodic, even though I did not agree with her analysis that this 'reflects the ways in which (women's) lives are organized and determined external to them' (p.65) because it erases even a problematic or overly simplistic idea of agency. But, as I do, Strawson does not entirely reject David Carr's arguments. Ankersmit (p.36) summarises thus:

Carr is right, in his turn, when arguing that this episodic self always takes together a diachronic, and hence essentially narrativist, continuity. But this narrativist continuity is given to us not as self-experience, but as self-knowledge — however embryonic, fragmentary and unsatisfactory this self-knowledge may be.

I do not exaggerate that reading this stilled a raging fire in my mind. I had been struggling for so long with this fundamental question. **Why do I think stories offer so much when their very structure speaks against my experience?** Ankersmit's conclusion to Strawson, that 'narrative is the transcendentalist condition of the possibility of all self-knowledge' (p.36) was like balm to my soul because it encapsulates beautifully what I have so long struggled to express. I think Ankersmit is saying, and the Elvis story above illustrating, that life is beyond our ken, tantalisingly close but never within our grasp. It cannot be explained (solely) in material terms or reduced to Theory or experience. However, this should not lead to despair or to cynicism or prevent us from asking questions because there is always the *potential* for understanding in an intuitive and spiritual dimension.

## Contextual truth

Tullis Owen et al (2009, p.196) argue that genre, trust, memory, and confession all influence truth telling.

Just as genres pose different demands for writers and readers, thoughts of and criteria for truth also pose such demands. The truths of life stories develop through genre, convention, and memory. This development makes life research contextual, malleable, and vague.

I return to my Elvis story and offer a reading that incorporates these ideas to illustrate my adherence to a notion of contextual truth.

*Getting my A level results was another milestone that marked my leaving home, something which had/had enormous symbolic and emotional significance in my family, a significance passed on by my parents. Their leaving home stories were complex narratives involving painful negotiations and accounts of loss. And yet I was excited and eager to go. Although I did not think this through at the time, I have subsequently interpreted my eagerness as the consequence of having worked myself to the point of exhaustion at school (I convey this by using the word 'drudge' in my higher education story) and hence saw going to university as an escape and a fresh start. However, I didn't really think about what I was escaping to. I didn't have anything on which to construct an imagining of what it would be like at university. Like Fiona in her higher education story, I didn't admit the idea that university might also involve some work. Thus I was in a state of conflict and ignorance. However, I did not consciously acknowledge this (I say I didn't know how my parents must have felt but this beggars belief) putting my thoughts instead into having a good time. This internal conflict was sublimated, I feel now, into the feeling of portentousness I allude to and symbolised by the death of Elvis whom I had loved for as long as I could remember.*

My Elvis story is not the Truth, and neither is this reading of it. However, it is an honest fiction in that it embodies and epitomises the three aspects of truth that I have outlined above. On these terms 'memory reduced to recall' (Ricoeur 2004 p.5) becomes immaterial. What matters more is how events in the past are remembered. I use the hyphen to indicate that relating the past in the present involves active, but not necessarily conscious, processes of reconfiguration. As I will show

later, the context for the higher education stories I have crafted, which I have called the '70s zeitgeist, instantiates the significance of this distinction, but first I need to say more about what this difference consists in. I do this now by focusing on oral history and briefly outlining the salience of memory to this research genre in order to throw the meaning of re-membering into sharper relief.

### **History, memory and re-membering stories**

I wondered for a long time whether I was doing oral history not life history because I was using oral accounts. Work done by Thomson (1994) with former ANZAC Fred for example and his interest in how we achieve 'an alignment of our past, present and future lives' (Thomson 1990, p.25) which he calls 'composure' connected with some of the ideas I saw as underpinning life history. A night out with friends (see Appendix 4) and a discussion of an oral history project one of us is doing on women textile workers of the mid-nineteenth century in West Yorkshire (Perfitt 2010) clarified the distinctions for me. I present these below in the form of a table to symbolise the crudeness of the distinctions I am making.

<b><i>Oral history</i></b>	<b><i>Life history</i></b>
Concerned with the past, with what happened then that no longer happens now.	Concerned with the past and how that has been carried into the present, with the relationship between then and now
Focus on an epoch, (Thompson 1992), circumstances or conditions (Passerini 1987), a singular event (Portelli 2003), or a way of life (Perfitt 2010) and the importance of these for individuals.	Focuses on the life of the story teller and the dialogic relationship of the life to historic events, circumstances, conditions and ways of life.
The life, lived experience and lived reality of the story teller is the context for historical circumstance	Historical circumstances are the context for the life, lived experience and lived reality of the story teller
Synchronic temporality (concerned with specific point in time)	Diachronic temporality (concerned with how things change through time)

I concluded that, due to its gaze to the past (Thompson 1981) and the attention paid to phenomena that are disappearing and being forgotten, memory is a key concept to oral history (Popular Memory Group 1982 and Perks and Thomson 2006). Indeed Green and Troup (1999) contend that, until the '70s the tendency in oral history

accounts was to treat testimony as factual evidence. I mean 'forgotten' here both in the sense of erased from memory and also in the sense of 'the forgetting that preserves' (Ricoeur 2004, p.442), those memories that are merely removed from the 'vigilance of consciousness' (Ricoeur 2004, p.400). Others may disagree (Chase 2005 for example) but these four features helped me to understand why I was calling my enterprise life history and why, despite commonalities, Thomson's research is oral history. His interest can be said to be the relationship between collective and personal memory (which he contends will always cause pain) and the dynamic relationship between individual memory and national myth. My focus in life history is the relationship of the individual to their circumstances. Thus memory is less important to my project than re-membering.

Having thus outlined the ideas that underpin my understanding of stories I will now move on to what I mean by contexts in general, as well as setting out the specific context of the life histories in this study, namely the '70s zeitgeist.



# Contexts

## An overview

To recap, on my understanding life histories require the contextualisation of a life story. I am also reminding readers here to return to the arguments I set out in the previous chapter that setting a life story in context does not equate straightforwardly to setting a life in context as Cole and Knowles (2001) suggest, because 'narrative is the transcendentalist condition of the possibility of all self-knowledge' (Ankersmit 2010 p.36) rather than an expression of self-experience. Others share the view that cognisance of the situated-ness of stories distinguishes the life history (Bertaux 1981, Denzin 1981, Prell 1989, Goodson 1992 and 1995, Munro 1998, Goodson and Sikes, 2001). However, it would be erroneous to assume that these writers all share a common understanding of what context is. For example Bertaux (1981, p.6), privileging a very specific temporal context, describes that of the contributions to his edited work as the intangible 'lurking threat' of nuclear war whereas Meyerhoff (1979) considered the context of all research stories to be the very real presence of the researcher and researcher subjectivity. Some regard the context as the interpretive framework of life stories (Marks 1989), others see the story as informing the historical context in which they are written (Finkelstein 1998). Goodson and Sikes (2001) acknowledge both.

There is a range of views on what the notion of context consists of/in. Goodson and Sikes state that shaping a life history is a two stage process, the telling of the story and then its placement in a context that draws on an assemblage of supporting 'data' external to the story. This data can take many forms. Thus Thomas and Znaniecki (1958a and b) made extensive use of letters in their study of 'The Polish Peasant'. Cole and Knowles (2001) provide an expansive definition of 'contextual data', referring to a range of contextual artefacts, including official written documentation such as passports and birth certificates, visual media such as photographs (Harrison 2004) as well as memorabilia (Huff 2008) and family heirlooms. Other people may also be contributors to this contextual data, in 'family stories' for example (Rosenthal 1998, Miller 2000, Scott and Scott 2000, StoryCorps® nd). Here 'interpretive conflict' (Borland 1991, Adams, 2009) can be a strength because we thereby gain potential insights into the construction of personal and family myths.

I am far from discounting the role of this kind of contextualising as it can supplement, complement and add layers to the story as it is told. In order to tap into the '70s zeitgeist which contextualises the stories in this study, I trawled the literature on higher education that was written in the 1970s, watched the TV programme *Life on Mars* (which was set in the '70s), visited former grammar schools in my area, made extensive use of online resources, talked to friends, revisited my old photographs as well as attending the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my old school. However, context can be interpreted differently, namely as that which always already infuses the story. Thus I agree with Goodson and Sikes about the two step process *and* with Fine et al (2000, p.126) that researchers have to excavate a story that is already nested within historical and material conditions. I also turn this understanding on its head because in my view historical and material conditions also nest within the story. The concept of context positions life histories as the outcomes of complex interactions between the individual and their circumstances however those interactions may be conceptualised.

I want to also sound a cautionary note. Whilst arguing that context is a defining feature of life history, it carries the risk that the researcher may be tempted to shape the story (and the story teller) to fit it. The following from the transcript of my first interview with Liz is a clear example of where I fell into this trap.

YD     So did you feel a bit, for want of a better word, housewifey?

Liz     Not particularly

The line between setting a story in context and fixing a life in place is a fine one (David Morley 2000). As Goodson and Sikes (2001, p.86) warn, it can serve to 'fortify patterns of domination'. However, this danger can be mitigated if:

we interrogate in our writings who we are as we co-produce the narratives we presume to "collect" and we anticipate how the public and policy makers will receive, distort and misread our data

(Fine et al 2000, p.123)

### **Three contextual dimensions**

Context includes notions of place and time as well as being part of meaning making itself (Geertz 1973, Ryle 2009) and thus connects to my commitment to 'bivalent' theorising (Walker 2003). Thus I intend my ideas to mesh with other understandings rather than creating their own niche. Fundamental to my understanding is that I

designate three problematic (and contested) non-hierarchical contextual dimensions in which life stories can be situated and which are also located within life stories. These three dimensions do not exist independently of each other. They are imbricated and also merge and blend so that it becomes a difficult and ultimately futile task to try and separate them into neat categories. Thus I will sometimes use the singular 'context' to refer to all three simultaneously. With this proviso in mind I will now provide an outline of each.

### **Historical circumstance**

I call the first of these contexts 'historical circumstance' although I also include the wider social, political, material and cultural aspects of life within this. The term alludes to 'public issues' in Mills' (1959) terms, to the 'big picture', the background, the broad setting, that of which we are aware but whose influence seems sometimes remote or irrelevant but which at other times seems to bear down on us. Megill (1995), has also grappled with this multi-faceted notion of context and, problematically for me, his concept of 'grand narrative' allies closely with what I mean here. It is a problem because I would not wish to impose an overarching framework on the stories because that would imply a determinism that was not echoed in any of the interviews. Nor did I hear such when doing transcription or reading the transcripts and I certainly did not craft the life histories in this way. Thus the material, social, cultural and political events of the '70s saturate the stories told and form the backdrop to them, but they do not explain them.

### **Prevailing discourses**

I have talked earlier about the influence of dominant discourses and given examples of how they shape understandings of participation/non participation in higher education along class lines. This explains why I include it as a contextualising feature of life histories. That said, I usually try to avoid the term discourse because it can have particular meanings within different disciplines. I use it here as a shorthand for the parameters of what is said and say-able at any given time, by whom and for what purpose. I also intend discourse to connect to historical circumstances and in its turn to be filtered through the latter. But I stress that historical circumstance can no more determine discourse than vice versa, although both can influence the other. On my understanding discourse should be understood as more than the words that are used. For example the words 'out' and 'gay' are not the whole story of the

discourse around homosexuality and not least because they do not account for the extent of their political import.

### **Scripts**

This is an extremely problematic term because it brings us into closer proximity with ideas of determinism than even historical circumstance and prevailing discourses. Material feminist Stevi Jackson (1999) is critical of the idea of the script, attributing its overemphasis on agency to its roots in symbolic interactionism. It incorporates some of Mischler's (1999) ideas about storylines and connects with an idea of narrative types, that is 'the most general storyline that can be recognized underlying the plot and tensions of particular stories' (Frank 1995, p.75). However, I genre-lise less and give greater salience to the relationship between structure and agency than strict adherence to Mischler or Frank would allow. My idea of script is closer to the notion of a space in which a person negotiates the boundaries of their 'imagined futures' (Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000). It thus approaches Bourdieu's notion of habitus, although I allow individuals more influence here than Bourdieu. We cannot help but imbibe some of the spirit of the times in which we live and feel the constraints of what is say-able and knock against the parameters of what is publicly prescribed (a key element of the slogan 'the personal is political'). But we are not powerless victims and how far we go, the extent to which we resist, the shape of our resistance and our ability to transcend parameters, are all important aspects of scripts. On my reading this differs from Goodson and Sikes's (2001) notion of script because it relies less on generalised scripts (Goodson uses the example of the 'grammar school boy') and more on the way in which the individual negotiates their own 'script'. But nor do I see scripts as individually authored. They are this to some extent but they are also influenced by their situated-ness in the times and places in which they are written.

### **Contexts in context**

I will now animate these line drawings with an example from Linda's transcript. I do so with trepidation and there are caveats attaching to this. Firstly, tearing fragments from the whole always changes meanings. Secondly, this rendition is based on the transcript of the interview I had with Linda and a transcript, even one that purports to be a verbatim rendition of the recording, cannot capture the life of the interviewee, nor be read as a facsimile of the interview (Downs 2010). Transcripts are bounded entities in their own right (Poland 2001). Furthermore, in my dealings so far, it may

seem as if contexts are relevant only to the stories told. However, the same contextual considerations apply to the stories *heard*, to story tellers and to readers and listeners and to those who re-work the stories of others.

Linda said:

The summer before I went to university I was working as hard as I could so I wouldn't be short of money at university. I'd applied where I did because my husband, as he became, was working near there. I had this relationship so I moved away. I can't imagine it now. My daughters don't go following the men. The men follow my daughters.

In the '70s when Linda went to university women's participation in higher education was well established but the women's movement was in its infancy and the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Act had only just been implemented. There was also a powerful discourse around heterosexual relationships and the expectation that a woman would marry. Whilst this is still an expectation today<sup>1</sup> I would argue that it is perpetuated through different means. These days it relies more on the creation of desire (whose symbolic significance is epitomised by 'the wedding'). In the seventies it was through the evocation of deviance, articulated for example in the phrase 'left on the shelf' (whose echo can be heard in many participant stories). Linda seems to have fashioned this into a script of the 'dutiful wife', following her then fiancé to where he was located and working as hard as she could so they would not be short of money. But Linda's story is not unique. Only Alison does not find herself relocating because of a relationship with a man (Jen's is also different in that it is her Christian beliefs that took her somewhere she may otherwise not have gone).

When Linda casts her mind back to those times, she also metaphorically transposes herself and her words and is able to narrate her experience. However, her narrative breaks down (something which comes across more clearly in the recording than through the transcript or this story) when she comes back to the here and now. It is not clear why this occurs, although she may have suddenly recalled that she was telling her story to a researcher, one who had already declared her feminist orientation. Whatever the reason, returning in her mind from then to now produces an awareness that she is speaking her words out of context and this interrupts the fluency of her narrative. Returning to the present allows her not only to question her actions at that time, but also to situate them in a particular historical moment. Linda encapsulates this by saying 'I can't imagine it now' and juxtaposing this with reference to her daughters. What this little story shows therefore is the

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Eve Stirling who discussed this with me after a paper I delivered at a departmental seminar (Downs 2009a).

complex interdependence between time and place, between the story told, the story heard, the storyteller and the listener. It is also an instance of participant reflexivity and demonstrates their awareness of their role in the research endeavour.

Having thus outlined my understanding of contexts I turn now to the particular context which pervades and locates the stories of the co-participants.

### **'It was the '70s after all'. The '70s zeitgeist: graduate stories in context.**

The above quote comes from one of the participants, Fiona, and what follows is the story of the context for the stories around which I have assembled my thesis. Readers might also like at this point to return to the historical commentary on higher education in the chapter setting out my research questions.

#### **Understanding the '70s zeitgeist?**

The term '70s zeitgeist' crept up on me unawares. It entered my consciousness during a supervision meeting in April 2009. I must have used the term a number of times, prompting Pat to ask something like, 'So is that your context?' I was unable to answer immediately. I hardly knew why I was using such a term, let alone what it meant. Instead of an answer I had only more questions in my mind. Can something as ephemeral and ethereal as 'geist' or 'spirit' be construed as 'historical conditions'? Can it be articulated at all and if so how? Is the notion of zeitgeist compatible with my inclusion of artefacts? Is this just a throwback to the time when I studied German as an undergrad? I answered Pat in the affirmative nonetheless, intuiting it reflected my unconscious intentions and determining to get to grips with *what* this thing called the '70s zeitgeist was. With hindsight I realise my first task should have been to ask *why* I was talking about 'the '70s zeitgeist' and not 'the '70s'.

Before my next supervision I told Pat

I need to create the texture and flavour of that time in which the stories may be read. I am not yet sure how this may be achieved... My husband has been watching a programme called *Ashes to Ashes* [I was wrong about the title here. I should have referred to *Life on Mars*. *Ashes to Ashes* is a follow on programme set in the '80s]. From the little I've seen I feel this does capture the zeitgeist (even if it is wildly nostalgic)... I envisage at some point that working on the zeitgeist will involve quite an investment in time and thought [I was right].

(Personal communication to Pat Sikes, June 2009)

As part of her response to this communication Pat included the following:

... I just tried to think about the '70s – I was at school and college and work – loon pants, granddad shirts, The Carpenters, first tastes of taramsalata, Cadbury's Smash – god.....

This list of '70s 'things' provided a 'Eureka' moment for me because I realised that, ironically, the zeitgeist resided in the objects, the artefacts, the music (or, more precisely the bands, the singers and the songs), the foods and the fashion (or more precisely the clothes) of the time. It was also through them that it could be evoked and articulated. I re-iterate that it would have been sagacious at this point to also ask why this was the case. However, I think I was simply relieved to find a way of reconciling the ethereal with the concrete. So instead of grappling with why the spirit was being thus invoked, I created my own list of words to epitomise and encapsulate the '70s and asked my co-participants to do the same. Taking a lead from Ellis (2009, pp.21-34) and prompted by Pat, I wondered if this would then perhaps form the bedrock of a contextualising story that spoke to the spirit of the times.

### **'For me the '70s were:'**

Reggae, The Charts, Top of the Pops, The Magic Roundabout, glam rock, stacked heels, 3 day weeks (Alison).

Music, long hot summers, going to pop concerts, going places, freedom, friendship, love, hippies, Real ale, 'Golden, happy days.' (Fiona).

David Cassidy, Donny Osmond, The Bay City Rollers, platforms, school discos (Heather).

Slade Christmas song: 'So here it is.....' (Can't you just hear it in your head!)  
Some men having longer hair than many women, women's lib/feminist movement.  
Women no longer expected to choose between marriage and a career (Jen).

Early 70s: Prog rock (esp. Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, ELP, King Crimson) afghan coats, crushed velvet loons, embroidery, cheesecloth shirts, platform shoes, Levis, patches  
Late 70s: punk (esp. The Clash, The Damned), very narrow jeans, spiky hair, lots of make-up, heat wave of 1976, spaghetti bolognaise, narrow ties (Liz).

Loons, smock tops, going to art school, Genesis, Roxy Music, first curry with no cutlery, think it cost 50p! floaty long clothes, very hot summer '76? Platform shoes. (Sally).

Bell bottoms, tank tops, feather cuts, power cuts, three day weeks, Vesta Chow Mein, Saturday Night Fever, punk, the Silver Jubilee (Yvonne).

These recollections are clearly very culturally specific (because we are all white, from working class backgrounds and mainly from the north). Also, I did not specifically ask for national events to be omitted. I had shared my list with my co-participants before they compiled theirs and I refer specifically to power cuts and to the three day working week. However, it was striking that cultural references featured more prominently than political or historical events. Now it may also be said that because I also made more references to the former the other participants simply followed my lead. However, when I analysed the lists, I was persuaded this was not the case. Firstly, although the '70s are invoked through cultural references, they are diverse references and do not follow my lead. For example Liz mentions the Damned whereas Heather cites David Cassidy and Donny Osmond which reflects the differences in their ages – Heather was still at school in 1976 when Liz was at university. Secondly, Jen mentions women's liberation which no-one else does. This leads me to conclude these are personal recollections rather than attempts to conform to a perceived norm. Thirdly I was also struck by the extent to which participant recollections imbricate with other sources, in that re-membering the '70s is through cultural and concrete referents rather than through world or national events.

If interested readers Google 'Remembering the '70s' there are millions of sites to choose from. This is representative:

The Magazine is compiling a people's history of modern Britain - featuring your written memories and photos... and now focus on the 70s. It was the decade of strikes, electricity shortages and piles of rotting rubbish on the street... But among the hundreds of written memories you e-mailed to us, it was clear that the industrial unrest was only one part of the story. For many of you the decade was defined by the music and the fashion. Or childhood freedom enjoying long, hot summers on Chopper bikes and Space Hoppers. (BBC, 2007)

Moreover, it also became apparent that this way of re-membering the '70s is not common to every decade. The BBC for example ran a series of online articles in which they picked out events that epitomised particular decades. I was struck by the difference in the flavour of the treatment of the '70s compared to that of other decades. All the others include references to historical events, but the '70s are summarised solely by reference to popular cultural. Now these series are clearly not intended to be anything other than light-hearted, nevertheless it did confirm to me that re-membering the '70s through its cultural referents was significant. Compare



the following (in the interests of space I have not included every year – my deletions were random):

<b>I Love the 60s</b>	<b>I Love the 70s</b>
<b>1961</b> Russia won the space race, Audrey ate breakfast at Tiffany's, and a dirty great wall went up in Berlin. Your host: Rita Tushingham.	<b>1971</b> Britt Ekland looks back at big shoes, tough guys, cuddly toys and the fastest milkman in the West.
<b>1963</b> JFK got shot, MLK had a dream, the Beatles hit the big time, and Dr Who's TARDIS broke down. Your host: Merseybeat hero Gerry Marsden.	<b>1973</b> Noddy Holder presents David Bowie, Chopper Bikes and Roger Moore.
<b>1968</b> Bobby K and Martin Luther were killed, Dad's Army was set up, and the apes took control. Your host: Adrian 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' Hall.	<b>1978</b> Lynda Carter was a Wonderful Woman.
<b>1969</b> Men walked on the moon, Concorde took off, Barbara Windsor went camping, and Rolf sang out the decade. Your host: Patrick 'The Sky at Night' Moore.	<b>1979</b> Bo Derek introduces the final year of a funky decade.
(BBC 2008a)	(BBC 2008b)

Thus I began to suspect that my unconscious use of the word zeitgeist was significant.

### **Political and historical events of the 1970s**

Lest you conclude that the '70s must have been a particularly uneventful time, I will provide a rudimentary and admittedly selective timeline that will show otherwise. I begin with 1970 and end with 1979, even though drawing parameters in this way is admittedly crude. Although this line is brief and simple I had to visit several online sources in order to compile it, particularly <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1970s>, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/>, <http://econ.economicshelp.org/2010/02/economy-of-1970s.html>. Moreover, none of these sources included mention of women's liberation (which Jen draws attention to) or to legislation affecting women in particular and for these references I had to visit <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/timeline/1970.shtml>. Similarly, the BBC

have a dedicated 'Black History' timeline, with no inclusion of these events elsewhere (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/1extra/blackhistory/events/70s/timeline/index.shtml>), which is significant in a way that merits a fuller treatment than I can undertake here but supports my justification for focusing only on white working class women in my study.

By this time I understood why the decade was not being re-membered through national events and why, if historical or political events were recalled at all, it was through the filter of personal experience. Re-membrance of the power cuts for example seemed to depend on your age at the time. I loved these times when my family sat by candlelight. In the absence of the telly my parents needed no encouragement to start telling stories of their past. When I talked to my friends about this they shared my perspective and my husband who was only a little boy at the time told me, 'It was like going camping'. However, those who were older, were working and had families are less upbeat (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6729683.stm>). I will return to this idea of the '70s being recalled in terms of personal experience in more detail later but for now, this is the timeline of events in the UK that I produced.

### **An eventful decade**

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 1970 | General election. Harold Wilson (Labour) replaced as Prime Minister by Ted Heath (Conservative). Riots in Derry, Northern Ireland. Docks strike – State of Emergency declared. Week of power cuts due to power station workers' strike. First national meeting of Women's Liberation Movement. |
| 1971 | Decimalisation (the old pound, worth 240 old pennies, was replaced by a new pound worth 100 new pennies. Shillings disappeared altogether). Postal workers strike. First march of Women's Liberation Movement in London.   |
| 1972 | Fourteen people killed on 'Bloody Sunday' in Northern Ireland. Northern Irish parliament suspended. Miner's strike. A rolling programme of three-hour long power cuts. Addition to Race Relations Act to end discrimination at work on grounds of 'colour'.                                    |
| 1973 | Britain joins EEC. OPEC oil crisis.  |
| 1974 | State of Emergency. Petrol rationing. Three day working week introduced to conserve energy supplies. Snap General Election. Labour scrapes a working majority. IRA explodes bombs in pubs in Birmingham, Guildford and on a coach on the M62. Adoption of strict anti-terrorism laws.          |

- 1975            Inflation rises to 27%. Implementation of Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Act. Margaret Thatcher becomes first woman leader of Conservatives.
  
- 1976            Heatwave. Sterling crisis: Britain faces bankruptcy and gets loan from IMF. Conditions attaching to the loan mean policy orientation shifts away from full employment and social welfare to control of inflation and expenditure. Harold Wilson resigns and James Callaghan becomes new prime minister.
  
- 1977            Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II.
  
- 1978            The 'Winter of Discontent' (Strikes by teachers, health workers and local government employees). Government wins 'no confidence' vote. Viv Anderson is the first black footballer to play for England.
  
- 1979            Government loses 'no confidence' vote. General Election. Margaret Thatcher becomes first (and to date only) woman Prime Minister of Britain.

The rationale for my selection of events is firstly to show that this was an eventful decade. I was also deliberately inviting readers to compare and contrast what was happening 'then' with the situation that prevails 'now'. I do this through the example of civil unrest in Northern Ireland, the bombing of the mainland by the IRA and toughening of anti-terrorism legislation (lest it be thought the threat of terrorism is a unique and contemporary phenomenon). To mirror the current 'climate of fear' I could also have referred to the Cold War and to the threat of nuclear warfare (Bertaux 1981), or the spectre of Communism (which was also invoked in dealings with industrial unrest) or even by the fear engendered in the north of England by the 'Yorkshire Ripper' (at least thirteen women were murdered before the killer was caught and the controversy about the police investigations still rages). My underlying intention is to show that conditions that seem very particular to a specific point in time may not be that novel after all, and that it is the detail that distinguishes one phenomenon from another rather than its general character. The 'climate of fear', the threat of terrorist attack and the economic climate then, are all phenomena which reverberate in the situation that pertains now. That said, these phenomena do have more of a 'global' dimension to them now and I deliberately focused my timeline on the UK to emphasise how much more parochial our experience of the world was then.

A third aim was to highlight an important characteristic of the decade, namely that it was one of transition (Black and Pemberton 2009). Thus I reference the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Act and The Race Relations Act, women's liberation

and Viv Anderson. I use the word transition advisedly rather than 'change' for example. Change implies something more radical and noticeable and demands a certain consciousness of the processes in play, whereas transitions can go on for some time before they are noticed. I am persuaded that those of us growing up and living through the '70s did not notice, or at least appreciate at the time, that this was a 'watershed' decade (British Academy, 2009) and it was mistakenly interpreted at the time as in decline (Dalyell 1977, Kramnick 1979). This has influenced the way it is still accounted for now, with two interconnected consequences. Firstly the decade is analysed in a way that makes it difficult for many people to relate to. Thus, secondly, in the absence of analyses that resonate with experience, the '70s are remembered solely through personal experience and through the things we had.

This mix of mistaking the historical circumstances in the '70s as symptomatic of decline and recollecting the decade through artefacts and cultural referents is evident for example in Turner's contemporary analysis of Britain in the '70s:

The 1970s. Strikes, power cuts, three day weeks, inflation, Paki-bashing and the dead left unburied. Or, from another perspective, a period dominated by *Morecombe and Wise*, glam rock, detective fiction, club football, *Get Carter* and the *Good Life*. It was the best of times and the worst of times.

(Turner, 2008, front flap)

Turner's account epitomises the flavour of recollections of the '70s, but my contention is that it does little to contribute to a meaningful analysis because it reflects and reproduces mistaken assumptions and the consequences of that. I am not singling Turner out for special criticism here but cite his work precisely because it is representative of writing about the '70s.

### **Towards an analysis of the '70s?**

I will animate this contention later, but first I want to pursue the idea of transition as the basis of a putative historical analysis of the '70s. By chance, the night before I planned to start writing up my ideas on the '70s zeitgeist, Malcolm McLaren, erstwhile manager of the punk band 'The Sex Pistols' died, leading to a veritable fest of reminiscence of the late '70s. It is often stated that the reason the Sex Pistols became so well-known was that release of their ironically entitled song 'God Save the Queen' in 1977, coincided with Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. I reproduce some of the lyrics to this song below.

*God save the queen  
The fascist regime...  
There is no future  
In England's dreaming...  
There's no future, no future,  
No future for you...  
God save the queen  
'Cause tourists are money  
And our figurehead  
Is not what she seems...  
Oh God save history  
God save your mad parade...*

(Cook, Jones, Lydon and Matlock, 1977)

The sentiments of this song undermine the reverential tenor of the Jubilee celebrations which harked back to the 1950s when Elizabeth II ascended to the throne. It is no coincidence that street parties with bunting and jelly and ice cream, an anachronism in the '70s, were a centrepiece of the celebrations. The day after McLaren's demise, recollections of 1977 were evocations of a time when opinions were fiercely divided between those who looked back with 'rose tinted glasses' and those who saw punk rock as frightening in its challenge to the establishment. The thrust of the discussions were that either you strongly identified with the sentiments of the song, in which case you were against the old order or you vehemently disagreed with them, which signified loyalty to the old order. However, my recollections do not support this division. Most of my peers took full advantage of the Jubilee celebrations *and*, without any qualms or sense of irony, 'sang' along to the Sex Pistols' version of 'God Save the Queen'. In other words, the old order was changing but not in a conscious or violent fashion. Many of us embraced both the old and new orders with little awareness of the import of our actions.

But here my historical analysis of the decade must end before it has even properly begun. I am not an historian and I rely on the work of historians to supplement the meagre rations of my knowledge and to stand in my stead as guides across the disciplinary terrain. However, in the case of the '70s, sustenance and guidance both are lacking. It was only towards the end of 2009 that I found confirmation of my suspicions that the significance of the decade was being ignored, misrepresented or represented almost exclusively through the lens of culture and/or

personal experience. Black and Pemberton (2009), following a conference at the British Academy (<http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2009/seventies/INDEX.cfm>) wrote of the 'relative neglect' (p.17) of the decade by historians, despite the availability of almost all the papers. Black and Pemberton (2009, p.17) only surmise why this should be the case but wonder:

if a key issue might be the centrality of political economy to the experience of the decade and a certain disconnection between this and other social science and historical analyses

Whatever the reason, my experience supported their claim that:

(r)ecent perspectives have reinforced a strong sense that the 1970s were a more grounded, visceral experience than the utopias of the 1960s, the consumerist 1980s, or the years of the long-boom after 1992. This is firmly apparent in the BBC TV's hit retro-science fiction (sic) drama *Life on Mars*. (p.16)

The '70s may or may not have been more grounded and visceral but this is how they have come to be re-membered anyway. Black and Pemberton offer reasons why the decade was mis-diagnosed at the time (they point to an unholy alliance of the press, politicians and academics) and their analysis supports my argument that the reason we cling to our every day, sensual experiences of the '70s is because we know on an unconscious level that representations of it as a 'benighted decade' (Black and Pemberton 2009, p.15) are somehow off kilter. Thus Black and Pemberton call for a reassessment of the '70s that challenges this view. For example, standards of living rose in the '70s (<http://econ.economicshelp.org/2010/02/economy-of-1970s.html>) which troubles the view of a decade in decline. Black and Pemberton argue that the '70s might reasonably be re-presented as the decade that saw Britain transitioning into the first post-industrial nation and thus lend weight to the conclusions I was drawing after my, albeit brief, empirical researches.

### **Why 'the '70s zeitgeist' as context?**

If Black and Pemberton are right (and my feeling is obviously that they are) it is little wonder that I used the term '70s zeitgeist instead of the '70s. We clearly did not grasp (the significance of) what was going on at the time, and the confusion continues. In the absence of a re-membering that makes sense to us, we recollect this epoch through its cultural referents, through our senses and our own personal experience. We latch on to platform shoes, and the first taste of 'exotic' foods because of the dissonance between personal memory and public recall. The

chimeric quality this lends to the decade makes the '70s zeitgeist an inevitable context for the participant stories. However, this is not to say it will always be thus and it would be interesting to revisit our stories if ever the kind of reassessment of the decade that Black and Pemberton advocate is undertaken. I return here to my argument that context is the manifestation of a relationship between people to their past *and* their present and that it embodies what was say-able in those times and what *is* say-able now (and to that I now add that it also includes what was and is notice-able). What we remember is the spirit of the '70s filtered through our senses and personal experience. As Jackson (1999) contends, different modes of self-construction are available at different historical moments.

### **Peaches. The '70s zeitgeist as context.**

I return now to my original intention to write a story that epitomises the zeitgeist, its contextualising properties, its meaning in terms of life history and how it comes into play. The story is about hearing a song 'Peaches' (Burnel and Cornwell 1977) in 2008 that I first heard in 1977.

*The MEN Arena in Manchester has all the soul and ambience of a disused aircraft hangar and this is the second time in a fortnight that I've been here. But I was delighted when my son asked me to come with him to see one of his favourite bands, The Pogues, playing Manchester as part of their Christmas tour. I took it as a sign he was starting to see me as a person and not just as something called 'mother'. My delight had been only slightly marred by my habit of sweating the small stuff. Although Huddersfield is half an hour from Manchester on the train, I had turned the outing into a logistical nightmare of 'what ifs?' My husband had been subjected to my usual litany.*

- *I'll have to get the train so I'll have to wear a coat and then I'll be too hot in the auditorium unless I take it off and then what if it's stolen? What if I can't find Wilf when I get there? What if I miss the last train home? What if Wilf misses his last train? What if..*
- *Yvonne. Yvonne. Stop. You'll figure it out and if there is any problem call me and I'll come and get you. OK?*
- *OK. Don't tell Wilf I've been fretting.*
- *I won't.*

Contrary to my fears Wilf is waiting for me at Manchester station and we have enough time for a leisurely meal before making our way to the MEN. We arrive just as the support act is coming on. "Oh it's the Stranglers!" I exclaim, seeing the tickets for the first time. "I first heard them just after I did A levels. They must be the oldest swingers in town."

We decide against a drink, laughing at our snobbish refusal to drink cheap lager sold at exorbitant prices in a plastic cup, and head for the auditorium. We have got standing tickets because Wilf likes to get close to the stage but I am concerned about being jostled which I hate. "You can always stand to the side," Wilf reassures me.

Entering the arena proper we stop to let our eyes adjust from the harsh lighting outside to the semi-darkness in. I take hold of Wilf's arm to steady myself for the long, steep descent to the floor. We both suffer from vertigo and there is no rail to hold on to. And precisely in the moment we begin the long descent, the Stranglers play the opening riff to 'Peaches'. I stop dead, disorientated. I know it is December 2008 and my son's arm is solid enough, but just in that moment – and it could have been eons or the smallest fraction of a second – I am not Mrs Yvonne Downs, wife and mother, sweeter of the small stuff, but Yvonne Novakovic, less definitively labelled but soon to be called 'The Wanderer' because of my habit of taking off at a moment's notice whenever the opportunity presented itself. And I am not here in the expanse of the MEN Arena but on my bed and the cusp of my 'new life', whatever that may be. And it's not a bleak day in December, it's the beginning of July, and I'll be eighteen soon and it's Jubilee year so everyone is in the mood for a party. This is not simply a memory of hearing this song for the first time. As I stand on the steps of this vast, utilitarian space, I am hearing 'Peaches' for the first time, played on Radio 1 and the experience is so real it is dizzying and makes me gasp.

'Are you OK?' asks my son, concerned. I look at him. He's older now than I was then but, I remind myself, so am I. I smile. 'I'm fine. It's just hearing that riff. It really took me back.' He looks at me, not understanding. 'Come on,' I say, 'don't go too fast,' and we carefully negotiate our way down to the pleasures of the evening ahead.



This story animates the points about context that I made in the previous chapter, particularly that the story and its context are always in a dynamic and dialogic *relation-ship* (Sheridan 2002) and that context is both a situational and temporal concept. The nature of the relationship between the time in which the story came into being and that in which it is related will bring different forces to bear on the what, the how and the who of the narrative (Ricoeur 1984, 1985, 1988). In other words time past and time present are complexly intertwined, the past is constitutive of the present and vice versa. Our reading of the past is mediated by what we know in the here and now. This means that, as story tellers, we are arbitrators in and manifestations of the complex interactions between stories and their location in particular times and place. Because the '70s are recalled in personally grounded, visceral and sensual ways the role of personal experience took on heightened significance in the crafting and contextualising of the life histories in this thesis.

# **Methods in crafting life histories**

## **Introduction**

Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (2004, p.48) in their guide for supervisors state that, 'the methods chapter is a good one to write early on and a useful 'test' for the supervisor' echoing the tendency to ascribe methods a purely technical or procedural role (Harding 1987, p.2, Letherby 2003, p.5, Lorenz, 2010) and inferring an unproblematic congress with them. Treatments of methods are often subsumed into concerns over methodology (Reinharz 1992, Hekman 1999, Naples 2003), a slippage which occurs even when their role in 'exploring social reality' is recognised (Ramazanoglu with Holland 2002, p.11). Letherby (2002, p.5) states that any method can be used in a non-feminist or pro-feminist way. I agree that no method is innately compatible or incompatible with a feminist research project but I would also emphasise that this does not mean its unproblematic use can be simply assumed. It is important to be aware of the provenance of one's methods and how the particular way in which they are used influences and impacts on the research. In the previous chapter for example I set out how life history research can be used either to exploit participants and their stories, or can itself be exploited to challenge powerful knowledge claims. Moreover, it is a mistake to assume that a critical scrutiny of methodological issues will also reveal problems with methods themselves. It is crucial that methods are considered in their own right because they can be conceptualised as epistemology and methodology made concrete. They are the means whereby research proposals move off the page and into life, the manifestation of research ethics and of moral purpose.

After reading the first participant life history Pat commented: 'I did find myself wondering which bits were your words and which were hers' (personal communication, April 2009)<sup>1</sup>. This chapter addresses the question, 'Whose words are they?' implied in this comment. This does not signal an interest in 'words' as a phenomenon but as a 'component of human interaction' (Coates 1996, p.12) and my aim is to illustrate the impact and influence of it on my thinking, not to provide a definitive answer to it. Even if I wanted to I doubt I could, because stories always involve humans and, as Plummer (2001, p.5) points out, humans are an 'epistemological disaster'. The complex and differentiated influence of human

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<sup>1</sup> I have not given details about particular life histories in the body of the text because I do not want these responses to influence your reading of them.

participants ebbs and flows over each stage of storying. On my reading Riessman's (1993) delineation of the processes involved in narrative research fails to take account of the flotsam and jetsam this ebb and flow leaves in its wake. I appreciate Riessman's aim was to clarify and simplify the processes involved in narrative research for those new to the approach but I think it is a truism that the process is complex simply because humans and human behaviour are complex. Thus rather than an answer I provide, first, a short response, before explaining why that is inadequate here. I then go on to frame a discussion of my methods, of everything I have done from the word go, as a comprehensive response, to show how the so called practical and technical acts of research contribute to the final shape and sound of the life histories that appear in this thesis.

### **Whose words are they? Concise response**

Crafting the life histories I took pains to remain close to the words in the transcript. Staying faithful to the words uttered was not a methodological decision per se, or reflective of the desire to produce a 'truer' account (Poland 2001). It was done out of respect for the participants (Downs 2010). Replacing their words with mine implies deficiency or inferiority, setting myself up as more capable of expressing their experiences. Because I am a participant and include my life history in this thesis *and* because I am also the researcher, there is considerable potential to present myself as superior. I do not wish to minimise or deny my power or privileged position but this also meant I took pains not to exploit it. I acknowledge my presence and influence (as far as any one can be aware of their own presence and influence) but I was also vigilant about not using the words of others as mere resources for self-aggrandisement, moulding them to fit a pre-ordained 'theoretical framework' in the service of my own academic cleverness.

I am confident that, were you to look at the transcripts, you would notice how closely I have adhered to the words used by each participant and to the tone, timbre and cadences of their stories. Obviously, turning a transcript into a life history necessitated a great deal of selection but I am satisfied that the criteria for this were not solely mine but co-constituted. Indeed, as Hunt and West (2006) maintain, Stanley's notion of auto/biography "embraces the idea of relationship and a dynamic co-creation of text or story. I had also passed transcripts of recorded interviews to co-participants before I began crafting the life histories and did likewise with the life histories when they were completed. The following, while more explicitly laudatory

than some of the others, is essentially a typical participant response to the reading of their life history<sup>2</sup>:

Well I'm really impressed with that. You managed to turn something that seemed very lengthy, rambly and incoherent into an accurate picture of me and my experiences. Everything is in there and it's all accurate. I've only made one or two minor changes. I think you've done an amazing job of it. I enjoyed reading the 'story' and will probably show it to (*my partner*) too.

Some participants did ask for more substantial changes, however. The most major of these was as follows:

Well I cried all the way through that. The only changes I think are (*minor amendment*) ... and I do not think I emphasised enough how much my home life and upbringing has affected me in that it has helped me to know how to do the right thing and be determined because that is the way my parents are.

I am persuaded that this participant was not being falsely modest or kind to me here by attributing this omission to herself. Nevertheless it is just as likely that I did not pay sufficient heed to the importance of her parents. I am no wiser after reading and re-reading her transcript. This illustrates the difficulty in determining from whom stories spring. Thus I cannot tell you for sure whose words you will read but I can alert you to the ways in which my influence has been brought to bear and you will no doubt detect the influences I exerted of which I am still unaware.

### **Whose words are they? Extended response**

Whilst this is presented as a linear progression I was embroiled simultaneously in various parts of the research process at any one time.

### **Participants**

I present this section as an interview as I anticipate some reader questions (in **bold**).

### **Why include your own story?**

I felt it would be dishonest to absent the personal reasons for my interest and exploitative to 'collect' stories from other people without including my own. Such

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<sup>2</sup> I have left names off here for the same reason.

decisions require careful consideration on a project by project basis (which is one of the reasons I believe standardised ethics review protocols are too blunt an instrument) but I felt my involvement here had to be as both researcher (as Yvonne Downs) and as co-participant (as Yvonne). However, I regarded my research as 'collaborative' because my co-participants did not have the resources I did or the luxury of immersing themselves in it as I did. I knew that the only person who stood to benefit *tangibly* from this research was Yvonne Downs when/if she got her PhD.

### **How was it possible to maintain this distinction?**

It was not possible. Although in my view there is no unitary, essential self in any body, not even when attached to a particular identity, it still took some work to achieve even a messy separation between Yvonne and Yvonne Downs. I am too close to my research to determine where the lines were drawn and blurred, which is one reason I have scoped an expansive role for readers. At times I felt more like a researcher and at others more like a participant. As a researcher I speak tentatively, cautiously, mindful of my influence on the knowledge-making process and of the responsibilities attaching to that *and* authoritatively as someone who is in the privileged position of having those responsibilities in the first place. But it was also a privilege to be a participant too because I could unburden myself of the need to be cautious and reflexive. In other words I experienced the empowerment that is achieved through constraint (Fairclough 2001, p.23).

### **What criteria did you use for selecting participants?**

Selecting! I was concerned initially that I would not find anyone to take part. I knew I was fishing in a very small pool anyway. Whilst one needs to treat statistical information cautiously, according to Wolf (2002, pp.188-189) in 1977 when I first went to university, only 4% of the population entering higher education, male and female, were from social classes III-skilled manual, IV- semi-skilled and V-unskilled<sup>3</sup>. I also failed to convince alumni officers that I was only asking them for advertising space in their communications with alumni and did not want to rifle through their

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<sup>3</sup> Classification is based on father's occupation as head of the household. My dad was class V, the lowest. Writing this brings me the closest I have ever felt to understanding on an emotionally cognitive level the moral significance (Sayer 2005) and hidden injuries (Sennett and Cobb 1977) of class and the violence of classification. No one who knew my dad would ever define him in this way.

databases<sup>4</sup>. But to return to your question, because I was researching to answer certain questions arising out of my own experience I thought it best to recruit other women 'like me' so my initial criteria were that co-participants should:

✚ identify as white working class at time of going to university.

This may appear to be 'unscientific' but Savage (2000) points out that class analysis is not the preserve of social science and has a diverse intellectual history. Social scientific conceptualisations of class, essentially allied either to Marxist or Weberian thinking, are thus limiting. I was aware that 'British people tend to identify themselves as working class' (Savage 2000, p.34) but this is accounted for in part by a circularity with the definitive criteria. Self-assignment, whilst disputed, is thus no less and no more reliable than other methods. Moreover, all the women I spoke to said that they were no longer working class, at least not unequivocally so.

✚ have parents who did not stay in education after compulsory schooling.

This was also used as an indicator of class by Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980).

✚ be the first in their family to go to university.

Whilst not explicitly referred to as 'class' this is a mark of 'disadvantage' in widening participation discourse.

✚ have enrolled between 1970 and 1979.

✚ have gone to university straight from school (possibly after a gap year) rather than as a mature student.

Most co-participants were actually more 'like me' than I initially specified. Most had gone to grammar schools, were from the north, had trained at some point as teachers and were still involved in some way with education and/or training (See Appendix 5). This is ironic because I had been particularly anxious not to recruit anyone who had gone to teacher training college as it was a more usual path for girls to tread at the time (Arnot, David and Weiner 1999, Archer et al 2003) and I wanted to speak to women who had not done what might have been expected of

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<sup>4</sup> My dealings with alumni officers has left me wondering about the extent to which imperfect interpretation of rules is impacting on research. When I asked alumni officers if they could place my request for participants in their newsletters they invariably stated they could not because of 'data protection'. I was still registered with the Data Protection Commissioner at the time and had worked as a data protection officer but I failed to persuade them that I was not asking for any information about their alumni but was in effect asking them to advertise the fact I was looking for participants.

them (although most participants relate how going to grammar school was the 'conveyor belt' to university). It is therefore telling that so many of us trained as teachers after getting a degree anyway.

I 'waived' my criteria on two occasions. One woman had been to a polytechnic, another had not started university until 1981, which only came to light when, after many false starts in both cases, I came face to face with them. I decided to continue anyway not because I am reluctant to communicate difficult messages, but I would have felt like a rape researcher in doing so (Reinharz 1979, p.95)<sup>5</sup>.

### **When did you begin recruiting participants?**

I wanted to start speaking to other women as soon as possible because I did not want to start imposing theory and normative frameworks on what they said; I wanted a conversation between theory and stories. I did my first interview mid-March 2008 and the last in July 2009.

### **How did you recruit participants?**

In addition to myself, the group of women I worked with 'was arrived at by a hodge-podge of means' (Coates 1996, p.6). I thus draw attention to the 'serendipitous nature of the resulting corpus' (Coates, 1996, p.6). Indeed, I had already 'closed my books' when the last participant asked if she could take part.

- ✚ The alumni office at Sheffield eventually agreed to put something in a newsletter. Two women expressed interest and one decided not to participate after I sent details of the commitment required.
- ✚ Two women were friends who offered to take part after we had social conversations about my research.
- ✚ Five people responded to an email that one of these friends sent out at work, but one did not fit my initial criteria.
- ✚ One person asked to take part after we met at a workshop.

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'rape research' is most often attributed to Patti Lather but I came across Reinharz's earlier reference when doing my MA in Women's Studies. Lather herself (1986, p.75) cites Reinharz's earlier critique of the 'rape model' of research.

## **What concerns did you have about this way of recruiting participants?**

Concerns! Sleepless nights and desperate emails to Pat about whether this was a 'valid' way of researching and whether my methods were 'rigorous' and how this would affect the 'data'. This receded in importance as I connected on an emotionally cognitive level with the stories.

I was also concerned that I already 'knew' two of my co-participants. Goodson and Sikes (2001) advise caution here and I was anxious on two counts. Firstly I wondered whether friends would tell me a different story to one they would have told a stranger. This anxiety diminished as I came to formulate notions around 'honest fictions' and as I spoke to other women I had not met previously. Secondly, the ethics and politics are of a different order. With trust presumably already established, the potential for exploitation and the need for ethical reflexivity are all the greater when interviewing friends (Finch 1984, Cotterill 1992). Although I found a sizeable feminist literature on interviewing friends and being 'friendly' with interviewees (Oakley 1981, Finch 1984, Ribbens 1989, Cotterill 1992, Coates 1996, Reinharz 1997, Harrison, MacGibbon and Morton 2001, Browne 2003, Letherby 2003) all assumed to know what friendship is. But 'friendship' is not a unitary term and cannot be uniformly understood (O' Connor 1992, Coates 1996). It changes over time and is dependent on circumstance as the following composite sketches of my relationship with my co-participants illustrate:

1. The friend of a friend initially (we have both lost touch with the latter).  
Regular contact when children were young diminishing as they got older.  
Sporadic social contact after research interviews.
2. Started as a professional relationship and developed over the years into a close and emotionally supportive one. Regular contact, including meetings, after interviews.
3. Not known to me before, no contact other than for research purposes since.
4. Not known to me before, contact outside research relationship including social events and further help with other aspects of research.

I thus concluded that minding my feminist research principles and a deontological ethics was of greater consequence than worrying about the precise nature of my relationship with individual participants.



## Interviewing co-participants

Interviewing foregrounds the micro-politics (Bhavnani, 1993), ethics and moral purpose of research, because it is an embodied engagement that quite literally brings the researcher face to face with them. I agree with Fontana (2001) that interviews carried out solely for the benefit of the researcher are exploitative. However, in my view the individual and the social cannot and should not be clearly delineated in *social* science research. Thus I emphasised to participants that they may not benefit personally from my research but I hoped it would contribute to a body of research that will assist in impacting on thinking about the value of higher education. Moreover, as I connected emotionally to my research and admitted more of my personal interest I also related more to the reasons other participants gave for taking part. Paradoxically therefore, the more it was 'for me' the less exploitative it became on Fontana's terms.

Most of my co-participants wanted to shape a coherent story of our experiences and none of us had had this opportunity before. This is not the same as saying we needed to do this. I do not accord my research the therapeutic role which Ellis and Bochner (2000) contend it should have. None of the feedback I received from participants suggests it has served this purpose but Ortiz's (2001) experience is that this may happen 'serendipitously'. I agree with Reinharz (1997) that we not only bring a variety of 'selves' into the interview situation but that we also *need to do* so. A therapeutic situation requires a degree of awareness about who we are being at any given time and researchers who are not trained therapists simply cannot do this. For example, I was puzzled about why I, sometimes overly sensitive and *empathetic*, could be *sympathetic* if someone got upset in an interview but also remain what I interpreted as 'detached'. Even more puzzling was why I would then weep buckets when transcribing the very same part of the story. I eventually realised that in the interview I was 'creating a safe space' and 'holding safe' the person speaking, things I had learned to do when working as a life coach. I did not stop to consider that I had brought my life coach self into the interview.

My experiences of the interview, and those of my co-participants as far as they divulged to me, were not of the following order:

It is impossible to anticipate what a life story interview will be like- not so much the form it will take but the power of the experience itself... Just witnessing- really hearing, understanding and accepting without judgement – another's life story can be transforming.

(Atkinson 2001, p.126).

This is not to say I think Atkinson is wrong and I have detected a drive to include a transformative element in a number of interviews on the StoryCorps® website (<http://storycorps.org>) but I cannot make such a claim for my own research. The very most I can claim is that we found it enjoyable and helpful inasmuch as it was a space we might not otherwise have found to tell a *coherent* story. However, nor do I see interviewing as a purely practical or technical enterprise because 'technology is only the procedural scaffolding of what is a broad culturally productive enterprise' (Gubrium and Holstein 2001, p.30). Moreover, like Gubrium and Holstein, I believe this makes attention to the technical aspects of interviewing not less but more important because 'they produce the detailed subject as much as they gather information about him or her' (2001, p.12). I re-iterate that they also produce the researcher (Skeggs 2002). It is thus in the face to face interview that Skeggs' criticism that the researcher comes to know themselves by fixing another in place is most cogent. In therapeutic situations it is understood that the client is addressing a particular deficiency (although I am stretching the meaning of deficiency to its limits here). Thus, if the interview is a therapeutic moment, who is being fixed in place as deficient?

No matter how much the researcher might think they can 'empower' participants to 'find their own voice' and 'own' the narrative (Mischler 1986) the influences of the contexts and times in which the interview takes place will militate against this enterprise. Moreover, Gubrium and Holstein (2001, p.29) argue that participants are 'always and already 'empowered' to engage fully in a vast range of discursive practices'. I agree with this inasmuch as researchers are not catalysts in the processes of empowerment (hooks 2000). However, it requires no suspension of disbelief to appreciate that the discursive practices of a member of the Sudanese elite using the interview to consolidate her own position (Hale 1991) are of a different order to those of Steedman's (2000) historical subjects engaging in the discursive practice of persuading the authorities that they were 'deserving poor'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In some previous iterations of this thesis I devoted some considerable space to a discussion of voice and there is a comprehensive theoretical, methodological and empirical feminist literature on this which troubles the easy connections between them (see also and Mazzei and Jackson for a poststructuralist perspective). However, I concluded it would warrant a more comprehensive treatment than possible here. Moreover, given the substantial literature on voice, it might also be useful to start asking questions about who is listening.

Having thus introduced the ideas underpinning my approach to interviewing, I want now to animate the points I make above and to give readers a glimpse of some of that which often remains hidden in research reports. I do this via four vignettes, composites based on my field notes.

### **First Vignette**

*I am running late. I should have started getting everything together sooner. I realise I have no spare batteries for the voice recorder. Have I time to buy more? Probably not but I am going to anyway because being late is bad, but not as bad as running out of battery. This handwritten aide-mémoire doesn't look very professional either, even though I have written it out a few times to make it as neat as possible but printing it out makes it look too formal. I know I don't want to do a structured interview or even a semi-structured one, whatever that might be, but there are certain areas I want to visit and my memory is really letting me down at the moment. Just a minute.... I've forgotten where she lives. I'll have to go back and check. Now I'm sweating and I've just remembered I've got to get diesel. I can buy batteries at the garage and maybe a little token of my appreciation. I did not want to feel this stressed.*

### **Second vignette**

*I stand at the door and squint at the various names at the side of the doorbells until I find the one I am looking for. I hesitate a moment before I ring. I was determined to be better organised this time and now I am early. Nothing happens and I am debating my options when a voice comes over the intercom. I announce my presence and am told to push on the door which panics me momentarily as I invariably mess this up. But I pass smoothly into the hallway which is as grand as the exterior led me to anticipate. I am awestruck. I wait as instructed, feeling self-conscious and conspicuous and am just beginning to wonder whether I am in the right place when she appears.*

- *Sorry about that. I was on the phone.*
- *No problem. I'm early.*
- *I've made lunch coz we won't concentrate if we're starving and I've done a cake to have with our tea later. You did say you drink tea didn't you?*

- That sounds great. Thank you. I'm touched you went to the trouble.
- My mother would never forgive me if I let you go away hungry.
- She sounds like my mum.
- Is yours still alive?
- No she died a year ago.
- Mine died last month.
- Oh. I am so sorry for your loss.

She bursts into tears. I fumble for the tissues I always carry in my bag and pass her one.

- How embarrassing. I bet you feel like running off.
- Not at all. It will get easier in time.
- Stupid really.
- Not at all. Why do you think I always have tissues to hand?

### **Third vignette**

- Is this the kind of material you want?
- I have no pre-conceived ideas, so whatever you tell me is exactly what I want to hear.
- I keep flitting about though. Shall I start again from the beginning?
- Please do whatever feels right to you.
- Remind me again, what is it you want?

### **Fourth vignette**

Oh my god. That took three hours. The participant information sheet states it will take two. I feel terrible. Maybe I should have chivvied her along more? What on earth took so long? Transcription is going to take ages. I suppose we were interrupted a few times and we digressed a bit. Well, quite a bit. It's so tempting when you have so much in common. Am I storing up trouble by arranging to see her socially? What if she doesn't like what I write about her? Well, she will simply withdraw from the research. But that isn't what worries me. I'm more worried that she won't like me after all and I think we could be good friends.

Reflecting on doing interviews I am acutely aware I took participants' time as well as their stories. In the first interviews I wanted to address some broad areas but

as it happened I barely needed to take heed of my aide-mémoire, covering areas of interest in the course of the interview 'as if by magic'. In the second interviews I swept up outstanding points and asked questions arising from the first one. I recognise that I am not a focused interviewer and we often digressed to chat about things that were on our minds – dreadful experiences at work and their impact on self-esteem, concerns about impending promotions, excitement about trips overseas, plans to start new businesses, stories about children. But of course when I came to transcribe these chats (and boy did I *then* wish they had not taken place - hours and hours and hours of transcription) they are also part of the story.

### **Transcription**

I have written elsewhere about my approach to transcription (Downs 2010) which evolved from my first experience of doing it. This has resulted in my committing to doing 'verbatim' transcriptions, although 'verbatim' is not a simple concept and I have unsettled notions that verbatim transcriptions are better representations of the interview than other ways of transcribing, not least because *recordings* of the interview are not faithful representations of the interview itself. Thus my commitment is based not on method/ological grounds. It is based instead on ethical grounds because my experience had led me to understand that it matters to people how what they say is transcribed and:

interviewees have taken the time and trouble to utter those words and have handed them over in good faith. It thus behoves the researcher to be conscientious in handling them.

(Downs 2010, p.110)

This meant I spent many hours transcribing the recordings, sometimes wishing I had been more 'businesslike' and not allowed the interview to drift onto other topics. I then passed transcripts to participants so they had the chance to take out, add in, amend or comment on them. If any amendments were made they were minor but this cannot be taken as a sign that participants were generally 'happy' with them. I have argued that the power relationships between myself and the co-participants were complex and shifting but, like Cole and Knowles (2001) I did not assume that silence equated to endorsement. Nonetheless I was easier in my mind that I was not grabbing stories simply for my own ends. I did not want the final product to be something that caused other people any grief.

## **Crafting life histories**

All we sociologists have are stories. Some come from other people, some from us. What matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced, which sort of stories they are, and how we can put them to intelligent use in theorizing about social life'

(Silverman 1998, p.111).

### **Guiding principles**

To recap, by this point the stories had already passed through several filters of which I consider the following to be the most significant:

- ↓ The criteria by which I 'selected' participants
- ↓ The questions I asked/did not ask in the interview
- ↓ The way in which participants interpreted my role in the interview and theirs
- ↓ The way in which I interpreted their role in the interview and mine.
- ↓ The stories that were told supplementary to their higher education and graduate stories
- ↓ The nature of the relationships formed between us
- ↓ The recording of the interviews (the process)
- ↓ The recorded interviews (the product)
- ↓ The way I transcribed the recording

After receiving transcripts back from the participants I began a process of reading and re-reading in order to familiarise myself with the stories, their cadences, tone and timbre. I considered listening to the recordings instead, but decided written transcripts would better serve a written end product. At this stage I did little other than to note some commonalities which I called 'points of recognition'. These could be common to all the participants (the number of times we referred to ourselves as being 'different' or 'unconventional') or to just some (for example most but not all of us became teachers, are from the north, went to grammar school, are married and have children). I wanted to establish a base on which to consider the stories not as individualised accounts but as telling of an experience that has resonance for others in other settings. More prosaically, it helped me to remember the details of individual stories. I also noted down anything which particularly stood out or caused me to reflect.

Once satisfied with my familiarity with the stories, I began the crafting the life histories. The most significant undertaking here was the process of selecting points

for inclusion and structuring them as a coherent story. I am not too far off the mark in stating that each participant life history is about 20%-25% the length of its transcript. Even allowing for the removal of digressions and the repetitions and falterings that are features of speech, this indicates a process of selection for which the label 'editing' no longer suffices. My decisions about what to include and omit were influenced by three major considerations: Dollard's (1949) criteria for the life history, my determination not to fragment the stories for the purposes of analysis, and my desire to provide counter-narratives to the dominant discourses around the value of higher education.

### **Dollard's principles for the life history**

Initially I struggled to understand how I could translate my ideas about life history into method/ology and into actual life histories. Dollard's seven criteria for the life history enabled this translation, particularly as they articulated with the principles of feminist research I outlined earlier and which I tested in Downs (2008). However, I do not use the criteria 'neat'. In the first place I find Dollard's language does not sit easily with my style. He talks (1949, p.8) of 'the subject' as a 'specimen' and of 'the organic motors of action' for example. Moreover, criteria could become the tail that wags the dog. Therefore in this thesis the criteria are double filtered first through Polkinghorne's (1995) interpretation and secondly through my own understandings. They thus take on the shape of guiding principles rather than rules. The page references in the following account are from Polkinghorne unless otherwise indicated:

#### **I. Attention is paid to the cultural contextual features that give a story meaning.**

Contextual features transform life stories into life histories, introducing 'values, social rules and meaning systems and languaged conceptual networks' (p.16) as well as 'assumptions about acceptable and expected personal goals' (p.16). Although Polkinghorne refers specifically to '*cultural* contextual features', this criterion can carry the weight of my more expansive notion of contexts. The specific context of the '70s zeitgeist foregrounds cultural aspects of life. This criterion thus acknowledges the inter-relatedness of the individual to their circumstances, recognising that personal choice is not a stand-alone concept untroubled by those externalities. Thus it also encompasses the dialogic relationship between structure and agency.

## **II. Attention is paid to the embodied nature of the storyteller.**

It would be easy to overlook this point in an account that seeks a conceptual language and which takes the '70s zeitgeist as context. Paying heed to storytellers as corporeal beings with a tangible as well as a symbolic, metaphorical, textual and representational presence in the stories acts as a foil to the ethereal, intangible elements of storytelling. It reminds us that our embodied beings do influence the kinds of experiences that are available to us. Hence I foreground the particular embodied-ness of the storytellers as white working class women and the stories are also coloured by our ageing embodied-ness, although this was not a deliberate or conscious inclusion.

## **III. Attention is paid to the importance of other people.**

Earlier I gave an example of how one participant was at pains, retroactively, to foreground the influence of her parents in her life. The expectation of relationships (with men) also had a major impact in several ways on our experiences, something which I formalise by framing it as a manifestation of the role of 'compulsive heteronormativity' (to which I return later but which can briefly be described as the barely appreciated force of social and political heterosexuality). However, I was also at pains not to overstate the importance of other people and to include references to the limits of their influence. For example when Liz's father was not enthusiastic about her going to university because of the cost implications, she set up a meeting with her local authority to discuss this. Thus her father did influence her (she may not have met with her local authority were it not for his concerns) but he did not deter her from pursuing her intention to go to university. The underlying idea here is the need to recognise the complex interplay between our own agency and external forces, be the latter structural or exercised by other agents. Indeed I detect this strand running through all Dollard's criteria.

## **IV. The storyteller is an actor who alters the scene not a pawn buffeted by events, in other words there is interaction between the storyteller and her or his setting.**

I take this to mean that, whilst contexts can be constraining, the storyteller is not inactive within those constraints. This addresses the charge of determinism in life history research (Peter Clough 2002) and allows for individual interpretations of 'scripts'. In other words individuals may experience the same events but will not deal with them in the same way which in turn mediates the outcomes of those experiences. Thus charges of relativism are also addressed here because on these



terms there can be no generalised response to life experiences. Broadly, all the participants and I were handed a script that we might not reasonably have expected. This fact is reflected in some common aspects of our stories. But that script was variously interpreted, within the context of opportunity and constraint imposed by the circumstances (particularly social and economic) that pertained at the time.

**V. Attention is paid to social events the storyteller has experienced as a member of an historical cohort in the context of understanding how the storyteller works to shape a future undetermined by the past**

Here the focus is again on the individual but in their capacity as a social (and historical) being. On my terms, it addresses the interaction between scripts and their broader historical contexts, and factors in the 'struggle to change habitual behaviors (sic) and to act differently' (p.17). Thus it introduces a greater element of deliberation in our responses to the circumstances in which we found ourselves. Sometimes we are conscious of what is happening to us at the time (Alison and Jen were both conscious of the force of expectation being imposed by their schools). Sometimes this consciousness comes after the event (such as when Sally laments her decision to leave London, attributing the reason she did to her inexperience and to societal expectations).

**VI. The story takes place within a bounded temporal period**

As outlined earlier, I have a transcendental understanding of life that cannot easily accommodate notions of a beginning, a middle and an end, even if one is dealing with an entire life (Chanfrault-Duchet 1991). My use of the vignette acknowledges the sometimes episodic sense of a story. Whilst all stories have temporal boundaries, the salient point is how *particular* temporal boundaries influence the story itself. For example, I began each interview by asking what the participant was doing the summer before going to university in order to get a sense of the changes, if any, going to university brought about. However, more than one participant regressed the story to when they were at primary school and some to a time when they were not even born. These selected temporal borders in turn transformed my intended emphasis on change into a focus on continuities.

**VII. The story has to make 'sense' ie be plausible and understandable**

For me this addresses Phillip's (1994) question 'will any story do'. Moreover, a story meeting this criterion forges a link between the storyteller and others. It is the 'point of recognition', the realisation that we are 'not so different that we do not recognize

each other' (Mahoney and Zmroczek 1997, p.5). I also think this criterion holds good in cases when the truth seems stranger than fiction. Here I call upon the arguments I make for the concept of honest fictions to support my contention, particularly the notions of aesthetic, narrative and contextual truth. Thus the 'facts' of a story may appear incredible (and to interpret Elvis dying as in any way connected with my going to university does stretch credulity) but these inherent truths still render it plausible and understandable.

To the seven criteria above, Polkinghorne also adds the requirement to acknowledge the role of the researcher. Sikes (quoted in Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995, p.122) maintains that this requirement pre-dates the 'postmodernist paradigm' and has been implicit in life history research from the 1920s. Thus I add an eighth criterion to Dollard's list.

#### **VIII. The presence of the researcher and their role in the co-construction of the narrative is made explicit.**

In the stories I try to remind readers of my presence. Thus I did not remove all instances where participants said 'you know' or asked a rhetorical question (such as when Fiona says, 'It's funny what can catch you isn't it?') and I am explicit about my presence in Jen's story. I also kept the tone of the story conversational to indicate that the story teller is talking to someone there with them.

#### **Keeping the stories whole**

##### **Analysis**

*When you smash a china vase  
And keep pounding it until it is dust  
And then take glue  
To mix a paste with the dust  
And then fashion a vase  
Is it the same vase?*

*(Yvonne Downs)*

Fragmenting life histories, taking them apart like a clock (Thompson 1981, p.289) after all the thought and effort that goes into crafting them seems at the very least perverse. At worst it undermines my commitment to non-violent research (Redwood 2008). It was therefore insufficient to treat this as a methodological challenge (I could for example have analysed extracts in the main body of the thesis and included the life histories as appendices). I knew from my MA experiences that I

would not be able to find a moral justification for fragmentation and extraction. This would indeed have felt like rape research to me, 'accruing the stories of others in order to make them property for oneself' (Skeggs 2000, p.349). My use of inverted commas indicates that of course the 'whole' stories presented here are no such thing but I feel I have nevertheless done my best to honour the spirit of the experiences related, within the constraints of doing a PhD thesis.

That notwithstanding, the method/ological and the moral are embedded one within the other here. Peter Clough (2002) argues against any analytical interference from the researcher. However, I did not feel justified in taking this stance. In the first place I have been funded to do social science research, although Brinkman (2009) challenges understandings of what that entails, and I agree with Stenhouse (1980) that research requires public scrutiny. That being the case I have a duty to my co-participants not to simply throw their stories 'out there' to be picked over like 'chicken entrails' (Stanley and Wise 1990, p.24). I also have a duty to readers to be explicit about what I think these stories are (counter-narratives to dominant understandings). It is inevitable that readers will come to their own conclusions but (and pace Phillips) I do not think any old analysis will do. Whilst there is an argument that researchers are too close to their research to get a clear view, I contend that my proximity to it and the length of time I have spent getting to know the participants and the stories afford me, if not the right, then certainly the capability to offer my ideas.

### **Shaping content**

Whilst Dollard provides guidance for the general character of the life history, I still had to decide on their substance. Thus the topics I incorporated into the crafting of the stories were those covered in the interviews, which in turn originated in my own interests, or in ideas engendered by my co-participants, or which were stimulated by reading other scholarly works. I have organised the topics under four main headings:

#### **↓ *Social mobility***

As this is a dominant area of concern in evaluations of higher education I considered it vital to address it in my research. However, I wanted to both re-define social mobility as a concept and, as part of the latter, to move away from the narrow understanding of it as occupational or 'income mobility' (Gorard 2008). Thus in the interviews I asked: 'What kind of circles do you move in now?', 'How different do you

think your life would have been if you hadn't gone to university' and, more directly, 'What class would you say you fit into now?'

### ↓ **Career**

In official rhetoric a key measure of the value of higher education is 'getting a dream job'. It is thus implied that graduation will be the start of a rewarding 'career'. My purpose was again to extend the parameters of understandings of 'career' beyond a status-based notion of progression through the ranks of paid employment. Hughes (1958, p.11) takes the kind of expansive view of career I also have in mind when he says the 'joining of a man's life with events, large and small, are his unique career, and give him many of his personal problems'. Likewise Levinson (1978, p.54) in his study of what it means to be an adult points out that:

(o)ur lives are punctuated by events such as marriage, divorce, illness, the birth or death of loved ones, unexpected trauma or good fortune, advancement or failure in work, retirement, war, flourishing times and 'rock bottom' times.

Both Hughes and Levinson recognise that it is 'different for girls', but theirs are not feminist works because 'different' here is defined in relation to a normative male experience rather than as a reflection of the influence of structural factors or a focus on difference itself. It is this loose thread in their work that I am in effect picking up here. I approached it by asking questions such as, 'What have you done since leaving university?', 'What are you most proud of?' and 'In what ways do you consider yourself successful?'

### ↓ **Relationships with others**

I focused on this area for three main reasons. Firstly it speaks directly to Dollard's third criterion and pushes the boundaries of what might be considered valuable about higher education. My reasoning was that as humans we are social beings and if something is to be considered a valuable experience then surely it must enhance our relationships with others? I thus asked about relationships with parents, with siblings, with children and partners as well as with colleagues and peers. Secondly, whilst I do not agree that a life can be neatly compartmentalised into stages, I did find some of the ideas in Levinson helpful. In particular he talks about one of the four main tasks of the 'novice' stage of life being the formation of loving relationships. Finally, it speaks to conceptions of women as 'naturally' concerned to foster and nurture relationships which in turn highlights aspects of compulsive heteronormativity.

## ↳ **Identity**

I had not intended to include issues of identity because of the difficulties inherent in trying to pin down what that means. However, after the first interviews it became apparent that identity was, on a broad interpretation, important to our stories. In order to address the difficulties of definition I offer a broad interpretation here, roughly equating to evaluations of our place in the world. In the second interviews I explicitly elicited views on the personal value of our higher education experience. Contested as these ideas may be I asked, did it make us happier, more confident, more at ease in the world? Did it enable us to live in a way that was harmonious with our beliefs and values? What does it mean to be a graduate? I also asked questions about historically imagined futures: 'What would have happened if you had not gone to university?'

These areas should not be mistaken for analytical categories. At the very most I see them as analytic motifs, ideas that are greater than their constituent parts. I have no desire to constrain participants' experience within the parameters of existing discourses on the value of higher education. My purpose in doing this research was to step out of these very borders. The means of achieving this was the crafting of the life histories as counter-narratives.

## **Creating counter-narratives**

I did not set out with the intention of positioning the stories as counter-narratives, although I did hope to trouble master narratives about the value of higher education. However, transcribing recordings and reading and re-reading the transcripts, I found myself being guided by a process that I cannot fully explain and offer therefore as a transgressive practice. Although I have no great knowledge of music I heard, rather than visualised, the way in which the stories did not so much shout down the dominant discourses around participation in higher education as stand alongside them and direct attention away from them. I thus came to conceptualise the counter narrative in musical terms as the counterpoint to master narratives of higher education. Naxos (2010) describes counterpoint thus:

If harmony is regarded as vertical, as it is in conventional notation, signifying the simultaneous sounding of notes in chords, counterpoint may be regarded as horizontal.

(<http://www.naxos.com/education/glossary.asp?char=A-C#>)

I am not denying or minimising, indeed have been explicit about, my influence on what participants chose to tell me (and you may detect it in other ways too). Nevertheless my co-participants gave me the idea for the counter-narrative through the topics they chose to include, the way they expressed their ideas and, particularly, in the reasons they gave for wanting to take part in my research. I therefore told Pat:

When I ask participants why they were interested in taking part in the study they invariably say that they feel their stories have not yet been told and that they have often thought they should be. I am seen I think as a conduit. That has made me feel very humble and I hardly dare re-visit my original proposal because I feel the 'aim' may well have changed completely. I think there is a *counter-narrative*, or at least a more nuanced narrative to the 'get a degree, get on, get a better life' story underpinning much of the WP talk today. This is very simplistic of course because it is a sound bite from a central argument which I still must develop. But I feel happier that troubling the message transmitted through public discourse on HE can be done in tandem with a notion of HE as something which has great value. I was worried I may not be able to pull that one off but am more confident it can be done now.

(Personal communication, May 2008, emphasis added)

Whether or not the idea for the counter-narrative was entirely my own construct (and I believe it was *co-constituted* by myself and the other participants), once it was planted in my mind it significantly influenced the way I crafted the stories and I take responsibility for that<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> In earlier iterations of this thesis I included an account of crafting my own life story but it was sacrificed in the arena of tough decisions. The short version is that my co-participant Fiona interviewed me, I transcribed the interview and then crafted my own life history. Readers must decide for themselves if the result is in line with my professed intentions. I intend to write the long version as a separate paper.

# Reading the life histories. Part 1

*I also want to experience and hold on to those moments when I read a line or a paragraph, and it is like the author stretches a hand out from the page towards my own hand, and I think 'yes, I think that too, that expresses something that I have never been able to quite capture into words'.*

(Ball 2006, p.5)

## Recap

What you are about to read are nine life histories, presented in alphabetical order of the names given to participants (Alison, Fiona, Heather, Jen, Julie, Linda, Liz, Sally and Yvonne). Preserving their anonymity was important to some participants and not to others and not all the names are pseudonyms<sup>1</sup>. Readers could no doubt work out the identity of at least some of these women, just as determined journalists tracked down the *Children of Sanchez* (Lewis 1962). But this would be to miss the point. I have removed most identifying features such as proper names from all the accounts because I do not want the stories to be read as idiosyncratic, although neither should they be seen as generalised or, to an admittedly lesser extent, genre-listed renditions. Neither are they 'narratives' that invite labels ('the struggle against the odds' or 'working class girl made good' or some such). As life histories they are still the personal stories of nine white women born into working class families who went to university in the late '70s and early '80s and who have for a quarter of a century or more lived out their lives as graduates in the social, cultural and historical circumstances that have prevailed. But as life histories they are also more than that because these circumstances and the way they have been interpreted and incorporated into the ordinary and extraordinary stuff of individual lives are contextual and embedded and through the dialectical relationship of history, biography and society (Mills 1959) they become more than sum of their parts. The '70s zeitgeist frames and percolates the stories, epitomising visceral, absent minded, barely conscious experience. The nature of our re-membering of the '70s symbolises the way in which we can misread the pervasive influences in our lives even while making sense of them in an emotionally cognitive way.

The life histories are artful creations, housing my methodological, ethical and moral intentions, shaped by Dollard's criteria for the life history, which I have

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr Jennifer Lavia for drawing my attention to the power of names, not least as a tool for the deconstruction of notions of power.

fashioned into principles that articulate with my understanding of feminist research. They stand as the concrete manifestation of my intention to sidestep current conceptualisations of the value of higher education in which humans are reduced to subjects or objects of value and which inhere powerful, pervasive and pathologising discourses on which it is otherwise difficult to gain purchase. They are to be read as counter-narratives, a counterpoint to these dominant discourses rather than as a response to them, because the latter can be done only through acceptance of the terms of engagement and I do not accept these terms. The language of these life histories echoes that in which they were told and instantiates my commitment to affective lexica and rhetorical sovereignty and as such it intimates a fledgling conceptual language with which to talk differently about higher education. These life histories therefore also require reading through the interpretive lens of emotional cognition in order to be fully appreciated.

### **Guidance for readers**

My original intention was to ask you to read the life histories unencumbered by any more of my interference other than my insistence that they must be read as the answer to the question 'What is the value of higher education to white working class women in England? My analysis is after all embedded and I wanted you to form your own ideas about how they serve to interpret and respond to the question. However, despite my best efforts, this just did not work. I suspect this is the outcome of a fruitless struggle in the arena of my ethical intentions to reconcile my often competing obligations to the purposes of research (to do more than just get a PhD), to you as readers (to trust you to be generous and to make reading about my work meaningful rather than burdensome) and to my co-participants (to respect them and honour their stories and to ensure others do likewise). There is to be no reconciliation, however. Responsibility to my co-participants has come to the fore, which simultaneously implies a lack of trust in you. In mitigation I offer the following story<sup>2</sup>.

*I have presented a conference paper using extracts from some of the transcripts to illustrate what I mean by affective lexica and rhetorical sovereignty and am puzzled by the comment that these were 'fairy stories'. I don't know what this means. The last time I had anything to do with fairy stories I was an undergrad studying*

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<sup>2</sup> The paper to which I refer in this story is Downs (2009a)



them as a part of a literary movement. I ask for clarification but the answer makes no sense to me. Another delegate, invoking an argument Skeggs makes about valueless identities, offers the view that my participants see themselves as 'white trash' and were involved in constructing compensatory identities for themselves. I agree in principle with this argument but how can such an interpretation be made on the basis of a few extracts from a transcript? Feeling like I have let my co-participants down and am responsible for allowing their re-inscription into prevailing (deficient) representations, I don't have the heart to continue the discussion and research 'social fairy stories' on the internet once I get home.

At issue here is the degree to which you (readers and audiences), I (researcher) and we (participants) retain or surrender 'communicative power' (Riessman 2001, p.696). Riessman for example states that she abandoned her communicative power after her participants resisted the codification of their experiences. Taylor similarly explains her abandonment of NVivo, analysis software that codes qualitative data, incorporating different strands into various 'tree nodes' and thereby giving the semblance of making connections<sup>3</sup>. By the time she had analysed half her data she had forty-eight tree nodes and writes:

I stopped using NVivo at this point: my data was in fragments. The coding procedure had removed me from my data by conferring on me *an unwanted and unwarranted epistemological omnipotence*

(Taylor, 2009, p.55) my emphasis)

It is clear that I am hanging on more tenaciously to communicative power here than Riessman. Having spent the best part of four years of my life immersed in my research I am making a claim to the legitimacy and, having received public funding, to the necessity of doing so. Thus I also lay claim to greater epistemological warrant than does Taylor. It would be disingenuous of me not to own the privileged position I have occupied in this project. But equally my decisions not to call my analytic practice 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1967) or to apply voice relational analysis (Gilligan 1982, Mauthner and Doucet 1998), or discourse analysis or analysis software or any other externally applied 'analytical framework' that would take parts of the story out of their setting, embody recognition of the negotiated and

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<sup>3</sup> Qualitative data analysis software. 'Combine automation with expertise'.  
<http://www.qsrinternational.com/>

contested privileges and obligations between all those involved in particular research relationships. In short I do not want to be controlling and prescriptive but equally I want to make it difficult for you to go down interpretative avenues that discredit the storytellers. The bottom line is that the integrity of the whole depends on all of us behaving ethically. Peter Clough's (2002) story of 'Lolly' is a powerful reminder that if we are doing narrative research with human beings then we may not be simply analysing data but embroiling ourselves in lives and the repercussions of that may endure for a very long time.

### **Reading, analysing, interpreting, theorising. A rose by any other name?<sup>4</sup>**

*I am seeking here to highlight the very practical role of theory in research as a conceptual toolbox and means of analysis and a system of reflexivity.  
(Ball 2006, p.3)*

The idea that processes can be employed discretely and in a linear fashion pervades social science research and can be difficult to resist. Thus Cole and Knowles (2001, p.116), referring to Walcott (1994), invoke the three 'levels' of the analytic process - description, analysis and interpretation - even while defining analysis itself as a 'multilevel, recursive process with coherent and interconnected elements'. I remain unconvinced that processes of research can be cleanly and neatly ordered, much as I sometimes wish they could. For me, reading/analysing/interpreting/theorising the stories (or 'reading' for short) should obviate the requirement to treat these *as if* they were discrete entities and allow 'data' to remain as an embedded facet of the narrative. Thus I am also talking about a different way of *thinking* about analysis and in the following account I set out, in a way that instantiates (in an albeit truncated fashion) the deliberative process that informed my decision to adopt the capability approach as a conceptual *space* (Hart 2009a) rather than as a framework (as is usual) or a paradigm (Robeyns 2003)<sup>5</sup>. Because the capability approach is not a theory, it does not seek to explain but it can help to conceptualise and evaluate (Robeyns 2003). The evaluations can either

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<sup>4</sup> Juliet: What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet  
(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, Scene ii, lines 1-2)

<sup>5</sup> As Ingrid Robeyns pointed out when I sought permission to quote from this work, it is 'grey' literature and has not been published, although parts of it have been revised and published elsewhere (Robeyns, 2005 in particular). However, her 2003 paper has played such a key role in my understanding of the capability approach it is also a useful point of entry for those who, as I did, want an accessible overview of it.

be partial or holistic, but either way the life histories may be placed whole into the space, obviating the need to support my contentions with disembodied extracts and supporting my commitment to non-violent research. The capability approach is therefore not a 'primary informational space' (Alkire, 2008 p.29) which could then admit 'bad' interpretations (such as those offered in the story above) but a broad space accommodating values and principles and the moral purpose of research.

### **Reading the life histories in the capability space**

One of the first tasks I set myself at the start of my research was to explore conceptualisations of value<sup>6</sup>. I knew that at some point I would have to lay my cards on the table and provide statements about what I thought made something valuable. It is telling that I was unable to articulate my own ideas at this point. I knew that going to university had been valuable in instrumental ways but not unequivocally so as the third vignette in 'Scoping my research' illustrates. I also knew it had been valuable, even invaluable, in other ways I could not articulate and thus I was seeking a conceptual language to meet this challenge. Melanie Walker, one of my teachers on the MA (ed. Res.) at Sheffield, first suggested to me in 2006 that the capability approach might support my endeavours. Since then I have worked to understand it and its role in my work. Its philosophical lineage goes back to Aristotle but in its contemporary form it is associated with Nobel Economics Laureate Amartya Sen and with philosopher Martha Nussbaum. As there are some differences in their understandings of it I will stay for now with Sen and return later to Nussbaum.

### **Sen's capability approach**

The two key concepts in the capability approach are capabilities or *substantive* freedoms and functionings or *actual* achievements. It is therefore not abstracted notions of freedom and achievement that are at stake here. Moreover, for Sen it is our capabilities to live a life we value and, crucially, have reason to value, that matter most (1992, p.81). Our functionings, 'the various things a person may value being and doing' (Sen, 1999, p.75) and have reason to value being and doing (Sen 1992 and 1999), are also important. Indeed they are so closely intertwined with

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<sup>6</sup> My starting point was Aristotle's (2002) ideas of 'the good life' and I think my adoption of the capability approach can also be attributed to this as much as to the serendipitous events of having had Melanie Walker as a tutor when I first began my MA (ED. Res.) and meeting Michael Watts who, with Ortrud Leßman, convened the Capability Approach and Education Network meetings at the Van Hùgel Institute, St. Edmunds College, Cambridge.

capabilities that Leßman (2009) highlights the circularity of the relationship between them and Robeyns (2003, pp 6-7) sees the difference between them only as the difference between 'the realised and the effectively possible'. Confidence is a capability and 'being confident' is a functioning for example (Hart 2009a). Sen is not prescriptive about our functionings because he does not specify what might constitute 'the good life' leaving that to each person to decide for themselves. Thus, in foregrounding the centrality of the individual to decide what matters to them, the capability approach may seem to endorse neo-liberal, consumerist notions of individual choice (that Reay, David and Ball 2005 discredit in their study of the degree of 'choice' that can be exercised by young people under-represented in higher education) but in fact it positions itself as an alternative to them. In terms of the individual Robeyns (2003) distinguishes between the neo-liberal ontological individual and the ethical individual of Sen's imagining, the former an isolated and the latter a social being, relational to others and to the conditions of their existence (Drèze and Sen 1995). The capability approach also removes choice from neo-liberal notions of consumerism through its concern with 'securing and expanding intrapersonal and *interpersonal* freedoms (individual agency and social arrangements)' (Walker 2006, p.166, my emphasis). This enables 'genuine reflective choice' about the kind of life that matters to any one person (Walker 2006, p.169).

Engaging with these issues, the capability approach also seeks to address the problem of adaptive preference which it sees as an omission in utilitarian-based accounts of choice (Teschl and Comim 2005). Adaptive preference has been variously interpreted, but significant here is the notion of 'preference deformation' foregrounded by Elster (1983) who conceives it as:

a non-conscious psychological process that causes the individual to change her preferences without her knowledge and which therefore generates non-intentional actions.

(Watts, 2009, p.428)

Sen and Nussabum on the other hand interpret adaptive preference (to different degrees) as 'self abnegation', which in short entails coming to terms with the conditions of ones deprivation. Watts (2009) further differentiates between the adaptation to means and to ends, thereby troubling accounts that working class young people who do not go into higher education lack aspiration or have adapted their preference. The young men in his study may well have adapted to the means of realising their ambition (going out to work rather than studying) but still had ambitions about its ends (a life they had reason to value). So the capability

approach, unlike neoliberal accounts of value, is cognizant of the influences of external factors (social, personal and environmental) in the conversion of capabilities into functionings and imbues choice with a moral and ethical dimension.

### **Nussbaum's capabilities approach**

Nussbaum (2000, 2003) has developed the approach in a different, albeit related, direction to Sen. She also accords fundamental importance to substantive freedoms, is concerned with the individual, is non-prescriptive about the constitution of the good life and shares Sen's concerns in matters of deprivation and human development, arguing, as Sen does, that there is a minimum threshold of capabilities that the state should be responsible for providing. However, Nussbaum foregrounds the importance of capabilities to what it means to be truly human rather than to living a life one values per se (although this is also understood). Thus she does not accord equal weight to all freedoms and provides a list of those which (for her) are fundamental to human flourishing. This is the main point of divergence with Sen who, despite providing lists of capabilities in specific situations such as in his study of development in India (Drèze and Sen, 2002), has steadfastly refused to be definitive. The challenge with Nussbaum's conceptualisation is that it has more *immediate* salience to situations of deprivation and to the field of human development (Nussbaum 2000), although Nussbaum herself has argued they are universal and cross cultural. Sen's primary focus is also on deprivation and human development but his ideas also connect with many others working in so-called developed or affluent societies and whose concern is to re-integrate political and moral economies, to restore values and ethics to economic and political life and to re-embed economic life into life itself (Sayer, in press for publication in 2011). Thus the underpinning rationale for his development of the approach lends itself more readily to studies of situations where basic freedoms of the kind Nussbaum proposes (such as bodily health, including being able to be adequately nourished for example) are generally taken for granted. I use the term '*capability* approach' to signal that I proceed from Sen, although I also use capabilities when referring to particular freedoms and Sen himself uses both terms, sometimes interchangeably.

## **Why the capability approach?**

I give a fuller, though less current, account of the following in Downs (2009c).

- ↓ Although Sen is an economist Robeyns (2006, p.372) states that the approach is 'extremely interdisciplinary, perhaps even post-disciplinary' and, in terms of research and academic endeavour, it serves both quantitative and qualitative epistemologies, a range of methodological orientations, a variety of different purposes (theoretical, analytical and empirical) and a number of different concerns, of which (social) justice, (in)equality and policy assessment are probably most relevant here. She also maintains that the capability approach signals a 'sociological turn' in economics and Hinchliffe and Terzi (2009) contend that 'the time for capabilities for educational researchers, writers and thinkers seems to have finally arrived' (p.387). All this suggested there were no obvious barriers to using it in my research.
- ↓ In my earlier paper (Downs 2009c) I concluded that the capability approach is compatible with life history research (Phelps 2006, Hulme 2004) and feminist research through, particularly but not exclusively, Sen's foregrounding of a socially and historically contextualised individual, their freedoms reliant and impacting on political and civil rights and particular social arrangements. Rather than an impoverished utilitarian view, within this space economic matters are thus inexorably bound to the social and cultural.
- ↓ Criticisms that it is theoretically underspecified did not disturb me because I was not asking it to explain but to conceptualise and evaluate, tasks for which it is considered apposite. I also appreciate Sen's scepticism about the power of pure theory 'divorced from the particular social reality that any particular society faces' (2004, p.78). Robeyns (2006) points out, therefore, that social theories are particularly useful to supplement the capability approach and Hart (2004) and Leßmann (2009) indicate the possibilities of that by drawing on Bourdieu and Dewey respectively in their educational research. I find echoes here of my own 'ragpicking' practice.
- ↓ It is also congruent with my research aims in that its counterfactual nature produces challenging questions that sidestep prevalent understandings (Watts 2009). For example it generates the question 'Inequality of what?' in discussions of inequality (Walker 2006) and 'Whose aspiration? What achievement?' (Watts and Bridges 2004) in considerations of the life choices

of young people. Indeed in this space asking 'What is the value of higher education to white working class women?' is itself a counterfactual question as it is the value of the latter to the former that underpins prevailing discourses and which has assumed almost monolithic proportions.

- ↓ The capability approach thus restores the human to conceptualisations of value by offering:

a compelling and assertive counterweight to dominant neoliberal human capital interpretations of education as only for economic productivity and employment and asks instead about what education enables us to do and to be... In short, it means taking up ...the central question: are all children, young people and adults being taught that they are equally human, or not?

(Walker 2006, p.164)

It thus speaks to the moral purpose of my research.

- ↓ In so doing it avoids discounting the instrumental role of education in helping a person achieve those things they value, but neither does it judge education on its impact on employability or income alone. As Drèze and Sen (1995, p.184) maintain, 'the bettering of a human life does not have to be justified by showing that a person with a better life is also a better producer'.
- ↓ It thus offers both the space and the language in which to tell a nuanced story of the value of higher education and provides a real opportunity for the women in my research 'to tell the stories they value and have reason to value' (Watts 2008).

### **Trouble in paradise**

The above points present a compelling argument for conceptualising and considering the value of higher education for white working class women inside the space of the capability approach. However, I still have some unresolved issues which remain for me a 'prickle under the skin'.

In a nutshell getting to grips with the capability approach can seem extremely forbidding as it may appear overly complex and inaccessible, requiring familiarity with and a facility for abstract reasoning and philosophy (Robeyns 2003). This can be attributed to the following:

- ✚ Because he is an economist Sen's language is at times specialist and incompatible with my own. Words such as 'operationalise', 'redistribution' and 'conversion factors' do not trip readily off my tongue. Furthermore, it is not possible to simply translate them into more suitable language as I did in the case of Dollard's criteria for the life history, because often they refer to key concepts. For example the fundamental concept of 'functioning' suggests an 'unduly mechanistic account of the human person' (Alkire and Black 1997, p.268) but cannot be substituted.
  
- ✚ Sen has refined his ideas over the years and Robeyns (2003) recommends reading from the earliest to the most recent of his works. In particular he has further refined ideas of freedom and achievement into four conceptual and evaluative spaces (wellbeing freedom, wellbeing achievement, agency freedom and agency achievement). Whilst Nussbaum (2000) believes this is unnecessary, and that all important distinctions can be captured by the capabilities/functionings division, refinement, differentiation and the adding of layers of complexity can serve to cast the approach as unworkable and difficult to 'operationalise' (Comin, Qizilbash and Alkire 2008). Indeed it has been said that Sen provided the philosophical basis of the capability approach, leaving its 'operationalisation' context dependent (Alkire and Deneulin 2009).

All this has contributed to the mystification of the approach. Like Robeyns I defend the legitimacy of academic endeavour and believe that, like me, most academics are able to 'resist being cowed into silence by elitist mystifications' (Jackson, 1999, p.84). But that is not what is at stake here. Robeyns (2003) also points out that scholarly interest tends to hinder the application of the capability approach in 'real world' settings by activists working 'on the ground'. Relatedly, the capability space is also being populated by analyses of affluence rather than of deprivation (Comin 2004, Robeyns 2006). Again, these are also legitimate endeavours and I have made a moral and ethical case for incorporation of the capability approach in my work on the grounds that it restores the human to analyses of the value of higher education. Nevertheless, it would seem that scholars (myself included) have already gone some way to appropriating the capability approach for their own ends, endowing it with an impenetrable abstraction and shepherding it away from the very locations where it may do most good.



And this is how I leave it, as an unresolved tension (see Appendix 2, story no.3) as an uncomfortable reminder that moral purpose is not a unitary or isolated undertaking (which is Sen's point after all) and that meeting obligations requires making tough decisions. I cause myself further discomfort by simply ignoring much of the subtleties of the approach. I want you to read the life histories in the evaluative space of the capability approach through the questions: 'How far and in what ways did going to university increase the substantive freedoms these women had to achieve the beings and doings that they value and have reason to value and to live a life they value and have reason to value?'

## Alison

I was born to teach no doubt about it. From the age of four I just knew I wanted to be a teacher and that's it. Even when I was tiny I was always teaching other people things and whatever I learned I had to impart. I don't remember getting any real careers advice at school though, or perhaps I didn't listen. I think we did have a session with a careers adviser. My aim was to go to teacher training college and become a primary teacher so I just said, 'I want to be a teacher' and they said, 'Well done. Off you go dear.' But that was frowned upon in my school at the time and they said, 'Well, no my dear. You should be going to university, getting a degree and then you can do your PGCE'. But what they didn't tell me was that when I came out with my degree nobody would want me in a primary school and I wouldn't be able to do what I wanted to do. It came as a terrible shock to me to discover that afterwards. I was completely misinformed about everything really.

I loathed school. It was awful. My sister went to a secondary modern but I went to a grammar school which was very rigid and disciplined. You couldn't take your beret off until you got into your own home, that kind of thing. And I got into terrible trouble for reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* but I'd got it off my father's bookshelf so I was lost then wasn't I? To make matters worse, because I'd done so well in the first year I was accelerated beyond where I should have been. My birthday's in June and I was the baby of the year anyway and I wasn't even fifteen when I did my 'O' levels. So I was never in the right place. I didn't do particularly well at 'O' level, but in those days you didn't really need to and I just went on and did 'A' levels anyway. The first year of sixth form was a complete nightmare because I was far too young and immature and although I could manage academically I couldn't manage emotionally. I repeated the lower sixth and of course by the end of three years in the sixth form I was completely fed up with the subjects I did for 'A' level.

So I wanted to do something new at university and chose psychology. But school expected me to do French because I was good at it and I ended up doing linguistics as well as French just because I wanted to do something new. My mother was also very insistent that I did French because psychology was too new a subject in those days, a bit like sociology. She said, 'If you want to teach you want to have a traditional subject that's going to be good for teaching'. I would never have crossed my mother but for a long time I was quite angry about that and I blamed her when I realised I wouldn't be able to teach primary when I left higher education. Now I

suspect she didn't know either and she was just terrified I would make a wrong decision. And actually, without a degree I certainly wouldn't have got the job I'm in today.

Education is an important thing in my family. My parents always did the WEA and my mother always, always, always did night school and later in life she did the University of the Third Age. One of the best skills I've ever learned is typing and my mum taught me that. My dad also did night school too but only for enjoyment. But when I failed geography at the end of the second year at school my father spent twenty minutes every evening teaching me geography. He enjoyed it though and I came top at the end of the third year. I realised my mother was also quite jealous of me because she would have loved to have had my opportunities and probably, all things being equal, she would have gone to university herself. From what she's told me I'm sure her parents would have been very forthcoming. They really approved of education. But my family is Jewish and my parents both came to this country from Germany at the age of eighteen. My father came over a few months before my mother and my mother was on the last boat that was allowed to dock at Harwich. Nobody else in their families got out and they lost everything. Can you imagine having to let your kids go like that?

I do consider that I come from a working class background because my parents were not professionals at that time. They were very much working class. I would not view myself as working class at all now but that hasn't affected my relationships with my family. In fact I think my mother also became a teacher as a result of me becoming a teacher. But I don't think it was the experience of university that caused me to change class because by the time I came along my parents had bought a house, or the beginnings of one. I also remember when we moved house later everyone saying, 'Oh my god you've got central heating... even in your downstairs toilet!' Also, because of my parents' experience of being kicked out of their country we always went abroad for our holidays. They said to me 'If anything happens and you can't go abroad you can always go and visit round the UK'. Of course going to grammar school does change you as well. So school was an influence too but not that great an influence. In fact what I learned there was mainly that I could do a much better job. I hated the way I was taught and I was clear from a very early age that the way they taught us was wrong.

I do have a very strong work ethic and I think that's a Jewish thing rather than a class thing. Historically Jewish people were debarred from entering certain professions so I think they worked very hard and were very driven. And of course my parents lost everything including their families so they started from scratch and had no choice but to work hard as well. I'm also sure that a lot of Jews, especially the refugees, worked very, very hard so that they did not have time to think about what had happened to them. What had happened was just too terrible to contemplate. So it wouldn't have occurred to me not to work. Every minute I could I was out getting paid for doing something. I signed on at agencies because I could type and I always did the post at Christmas and I always went to the local hospital to help with giving out Christmas dinners and stuff. It was just what we did and now both my children have got this work ethic too thank goodness.

When I went to university I did feel very special and very proud but that was because my parents were proud of me. Because of the kind of school I went to you were just expected to go to university. It wasn't seen as a privilege in any way. Everyone went and it was frowned upon if you didn't. There was a young lad in my class who was very bright but he wanted to go into banking and the moment he said, 'I'm not going to university' they just turned off him immediately. Do you know, it's been on my mind ever since. It must have coloured his whole attitude to school because I think the whole of my class is on Friends Reunited but he's not. And he was such a nice young man at the time. He's probably been really successful.

I didn't have a clue about what university would be like and what I did know wasn't favourable. Because of my background I don't have cousins or anything like that, but we do have friends who are like cousins and one of them was studying medicine and invited me to go with him for dinner with some friends. And they were the biggest load of twits. They were pompous. They were arrogant. They behaved as if they knew everything. I thought 'I'm never going to be like that'. And my university wasn't like that. It had this reputation for being very new, very modern and very radical. Mind you I soon learned it wasn't our students who were causing the police to come on campus every weekend with their big horses. It was the Cambridge students coming to us, because you don't do that kind of thing in Cambridge do you?

Nobody else from my school had ever been where I was going because it wasn't considered elite enough by my school, although it is now one of the top universities and when I tell young people today that I went there they are always very impressed. My main reason for choosing to go there was that it was one of the few places that offered a term abroad rather than a full year. I had spent every summer from age eleven with a pen-friend in France so my spoken French was pretty good and I didn't want to spend a whole year abroad. I had also chosen a campus university because I liked the idea of being able to tumble out of bed and go to lectures. But it wasn't anything like I'd imagined and it took me a long time to settle in. I changed my friends every term in the first year because I got in with groups I realised I didn't want to be with. There was one group that was into smoking dope for example. I don't think kids do this any more but we all sat in a huge circle and passed these big joints around. But I wasn't into it at all and just passed it on. Nobody said anything to me but I just didn't feel comfortable. Anyway by the end of the third term I'd found a group I wanted to be with. But it took until the third year when I met my first real boyfriend and was living with him for me to feel completely at home, even though I really did have a wonderful time and have got very fond memories of university.

I was terrified about going to university. It was exactly the same feeling I had when I went to grammar school at the age of eleven; I was excited but it didn't feel very good. I was also ready for a stable routine because I had spent a long time away from home the summer before I went. My school encouraged competition and won loads of scholarships and awards every year and that summer I won some money from the local authority to spend nine weeks in French-speaking countries. Then I had to write this long project in French when I got back, something I never had to do at university. I still have it somewhere.

I went home a lot in my first year. I found someone who went back home to see his girlfriend every weekend and he passed my door so he was more than happy to give me a lift. I don't know why I went back so much. I wasn't missing home exactly because as soon as I got home I wanted to be back at university. Maybe it was because I'd had all that time away before the start of term. Or perhaps it was because communication was difficult as well. There used to be one telephone at the bottom of a tower block for everyone to use and it was a complete nightmare. I wanted to talk to my family and the only way I could do that was by going back. I also remember feeling quite vulnerable and I felt I needed that backup and that

confidence boosting again. Or perhaps it was because we were all put into digs in the first year. After that we moved on to campus. As soon as I was on campus I was fine. I absolutely loved it and I had a ball. There were six or seven of us in our group but we weren't very cliquy. We took a flat made for twelve and filled it with other people. And within a very short time the twelve became twenty-four.

I blame school for the only really low point in my time at university. In the first year we had to do all sorts of courses which I couldn't bear, like the Enlightenment. You know they're still doing that at the university where I work now and I'm thinking 'Can we move on?' Anyway we did art appreciation and it was assumed that you already had a certain level of knowledge. It was assumed that you had this cultural capital but we didn't have highbrow art in the house, just paintings done by one of my mother's friends. I didn't go to galleries with mum and dad either because of course nothing was open on Sundays in those days. But the main reason my knowledge was so poor was that I'd not done anything useful like art or textiles or cooking at my school after the second year. Because I was accelerated I had to do Latin and languages instead so my art knowledge was pathetic and I failed the course. Later my mum and I started going to galleries and we sort of learned how to do it together.

At university I joined the Film Society because everybody went to that. It was the thing to do on Friday night or whatever. I also joined the Jewish Society mainly because I was told we would get a Friday night dinner, which we did but we had to cook it ourselves. There were only about six Jewish students on campus anyway so it wasn't too bad. But apart from that I didn't do anything. I don't know why. At home I had been active in the Jewish community and had been a youth leader and been encouraged to go on leadership courses. This meant I met loads of people and was very mature and outgoing. So God knows what I was doing at university but it certainly wasn't work because I remember having to catch up with essays every holiday if I couldn't get someone else to do them for me. I suppose I was just too busy and too far in with my friends. There were always too many people around. There was too much chat going on and I was always dead keen to know what was happening.

So although I enjoyed linguistics (I loathed anything to do with French) it was the social life that that I loved. That was the real highlight for me. I was meeting all these people from these amazing walks of life and fascinating backgrounds and

what I got out of it was how lucky I was, how lucky I am, to have such a loving family, one that did stuff together. I knew that they were proud of me. My father was very proud of me going to university. But because of my parents' experience during the war, we lived in a very close knit community. We did have the synagogue but it was a very young synagogue so there weren't that many people around, whereas at university I was meeting people from all walks of life and from up and down the country. I had never heard a northern accent before then. I met people who had eating disorders which I didn't realise then were eating disorders. There were also lots and lots of international students and a lot of disabled students which was unusual at the time. And a real highlight for me was meeting my first real boyfriend and living with him in my third year.

The social side of things wasn't about having parties. It was more about sitting with people in their rooms and spending hours and hours talking late into the night and discovering things that you didn't know. It was cooking these massive Sunday lunches together which was fantastic fun. And I know friends from home used to talk to me about things, but it was like everyone would come and talk to me. I suspect my card was marked in the first week because I'd met a very nice girl and we got on very well and spent a lot of time together. And then about a month into the first term she told me she was pregnant and was going to need an abortion and would I mind very much coming with her because she was frightened. It was the first time she had ever made love to anyone and she was terrified. She did have the abortion and ended up leaving and I was devastated because I'd put so much emotion into that relationship. But my role, this agony aunt kind of thing, was pretty well cut out from the word go I think.

The biggest benefit of going to university was that it opened my eyes to all sorts of other ways of living and being and nothing shocks me now. In terms of experience I can see how very different I am to my sister who didn't go. At first I was very shocked by the antics some people got up to. I was terrified of drugs but they would be doing them right left and centre and hardly worry about themselves. I learned everything, everything about becoming an adult at university. I learned about being independent and about living away from home. I learned about responsibilities both to myself and to others. Having a boyfriend that I actually lived and shared so much with, you know all the day to day living, was also a huge, huge experience for me. Although I probably wouldn't have done things differently – I'd still have got married and had kids and my agony aunt role is just a reflection of the

kind of person I am – going to university did colour the rest of my life. If I'm absolutely honest I know it is hugely important to me that any potential partner is also a graduate. My husband came from a working class background but had a postgraduate degree and I do look out for that.

I was very naïve and unconfident when I first went to university. I appeared confident but deep down I was unsure of what I was doing and frightened of making mistakes. I learned to talk to all sorts of people and I got the confidence to be OK with them. University gave me the skills to go into a room and talk to people. It became clear to me that I had this sort of confidence when I separated from my husband and it was knocked out of me. I lost that confidence to be by myself in a room full of couples. It had taken guts to change my friendship groups at university and then to go abroad for a term just as I'd found people I was comfortable with. It was asking a lot to come back in the autumn and expect them to still be friendly and I actually only have about three or four friends from that time. I have also had to change friendship groups after I got divorced. So my closest friends are not from school or university but from the community I grew up in, although I also have friends from the various places I have worked.

After I left university I did my PGCE at a college in a deprived area in southeast London to do primary teaching. I wanted to teach kids from that kind of area but of course with my degree I ended up in the suburbs in a secondary school doing things I didn't want to do, with all the day to day secondary crap and all these boys who were setting fire to my classroom and all that kind of stuff. Everyone wanted me to teach French but I found it boring and I hated it. I always hated it. So two years after getting my first teaching job I went to Japan. I really wanted to go to China but they had closed the borders by then for some unknown reason. I had a fabulous time working for the BBC and when I had the chance of staying an extra year at the end of my contract I did.

When I got back I got a job covering a maternity leave in a secondary school just to tide me over and I ended up staying twenty years. I did all kinds of things there and had some time out to have my kids but when my husband was made redundant I went back full time and ended up doing Section 11, supporting kids who had English as a second language. But once they found their English some of the stories they told were just so horrendous I started living it at home, so I asked the head if he would let me do a counselling course. He was totally supportive and a two



year course stretched to five years and I ended up becoming a qualified counsellor. So the psychology keeps coming back you see. After twenty years I was moved by the Local Education Authority to another school as head of department and then I applied for a huge promotion and got it. I had been using my counselling skills more and more and also working more with kids with disabilities and when I saw a job with the local hospital as head of school for students with emotional difficulties I thought, 'I could do this standing on my head' and I did get the job.

I would have stayed there forever but then the local health authority decided to amalgamate two units. Our unit was a therapeutic environment and the other one worked on a medical model so they had nothing in common and in the end I thought, 'I can't do this any more'. I didn't get anything for six weeks after that and then my present job came up which was funny because my foster daughter had been here and she had said to me only weeks before, 'You ought to come and work here because they need someone like you' and I've been here for six years now. Although I absolutely adore teaching and I love it when someone comes to me with all this stress and I see that stress being lifted and the change in their faces because of me, I think it is time for me now not to have such a stressful job. When you have young people discovering they are HIV positive or have cancer and you are dealing with that ten times a day and then there are staff issues to deal with as well, you start to think 'No, actually. I've had enough of all this. I don't want to do this any more.'

The only thing I would want to be different in my life is the advice I got about what courses to do. I have spent a lot of time with my own kids and with my nieces about choosing courses and have always told them it has to be their choice. So one of my sons did an apprenticeship and got to university through that route. And because he's had three years of working hard for peanuts he has a more mature attitude and is enjoying it for what it is. My other son works in the music industry. He had a poor experience of higher education actually and left rather than topping up his qualifications to degree level, because he knew he needed to get into the business instead and he's been proved right in that. I didn't even realise when I went into higher education that I wouldn't be able to do what I wanted to when I came out. So, in the light of so much money being spent at the moment on trying to get the first in families to go into higher education, when I heard you talk about your research I just thought 'Oh my god. Perhaps I've got something to contribute'. It hadn't occurred to me before then.

My life has been fifty percent planning and fifty percent chance. I always wanted to be a teacher and I didn't waver from that although I'm now doing less and less teaching which is OK because I've got a lot more to give now. I wanted to do psychology which is why I would say qualifying as a counsellor has been my greatest achievement. And I always wanted to teach in a deprived area. It's taken me thirty years to get here but I am now teaching those kids I wanted to teach from the start. I am not teaching primary but I'm teaching kids at higher education level because they have had a crap life and a crap education and I just want to support them a bit. So I would say my life has been a success in that I've enjoyed what I do and I have been fulfilled by it. My success is definitely that I am very happy in what I do.

Alison mentions Friends Reunited in her account. This is an online facility for connecting with people you have known in the past, often from schooldays. See [www.friendsreunited.com](http://www.friendsreunited.com)

She also mentions the WEA. The Workers Educational Association is the UK's largest voluntary sector provider of adult education. It was founded in 1903 to support the educational needs of working men and women. See [www.wea.org.uk](http://www.wea.org.uk)

## Fiona

I went to a grammar school where they really did encourage you to go to university. It was at a time when they were very aware that we all could go and I suppose it reflected well on them. Actually, they encouraged teacher training rather than university but I come from a big family and although I loved my own younger siblings I hated kids and I thought 'I can't stand there and be patient all day. I'm not that sort of person'. So the idea of teaching was just not for me. I also felt that if everybody was doing it, I was not going to do it. However, I knew that whatever I did I wanted it to be with people. My exceptional subject was actually geography but when I started getting careers advice and looking things up, I homed in on sociology because it seemed like a really trendy thing to do. My dad actually wanted me to be a policewoman because I think he had wanted to be a policeman. I was also quite a strong personality and he said, 'You can go around telling people off'. So I was quite interested in law and I felt doing sociology and law was a nice combination. Having said that, although we got good careers advice and there was a careers library at school, I didn't know anything about how or where to apply. I didn't know there were different levels of universities and I went for all the top ones and went all over the country for interviews and then got rejected by loads of them.

I particularly wanted to go to a university in the southwest because from the age of fifteen I had been going down there with two friends from home to work in the summer. I had this wanderlust which I think my mum had got us into as youngsters. She was always one for setting off and she gave us the idea that there was always somewhere better to go. I ended up doing this every summer until I was twenty-two and I was there when my A level results came through. They were really lousy and in fact all three of us who were away working had the upset of not getting what we wanted with our grades, even though we hadn't been the low achievers of the working class kids at school. I've wondered many times since why my poor result in English wasn't queried when I'd been getting A's all the way through the course. My parents obviously wouldn't have thought to have questioned it but I don't know why school didn't. Perhaps it was because I got in somewhere anyway. My two friends didn't get in anywhere. One was supposed to be doing teacher training but failed even more badly than me. She ended up staying and getting a job in a bank down there because she had met a boy and she went to live with his family. She's still there now, still married to him. The other girl was supposed to be going to university but she came back home and also got a job in a bank, as did quite a few other girls

from home. Both these friends have done very well and I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had stayed down there or gone to work in a bank.

I had also met a local boy that summer and when I didn't get in I lined up a job as a nanny and was going to stay in the southwest. But one day my parents got in touch with me. I don't know how because they hadn't even got a phone at that time. We only got one when I went down to university. I didn't have a phone either and they could only ring the boss's office where we were working. Despite this they rang me one day to tell me that someone from school had been in touch with them. They said, 'They can find you a place. They can get you in'. My mum and dad fixed it all up for me. They organised everything. They must have done all the paperwork and phone calls and stuff, despite not having a phone and not knowing about how the system worked. I don't know how they did it because I was miles away, but they fixed all this up for me to go. They even arranged for me to get a lift at the start of term with a girl from my school whose dad was driving her down because we didn't have a car. Now they are no longer alive I get very emotional and tearful thinking about what my parents did for me then. It's funny what can catch you isn't it?

There was never any question about me going, never any question about doing a degree. It was like 'Wow! If someone will have me I'm off! I felt it was such an opportunity being offered to me on a plate. You know 'Here's a full grant, everything is sorted'. But I did have some uncertainty because I had never heard of the place before. I didn't even know it was a campus university. I also had this boyfriend and this nanny's job lined up. But I thought, 'No. It's an adventure. It's something I've got to do'. I think one of the major factors for me was getting that grant. I don't think I would have gone otherwise. My husband also comes from a working class background but he didn't get a full grant and he worked like mad to make up the deficit. He wouldn't have a penny off his parents or let them give him anything. It hadn't occurred to me before but getting a full grant was very big thing for me because I didn't feel I should be a drain on my parents, which is part of the reason I went away working in summer. Apart from loving it of course and being at the seaside.

So off I went with this girl from school and her dad in their big Volvo estate. I did feel I was doing something special in going to university because I was the first in my family to do so and also because very few of my friends went. However, once I was there I was in my element. It felt like the right place for me and from that point

of view it became normal very quickly. I adapted quite well to the other people around me so in my day-to-day life there I didn't feel special at all. There was also this thing about making something available for girls and women that previously had been open only to men and they were telling us that this was something that was on offer to us, something we could just do in our stride. And I believed this so I didn't feel it was a privilege to be going. I thought it was something you *should* be doing. I'm not sure if I believe this now but at the time I really believed this was going to make men and women equal.

There were very few low points in my whole time at university. After a couple of weeks at university I ended up sharing accommodation with the girl from school whose dad had driven us down but that was a real mistake. She had some weird friends, older students who were really wild and into drugs which wasn't my scene at all. I'm not sure we even made it to the end of the first year before she moved out and I was glad to see the back of her. I was also a bit down when the lad I'd met the summer before told me things weren't going to happen like we thought they were. Although we weren't that serious, I was quite attached to him at the time and he'd been home with me over Christmas. He was due to come and visit me at uni a few weeks after that. But when I rang him to make arrangements he just said, 'Oh no, I'm not coming'. And he never came. He said the long distance thing wasn't working. He said I had a new life now and different friends and a big future and all that and he didn't feel he fitted in to it. He was lovely really, a really big bloke, older than me and established in what he was doing but he was a really big softie. When he came up at Christmas he must have seen that our lives had grown very different. The only other low was that I struggled a bit with geology which I did as a subsid. It got to the point where it was all just gobbledegook and I got very scared and upset. In the end I dealt with it and changed to something else but I can understand the kids I am working with now when they start missing lessons and hiding things.

Other than that I loved it all. We were all doing a foundation year, all doing the exact same course. My recollection of the first few days is of wandering around in big groups and struggling a bit with that, because for all I'd been off working every summer I was quite shy. It wasn't my thing at all but I quickly made a couple of close friends who I then stayed in touch with for many years. It's funny how you pick your friends and gravitate towards people who are a match for you. In the second year I shared a university flat with one girl I still exchange Christmas cards with and it soon became the hub of the action. So after the first few days I loved it. I loved the

lectures and that whole foundation year was wonderful to me, a chance to do subjects you'd never even heard of. The lectures were held in these massive lecture theatres and after a few weeks people started saying, 'Oh you don't have to go. They don't know whether you're there or not.' But I just went because I loved it. I think the people who didn't go to lectures and stuff were stupid really. They were stupid to waste such an opportunity. We covered the whole curriculum from geology to history to science, everything. There was so much I didn't know and it was incredible the way they did it. Although I stayed with my original choices of sociology and law, the foundation year also gave you the chance to back out and choose different subjects if you wanted to.

I had chosen unusual subjects because I was at that age where I wanted to be different. I went round with bare feet and my granny's old clothes and that sort of stuff and my university gave you that opportunity to be unconventional. It was an opportunity for me to do what I wanted, definitely. School had been such a sausage machine. So many people were being told to do teacher training because that's what nice working class girls do and being a teacher would be a step up in life. That's how they sold it to you. Of course being a teacher really was a step up, but if everyone else was doing it, it wasn't for me. So my ideas about the value of going to university are very specific to the place I went. It was the kind of place where you were encouraged to voice your opinions and where your opinions were valued. You could have a different perspective on things and you knew that someone would listen to you. You didn't have to be conformist, which again fits in with the '70s thing doesn't it? At home people had quite narrow viewpoints and I notice now that people who didn't go don't tend to have that open mind to things. They don't see things or do things like we do.

My ideas about the value of university are also specific to doing sociology. To me sociology was just mind boggling. It was wonderful. We were at the cutting edge in that students used to suggest modules and teachers had to read up on it quickly if they had never taught it before. These people weren't famous at the time but quite a few people have become well-known since. I heard someone on Radio 4 the other day. So I loved studying and I loved my subjects. I didn't contribute much to tutorials because I don't find those situations easy but I still really enjoyed and loved the study side of it. I even loved going to the library. I used to go to the original books and read those because nobody told me there were short cuts or said, 'Just read a chapter and write your essay based on that'. I did put in the hours and I'd

work till midnight on these law cases, ploughing my way through all this tiny print. So those were hard work but I didn't see that in any negative way. Don't get me wrong, I was partying as well because it was the '70s after all. And it was just one long party. There had been a bit of nudism on campus the previous decade and there were these beautiful grounds and old buildings and stuff and it was lovely. People used to refer to it as a holiday camp and it was actually like being at a holiday camp. I didn't do much other than study and party. I did yoga a bit and went to see bands and to listen to outside speakers, politicians and so on, but other than that it really was parties and going to pubs with your friends. You had that kind of social life on a plate with everybody on your doorstep.

I do feel the person who came out of university was different to the one who went in. It made me a more confident person in that going to university really broadened my experience and knowledge of people. I don't think my university appealed to posh people and there weren't many there, but having to deal with them was a real eye opener for me. My husband was used to it because he'd had a scholarship to public school but even though I went to grammar school it wasn't posh. And then doing sociology really changed my perspective and coloured my views for the rest of my life. It's definitely made me more left wing politically. I also think university makes it easier for you to grow up because you have to stand on your own two feet. I was quite independent anyway but it's about taking responsibility for yourself and making yourself do things and taking care of yourself and all the organisational and domestic stuff around that. That said, in many ways we lived in a very sheltered environment. The town the university is in is very working class and the university was like a little enclave, an ivory tower. The rest of the world was going on around you but you were oblivious to it. I met my future husband there and he had a car and we would venture out to real ale pubs in the second year to see what was happening in the real world. In that sense we were very cosseted.

After university I went home for a few weeks and while I was there I saw a job advertised in the local paper for someone to work in the personnel department of a manufacturer's in my home town. So I applied and got the job to start in September. In the meantime I went back to work in the southwest for the summer. I had actually applied to do a Masters in criminology and was offered a place but I don't think I tried very hard to get finance. There was no money available and to be honest I don't think I even knew how to get the money. I applied to a couple of

sources but when that didn't come through I had no information about other ways of doing it. So when I got a nice job with a nice company I just went. It was a very good job although I had a tyrant as a boss. She was ancient, a real old dragon and very scary but she trained me really well. I stayed there for two years, learned a lot and got my qualifications in personnel management. When we got married I moved to be with my husband who was moving around with his job. I was quite happy to go and I didn't give a thought to getting another job. I just thought, 'I'm a graduate. I'll be able to get a job somewhere'.

But there was a big recession at the time and I couldn't get a job doing anything. I actually didn't mind because we were newly married and had a new house which I was decorating and stuff. We also got a dog who was with us until she was about twenty and one day I was out walking and found an abandoned kitten so it was quite a nice situation to be in really. But after a couple of months I got a job as a placement officer on a Youth Training Scheme. I continued to do that in different places as my husband moved around with his job. I actually moved up very quickly and ended up working at a Polytechnic as a trainer of trainers which was a lovely job but after two years I left to have my first child and then started teaching sociology part-time. When we moved here I did my PGCE. I hadn't done it before because I didn't know it was free to do it and I kept thinking, 'I'm not paying to be trained to do something I do anyway'. So then I went to work at the local FE College helping adults back into education and work and it was a lovely job but I was made redundant from that in 2006.

After that I was persuaded to go back into personnel, after about twenty years out of it, and it was a horrendous experience, just sitting all day long at a computer when I had no idea what I was doing. I received no training and I got down to rock bottom in that job. After that I just did an ever-dwindling supply of part time FE teaching until it got to the point where I knew I had to find something else. In a way I thought, 'It's a big opportunity. I could do anything and go anywhere.' Then you keep applying for stuff and you think, 'Maybe I need some advice from somewhere'. There were so few of us getting degrees in those days that you did feel like a bit of an elite and in some respects I have just walked into jobs at times. But I'd got to a point where I wasn't walking in to things any more. Now I don't feel being a graduate gives me any kind of advantage because these days a degree is an automatic requirement for a job. I don't feel I have anything that I can negotiate or bargain with as far as jobs are concerned and age doesn't help because I'm past



fifty and it starts to tell. I got a job eventually working in a school supporting kids' achievement and at first I really hated it but I'm starting to make some friends there now and it's getting better. At one point I wondered what had got into my head even going for the interview but I had got myself into this bind where I couldn't just turn round and throw away that income. I do feel I've underachieved and I am disappointed with where I am now and I wonder what direction I would have gone if I'd done the Masters. I probably would have been quite academic. As it is, I sometimes I ask myself if my degree has done me any good really.

I know a lot of my situation is of my own making. Because my husband works really long hours and I had two kids I didn't want a full time job. This has meant the jobs I've done have not really been at the level you would expect as a graduate. When employers look at your curriculum vitae and see you've been stuck at one level all these years, see that you've not progressed, not gone any higher and not gained any wider experience then all that goes against you. Prior to having my first child it was all just progressing and building on what I'd done and getting higher level jobs with more money and everything. I was talking to a colleague about it and she said, 'Oh you were doing quite high-flying stuff before you had the kids.' And I was. But coming from a big family and having younger brothers and sisters, that kind of little mother role just seemed to be a natural progression for me. It is a massive part of me. I sometimes wonder where I'd be if I'd been one of those people who decide to go straight back to work. I could have been all sorts of things. But kids are all enveloping aren't they? Going to university, getting a degree, getting married and those kinds of things, they are just events; things you expect to do and are expected of you but having kids takes you over. But I have no regrets because I think it's paid off. Both my children have been very successful and of course you make that choice don't you, about which way you are going. I've read in magazines that we were the 'have it all generation'. But we had to make choices. If I'd struggled to work full time when my girls were little I might have had big regrets about that. And in some ways I've had quite an easy time working part time and having school holidays as well.

Being at university at that time in history definitely influenced the way I brought up my girls. To some extent it's because I did sociology but it's also just being part of our generation. I consciously took a women's lib and feminist approach to their upbringing. They were always dressed in bright colours and I gave them all the construction toys and cars and stuff as well as dolls. Women of our generation

were steered into teaching and I went into personnel management which is also a woman's caring job, so when they were little I was so determined my kids would have more opportunities even than I did. I don't think I would have picked up on this at all if I hadn't been to university and done sociology. Having said that a lot of it has to do with how you were brought up, so I may have been like this anyway and I've always had my own ideas. Like my parents, I've not been somebody who said to my children 'I really want you to do this subject' or 'I really want you to work hard at this', although we were museum-y to the extent where one of my daughters now won't go into one. In general though, it's always been whatever they were inclined towards, but I've always been very conscious of creating the opportunities for them and letting them know about all the options. Now they are both doing science based things and they'd probably say, 'My mother used to make me do this and make me do that and get the blooming Lego out'.

I had such a strong family and I don't feel that going to university really affected my relationship with any of them, although my parents were upset when I didn't come back to live at home after university. I just felt that having been away I couldn't go back. When I went back home I used to have what you might call lively conversations with my dad and his standard response was, 'I've been to the university of life.' My husband and I were a bit full of ourselves and it was like, 'I'm having this really big experience so you should know all about it' which caused a bit of antagonism but I think that's to do with being young. We get this with my daughter now. She'll come home and say, 'Oh mother, how could you be so stupid?' That said, I do think you were learning to be middle class at university, developing that middle class approach to everything, this way of carrying on, but that didn't cause problems at home as such. Although my family, parents and all my grandparents were working class, my dad was a draughtsman so we were just that little way up the hierarchy. In some ways I already had ideas above my station when I went to university because my parents were very aspirational. Now I would definitely say I was middle class but my siblings have also moved up so there is no conflict. I could see that if I had a sibling who did manual work for example it could cause some tension but we haven't had any of that.

Where I am now, I've got at least ten years work left in me so I could start a whole new career but I'm at an age where I don't want to be doing a lot of hard work. I'm quite happy to be enthusiastic in what I do but I don't want to be starting from scratch. I've done what I've done and I've got the qualifications. So sometimes

I feel I should take a back seat and back pedal a bit and just plod along and then sometimes I think, 'Aargh! I should be doing a lot more because I have the qualifications and experience to do that'. I was the 'support team' at home for so long and it was a big role and one that was recognised but now my girls are gone and my husband has started to take on more of the cooking so that role has diminished. That said I have the same supporting and caring role with the kids at school as I had when I was at home with the my girls. In some ways I do feel I've dug myself into a hole.

A degree was supposed to be your passport to all sorts of things but nothing I've done has been a passport to anything. And as a sociologist I'm interested in the fact that women, because I suppose it's mostly women, have not necessarily lived up to the great expectations and to what was on offer. I'm conscious that the dream maybe doesn't work out for everybody. I used to say everybody should go to university because it's such a great time, such a fun time, having all that independence and being able to go out and do your own thing and at the same time absorbing so much knowledge and information. Now with all the changes in the economic climate you just wonder if it's all been a big mistake. Last year's graduates are really struggling even to find temporary work. Kids at school are asking me, 'Will there be jobs if I go through all this. If I go to university will I get something?' But my husband always says, 'Don't go to university to get a job. Go to university for the learning and whatever else. It's not anything to do with the end outcome'. It's education for education's sake isn't it?

*PGCE* or the *Postgraduate Certificate in Education* is a one year graduate course leading to newly qualified teacher status.

## Heather

I was the first one in my family to go to university, and in fact am still the only one to this day. I am pretty competitive and ambitious and I think I picked elements of that up from my mum. My mum was the eldest in her family and grew up in a council house with parents who were quite strict task masters. I think she had a desire to escape from that and she went travelling, which was unusual in those days. She lived in Spain and Holland and saw how other people live and I think that's where she got her independence from and this desire to get away from how she'd grown up. My dad had left school at fourteen and was drafted into the military during the war. So whilst my dad didn't mind which school I went to as long as I was OK, my mum was always ambitious for me. When I was in the infants I was terrified of my teacher and was physically sick every morning but my mum would not allow me to change classes because she thought this woman was a good teacher. I also felt pressure from my mum to pass my eleven plus. I think some of it was to do with keeping up with the Joneses rather than me getting a better education but it was drummed into me that you had to pass. When I did she was delighted and we went round in the car to tell everyone because of course there were no mobile phones in those days. Passing my eleven plus was the start of my ambition I think, because up till then I just went quite happily through school. But I don't think I am unusual in aspiring to more. I think most people do. It's like if you are lower middle class you aspire to be upper middle class and if you are upper middle class you aspire to the aristocracy. It was the same at school. You were put into sets so if you were in set two you wanted to be in set one and if you did Latin you could do German so there were always these add-ons and always this desire to better yourself.

I enjoyed school and I was really sporty, which again is that competitive streak coming out. Although my school changed from a grammar to a comprehensive while I was still there, it didn't seem to affect us at all. The school changed in terms of attitudes to teachers and more children skiving and getting detentions and standing outside the headmaster's office for being naughty, but there were no real serious problems. We were very respectful of the teachers and if they said jump you'd ask how high. They drummed it into us to get good 'O' levels, as they were then, good 'A' levels and then go off to university. Although we didn't get anyone from the universities coming to our school we did have careers teachers and prospectuses in the library and that kind of thing. Some people did leave after 'O' levels to go into things like banking. Someone I knew did that and my mum said, 'Oh

she's got a career for life now'. I didn't really know what I wanted to do but I enjoyed doing economics 'A' level so I decided to do business studies because that's wide-ranging and I could go into a number of different jobs. Having decided not to do a traditional subject like English or geography I chose to go to what was then a polytechnic but which has become a university now. It seemed to offer the best course and it was in a good location with countryside all around and some of the tutors there were well written and well respected. At that time they were also offering you a year out getting practical experience, but, as it turned out, the economic situation was so bad very few of the people on my course actually got a placement. If I could do everything again I'd go back and be a vet. I'd be jumping at the chance to do biology now but at thirteen when I was choosing my subjects I was very squeamish and didn't want to dissect locusts and bulls eyes and things.

I was very excited about the thought of going to university. I had a core group of friends whom I'd met in nursery school and after exams finished, all the pressure was off and we had a really great summer together. These friends were all going to university in different parts of the country so it was the last time we were all together like this, although we stayed in touch until we were well into our thirties, probably until most of us got married. I did have a Saturday job and I worked a bit here and there but we all went on holiday and were all able to relax a bit. I hadn't thought at all about what I might do if I didn't get in, but during the build up to the results in August I did get nervous because everything was a bit up in the air. I also had no idea what I was going into. I had been up to university on a visit and knew the buildings where business studies was based and I maybe knew where the halls of residence were, but that's all I visualised really. I had no pre-conceived ideas of what life was going to be like there and it seemed strange that here was this group of friends who'd been together all these years and suddenly we were all going to be separate because no two of us went to the same place. It was the first time I'd be away on my own and I didn't have a clue how it would pan out, although I hoped it would be an opportunity to meet lots of new people.

I went to university on a Sunday and my mum and dad came with me and helped me unpack and get settled in. I had decided to go full board in halls because I knew my grant would then pay for accommodation and books. There were other people milling around and I was there in time for tea in the afternoon and I met a few people who I hung around with at first. In those early days and weeks it was quite a daunting experience because everything was so new and I felt this need to make

friends, to be part of a group, because that's what I'd always known. In time we became a little community, boys on one floor and girls on another, and I had a lot of fun with the people in there. One girl had a telly in her room, which I thought was really posh, and we all got together every week to watch Top of the Pops. In time I also met the people on my course and they became my core group of friends throughout university. We went into one of those grotty shared houses after we moved out of halls at the end of the first year. And you know if you're living with someone twenty-four seven at some point you're going to say, 'Why didn't you put the milk back in the fridge?' or something and somebody else goes, 'Well you do it,' and there'll be a bit of a bust up. Well these fallings out were the real low points of my time at university. I hated all that conflict and someone not speaking to someone else. It also felt like a very lonely place to be if someone wasn't talking to you.

I led quite a nice life at uni because I got almost a full grant and my mum and dad topped that up. Once I'd paid for everything I'd be left with the most money I'd ever had in my life. I was only about £800 overdrawn when I left university, which was quite a bit in those days but £800 had taken me all the way through. But there were a lot of wealthy people at university that I would never have imagined coming across at eighteen. I was shocked that somebody had turned up at uni at eighteen years old with a car. Prior to that I thought everyone was like me because I grew up in a small village where everybody knew everybody else so going to university broadened my horizons big time. There was a girl in my own social circle who lived in a massive house in the sticks with six cars between five of them and a swimming pool and as much land as you could see. I think that's probably where a lot of my desire to have a bit more came from. I thought, 'You know what? You could actually have this,' because if you took away the material possessions they were no different to me. Back home my mum mixed with some people who were nothing special but who thought they were something better and it's almost like she'd defer to them a little bit. But I saw that nobody's actually better than you, they just have different things. Despite the fact my parents didn't have a lot of money I think I was brought up pretty well in terms of manners and trust and respect. I think these are pretty good qualities that money can't buy.

I also learned about other lifestyles I had not been aware of but in which I did feel very comfortable. I had one particular friend and I used to go home with her at weekends to her parents' house. Her parents were both doctors and she and her brother were privately educated and they had a housekeeper. They were obviously

very middle class, although I didn't think of them in those terms because they were fantastic people. They became like an extended family to me and I loved going there. I think I was attracted to being part of a family, to that homely environment and that comfortable lifestyle. So I was exposed to all these different influences at university and I think it made me even more ambitious and I became conscious of achieving and grades and so on and wanting that kind of life for myself. Although I used to visit other people at home when I was at uni, I didn't feel I would be able to invite anyone back to mine because it wouldn't be as good.

The importance of doing well was a theme throughout university. Sometimes, on a Saturday night, everyone would go out and I'd just stay in and finish a piece of work and maybe work right through the night but I enjoyed it and it wasn't a chore to me. I love studying and learning and I've done a postgraduate diploma and an MSc since graduating. But university was also a lot of fun and I made lots of new friends and I enjoyed the subject. There were all kinds of different societies but I didn't join anything. I just had a group of friends and it was a good time generally. Mixing with a lot of people and seeing a different way of life opened up my world and I also had to learn to be independent and stand on my own two feet which has given me a lot of confidence. I just enjoyed the whole experience. If I hadn't gone to university I would probably have gone to work in an office, hated it and then done something else, but I don't know what. Times are very different now and the types of job that were available then and which are available now are quite different. I might have gone off travelling like my brother. I may have gone into politics because my parents had friends who were councillors and the odd MP. I used to help stick leaflets through doors and things and I think I may have gone down that route, maybe as a research assistant for an MP. I may also have been an MP because I am quite outspoken. I also think I would have found a way to study because I have always been interested in that. That said, if I had not gone to university when all my friends did that would have been the worst thing. It would have left a big gap in my life.

Because all my friends went to university I didn't feel I was doing anything special by going and for me there was no plan B, but I guess at the time not many people did go whereas now you get the impression that everybody does and that worries me a bit because it makes a degree a cheap commodity. When I did a degree it meant something you know. Now everybody has one, what's going to make somebody different to the next? I think the universities do this fantastic job of

selling the idea to students that they will graduate and walk into a fantastic job but they are graduating people just because they want the results. It's alright having targets and the government wanting everybody to be qualified and to stay in education till they are eighteen, but I'm not sure what the prospects are for people who then don't have a degree. What will be the minimum criterion? There are a lot of people who can't get a job without one and a lot who are doing jobs they never thought they would. It's weird but I have come full circle. Having gone through the system I used to think that knowledge and education and a degree beats practical experience hands down. Now I know that's not the case, to the point where I was looking for a graduate last year to help out in my business and I didn't even consider anyone without work experience, even if it had been a Saturday job.

I still didn't know what I wanted to do as a career when I went to university but then I started to look at what I enjoyed studying and where I was getting the best grades and then I knew I wanted to go into marketing or a related field. A lot of the people on my course were going to work in London or abroad but I didn't. I came back home. I think maybe I was coming back to where I felt safe and comfortable and grounded. I missed my friends because we'd always had such a great time together. Also, at that time there weren't exactly a ton of opportunities either. Over the summer I worked for a guy who ran an import business. That gave me a feel for doing a deal and getting a good price and stuff and also about dealing with people and mixing with others, people who were where I wanted to be in a few years. I also had a friend who was working in London as some kind of executive and another friend who was a teacher there and I used to go and see them. I found I liked it down there and started to look for jobs in London. I eventually got offered two jobs and I accepted the one I did because they were offering a company car. I thought, 'This is great. You're twenty-one and you've got a company car.' I stayed with the company for quite a long time and I had a great time down there, but one Easter I came home and thought, 'I don't want to go back, I want to stay here.' Luckily there was an opportunity to move back with the company so I took it. It was a great success for me because I started something up from scratch and grew it into something that was turning over millions. Being successful, I was eventually headhunted but they just took me for a ride. They only wanted my contacts and they were just ruthless.

Now I have my own business and I've got a fair degree of independence so I think I'm pretty unemployable by now. I wouldn't mind going into partnership with



someone but I would find it hard to work for anybody else, even though I probably have to work harder. It annoys me when people say, 'It must be great having your own business. You can go shopping whenever you want'. Shopping! In and among the fourteen hour days and long weekends? But I don't think I've ever done anything I haven't wanted to do. I'm not saying it's been easy but I've never thought, 'Oh I'm doing this and I don't want to do it' and if I have I've always changed it. I don't think it comes down to luck. I think that people get lucky because they want something badly enough and have probably worked very hard or just wanted something very badly and focused on it and made it happen. So, having mixed with people from different backgrounds at university and in London I feel I am on a level with anyone whereas I think if I'd left school and worked I wouldn't have had that interaction or experience and I would not have the confidence to have done what I did.

I met my ex-husband through work. He was a client of the company I worked for and so we kept our relationship quiet for six months. In the end it became obvious he was someone I could see a future with and I was fed up of skulking round town and diving into doorways. I just thought, 'This is no way to live your life. You cannot do this.' So I went in to work one Monday and said, 'Look if you're going to sack me then sack me because this is a guy I'm quite serious about.' I still believe now that, for all I love my work, personal relationships have to come first. There's more to life than just work, no matter how rewarding. But in the event they just told me to get on with it and my relationship with him developed and we did get married. I always expected I would marry and I vaguely remember my mum saying, 'Make sure if you marry someone that they're well off'. However, financial independence is very important to me and when I was married we only had a joint account to pay household bills and kept the rest of our finances separate. But the marriage started to go wrong and I feel ten years of my life just disappeared because I just stayed in it. I didn't feel I was strong enough or in a position to leave. You know how one thing triggers a lack of confidence and then on it goes? Well my confidence started to go in the marriage and then it started to go in my life and for three years I felt I lost my whole identity. Those were my wilderness years and instead of my world getting bigger it got smaller. My biggest regret though is that we didn't have kids. Most of my life I knew I didn't want them. I just didn't ever feel maternal but now I feel I've missed out because I've nothing to show for all the years I was married. If I was ten years younger and met someone I would want kids and if I meet someone now I'd think about adopting.

I have not yet achieved everything I want so in that respect I would say I have underachieved. I still long to travel and I want to live and work in New York. Had I had the support and not lost confidence in myself for so many years I may have achieved more. Nevertheless I would still define myself as successful because it is a journey not a destination and I have achieved a lot of what I want along the way. For me success is not raking in millions. That's not important to me. Of course, having seen the material things that people have, I want to be comfortable but to me that means not having a load of bills hanging over my head and buying the odd nice thing and being able to go on holiday. I have a desire to be successful in terms of being professional and doing good work, being highly thought of and recommended and so on. Whether there's an element of wanting to be liked in there I don't know because I had issues growing up in my teenage years about how I looked and so on. I think part of that was because I was reasonably clever and I was going to go to uni. I think I was different from other people in my family and you know that you get bullied because you're different. I think it was a case of 'you can have brains or you can be beautiful but you can't have both'.

I have absolutely no regrets about going to university. It was a lot of fun, a really positive experience and I sometimes wish I was there now. I think I'm happier now because I went, because I learned to be more independent. My brother is in his mid- forties and my dad still checks up on him, so university definitely allowed me to break with that and to say 'Woah. I don't care what you want it's my life'. It also allowed me to appreciate the qualifications I've got because they now give me that bit more confidence. If someone is talking rubbish, I can actually back up my arguments if I challenge them. It's given me this kind of extra confidence and self belief. My confidence comes from knowledge and having a bit of paper that says, 'You've got that'. It took me a while to appreciate that and for a time I didn't put 'MSc' on my business cards. Now I do. So for me education has been really important. There's part of me that almost felt I needed to study to do well. The only reason I haven't done a DBA, a doctorate in business administration, is that it costs about £40,000 to do the one I want and I'm not sure what I would do with it once I had it. But whilst I don't do as much now in terms of theory, I am always learning from other people about better, easier or different ways of doing things. It's how I was brought up, but had I not gone to university and seen all these people from different walks of life I might not have been so ambitious. My parents were working class and I guess I see myself now as more middle class. And it's not a bad place to be.

## Jen

History was one of my favourite subjects at school, although I am actually a linguist. I am particularly interested in social history and people, which must run in the family because one of my dad's cousins has traced our family name back to 1692 in the area where I grew up. He used to love telling me his stories because everyone else had heard them a hundred times. I also had a form teacher at school whose life story I would like to have heard. She was head of physics and she had a doctorate, which considering she was probably in her fifties thirty years ago makes her unusual for her time. But I've forgotten her name now. I'm very good on faces and hopeless at names. I've always been like that but I think it gets worse as you get older, although they say as you get older you remember better what happened thirty years ago. For all those reasons I was interested in taking part in your study.

I guess there were two things that made me go to university. Firstly my handwriting is atrocious and it must have been so from a very early age. My mum made the mistake of telling me that one of my teachers at primary school told her it was because my brain was working so fast my hand couldn't keep up with it. So they were saying that I had potential. And then, as she admitted herself in later years, there was a certain amount of pressure, or possibly encouragement is a better word, from my mum herself. She was sixteen in 1942 so I think she felt she lost out because of the Second World War. She wanted, well not exactly to live her life through me, but certainly she wanted me to have opportunities she never had. I also went to the kind of grammar school where if you stayed on to sixth form you went to university. I had a friend who was a year older than me and he had very definite ideas about what he wanted to do and that didn't include university. He got absolutely no support, no careers advice, nothing, which was absolutely terrible.

In fact we all got very little careers advice in that sense. We did have this small careers library and there was supposed to be someone who was officially a careers tutor but most of the information seemed to be about the stage beyond university. Also, in the early to mid seventies the recession was just starting to bite and they were saying, 'Go to university and in three or four years' time things will be better'. In that sense I saw going to university as an investment in myself. I thought it would improve my job prospects. And of course you go to university and in four years' time they're not any better, they're actually worse. But I would have gone anyway because, although I hate exams, I actually enjoy studying. I feel I've always

had what you might call an enquiring mind and have a lifelong love of learning. I guess I have a very active brain and I need to keep it occupied even now. I need that stimulation. If I realise I'm stagnating a bit mentally I look to see what I'm going to study next.

Although I can do lots of other things I am basically a linguist, something I inherited from my mum and my granddad. I even enjoyed Latin at school. So languages were the obvious choice but I also wanted to do something different and challenging at university and I chose Russian. Not so much now but when I was younger this became a bit of a conversation stopper. I was once introduced as having studied Russian at university and being a member of Mensa. These are not actually the two most important aspects of my life and there's a whole load of other things about me besides those, but I was stuck with that label for years after that. It was the case though that not many people were studying Russian in the Communist era of the seventies when it was still the Soviet Union when Brezhnev was in charge and before Gorbachev. There were only seven students in the Russian department at my university and there was fierce competition nationally for a few British Council scholarships to go and spend a year abroad, which is the norm for other language degrees. Rather than spending a year in Russia I spent one summer in Leningrad, or St Petersburg as it is now, and one in Minsk which is now in Belarus.

The summer before I went to university I went to work at Butlin's. That's a correct memory because I remember I was there when my A level results came through and my mum had to ring me up. I didn't actually get the grades I needed because, like I said, I hate exams but they let me in anyway. These days you probably wouldn't get in. There were some stories running in the News of the World about working at Butlin's at the time, which I can confirm were all true, but I went there for financial reasons. I didn't get a full grant because both my parents were working. In those days as a student you would work in the summer but you could sign on at Christmas and Easter. I know students these days don't have that luxury and they don't have grants either. In going to Butlin's there was also an element of escaping from home three months early. Without going into detail, on a personal level circumstances at home were difficult. Although my sister would later prove me wrong, I always felt I was the only academic one of the family and in some ways I really didn't fit in. I remember my mum and maybe my dad calling me Mademoiselle from Armentières when I was quite young and I wasn't sure what it meant but it definitely wasn't very complimentary. So on the one hand my parents were

encouraging me to go to university, but on the other I felt no matter what I achieved I could never completely satisfy them. Someone once told me that my mum told them she was proud of me and I thought 'Why does she never say that to me?' I guess I looked forward to being with like minded people when I went to university. Other than that I'm not sure what my expectations were.

My parents never learned to drive which is probably a sign of being working class. In fact it wasn't until my younger brother got to driving age that there was ever a car in the house. So I remember the day I went to university my mum went with me on the train which was an interesting experience. She would have taken the day off work I guess. She spent a bit of time with me when we got there and, having said all that about wanting to escape from home, I remember actually feeling abandoned when she left and quite lonely because it seemed nobody was around. Then on the Saturday of Fresher's week I met somebody who'd been at my school and was now in her second year and we were actually in the same hall of residence, which was a women only hall, so that really helped. I started off in the annexe of the hall of residence which increased my feelings of isolation. Then for reasons I can't remember now, I was moved into the main hall which was much better. Nonetheless it still took me a while to settle in because I'm not the sort of person who finds it easy to make friends in a new situation or to go into social gatherings on my own. I've got better at this as I've got older and I went to a Russian department reunion recently because two of the professors, who were lowly lecturers in my day, were retiring with a combined total of seventy-four years in the university. There were quite a lot of people I knew there and it was great to see everyone and they remembered me too.

University was not an entirely happy experience for me. To be honest I don't think I ever totally felt I fitted in. For one thing about ninety percent of my friends and the people on my course were pairing off. When I graduated my tutor told me they thought I would drop out after the first year so you don't actually fool as many people as you think, do you? But when people dropped out I thought 'What a waste. Why did they come in the first place?' although maybe it was more of a culture shock for them than it was even for me. So I really didn't fit in at home or at university which makes it even harder because you've got nowhere.

The real highlight of my university career, which is also why I've finished up here, is that I became a Christian during my first year. It's difficult to say whether becoming a Christian meant I stayed at university but I don't think I would have stayed otherwise. I guess I did feel more at home in the church I was involved in and in the Christian Union. It would certainly have been harder for me to have become a Christian if I'd been living at home. At nineteen people are open to new experiences and influences, positive and negative, and I saw going to university as a way of breaking free from my past. Consciously or unconsciously becoming a Christian was part of that process. I'm not saying it would have been impossible but it would have been much harder if I'd still been at home.

I enjoyed the academic side of university on the whole. I liked the language and the history. Soviet history is a very important part of what makes Russia today and actually to understand the people you really have to understand the history. But, for reasons I've never quite worked out, I struggled with the literature. I like reading for pleasure but didn't enjoy analysing literature. The department has changed a lot and now I think you can virtually do the degree without doing any of that. It's a shame but I did it basically because I had to.

Another good thing about going is that I made some good friends, some of whom I am still in contact with. I didn't really get involved in anything other than the Christian Union when I was at university and the friends I mentioned mostly belonged to that. I remember that on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday we were at a conference centre out in the wilds and it had snowed. It was nice to have snow on my birthday and everyone sang 'happy birthday' to me at lunch which was very embarrassing but rather nice and with hindsight I'm glad they did that rather than ignoring it.

I'm not sure I regard myself as working class any more. Certainly when we graduated thirty years ago graduates were seen in a different light, but, sometimes for political reasons, some people would still say they are working class even if they've got a PhD. It also has a lot to do with the circles that you move in. If you look on the surface for example, the area I live in now is very middle class, if not upper middle class, but it still has the same drugs and alcohol problems in young people and the same gang problems as anywhere else. So people regard class as an escape but really it's down to the person that you are inside. You can take the person out of the situation but they're going to take their problems with them. Nevertheless there is an element of me that perceives the difference between north

and south as a class thing. Probably more than eighty percent of the students at my university were from the south. There were very few northerners around campus at that time. The southeast is definitely more middle class than where I grew up and that's not just in terms of income it's in terms of attitude you know. Southern values are very different in some ways to northern values. Loads of people here send their kids to private school.

I've lived more of my life outside Yorkshire than I have inside and I still regard myself as a Yorkshire lass and if you talk about north versus south I'm definitely northern. No doubt. When I say I was escaping from home I was thinking of my particular family situation rather than the dark satanic mills. Moving from the north to the southeast was also a huge culture shock. This is a classic example. One December, just before Christmas, I was in church and they were promoting this set of DVDs which was £25 for four which actually isn't that bad. I'm not talking about the cost but it was presented as a stocking filler and I thought, 'Hang on a minute. £25 to me is a major present'. So sometimes I think I've come a long way from my working class roots and then suddenly something happens and you think 'Well maybe I haven't come as far as I thought'. Having said that, there is someone on my counselling course who was brought up in this area of the southeast and who, like me, still feels a hesitancy, guilty almost, about spending money on frivolities rather than necessities.

However, I have lost most of my accent. I don't think I ever made a conscious decision to do so but after one term at university I went home and my mum said, 'You've changed' and I thought 'Oh. What's coming now?' and one of the things was that my accent had changed even after one term. I don't know whether that was a subconscious effort to try and fit in. You can overanalyse yourself as well because, looking back, my grammar school was quite snobbish really and my accent didn't change then.

Likewise I have what used to be called the Protestant work ethic. One of my family mottos seemed to be 'The Lord helps them as helps themselves'. These days I would say it's probably a working class thing because it is much more prevalent among the working class of whatever persuasion. I was talking the other day about how there's this kind of expectation that the married people around here need time to spend with their kids during school holidays but the singles can just carry on as normal, which I think is society's attitude in general not just this place. If I didn't have

such a strong working class work ethic, or whatever you want to call it, I would probably rebel against it more, but sometimes I feel guilty about taking time off. I'm a late developer in some ways and it's only now, having reached 50 plus, that I've started to rebel and I think 'No I shouldn't feel guilty about taking time off. I need time for myself and maybe I don't have a husband and kids but I still have me'. I think as you get older you become more confident of yourself, more set in your ways and firmer in your views and all the rest of it. I listen to myself sometimes and I think I sound just like my mum. You become less bothered about what other people think as well, because most of the time they are in fact far too preoccupied with their own concerns to give a second thought to you.

When I went to university I did have thoughts about doing a PGCE afterwards. This actually shows the influence other people have on your lives. My godmother, who has become a friend as well in my adult life, is in her eighties now but comparatively healthy. She never got married and looked after her parents, particularly her father, for quite a long time but she was also a teacher, although she probably did teacher training rather than a degree. Because of her influence I did seriously consider going into teaching, which is one of the traditional safe roles for women isn't it? But to be honest by the time I'd done four years at university I'd had enough of academic life and I really didn't want to go on and do PGCE. It wasn't that I didn't want to teach full stop and although I never trained as a teacher one way or another over the last thirty years I've done quite a bit of teaching. I just didn't want to go and do PGCE straight away. Other than that I left university with no clear idea of what I wanted to do. I possibly hoped I might finish up doing something with my languages and I did apply to work at GCHQ in Cheltenham. I got as far as an interview but I don't really think I would have been happy working there. It was about the time there was a big row about someone who worked there being a spy.

I went back home for a while but once you've been away at university for four years it's not the right move to go back and live at home. Before that I had only been back home for holidays but I'd even spent summers at Butlin's or in Russia. I think to some extent my parents thought that our relationship would stay the same and I'd still be their little girl even though I'd been away to university whereas living away from home, whether at university or whatever, does change you and you can never be the same again. At school everything was structured but at university, certainly with an Arts degree, you had to take responsibility for your own life because nobody bothered if you did the work or not.



So when I left I was looking for a job and also did some temping but had no clear idea of what I wanted to do really so in the end I applied to the Civil Service and ended up working at the DHSS as it was then, the Department of Work and Pensions now. I could have gone to Merseyside but for me this meant Liverpool and I remain a small town girl at heart and I didn't want to live in a big city. You can take the girl out of the town but you can't take the town out of the girl. So, to cut a long story short I got another posting elsewhere. This was in a new town and I was a designated key worker so I also got a very nice flat there.

In spite of all that I have to say there was part of me that still felt unsatisfied and unfulfilled. Looking back and although it was never diagnosed I think I was suffering from a form of depression. So, even though the Civil Service was regarded as a job for life in those days, I'm one of the few people from that era who actually got the sack. They didn't put it quite as bluntly but I think they came to the conclusion that I was a square peg in a round hole too. So obviously one of the things I had to do was ring home and tell them, which wasn't very easy and I didn't exactly fudge but I blurred little bits and one of my mum's first questions was, 'Does that mean you're coming home?' But I was very definite that this would have been a step backwards. So I was unemployed for a while and then I did a secretarial course and actually it was when I got into secretarial admin that I realised I'd found my niche. I did quite a lot of temping after I finished my course and then I ran the UK office of an Irish based company which involved everything from making tea to doing the accounts and I was happy doing that.

At the same time I was temping, around 1987, I was invited by a couple from my home church, who worked for the organisation I'm with now, to look after their youngest son while they ran an English language school in Spain. A few years later they did ask me if I wanted to help them in the language school but the time wasn't right for me and not long after that my dad was taken ill and died. This was a very important time for my family and during those last months my dad and I became close in a way we hadn't been while I was growing up. Then, not long after that I had to have a hysterectomy and you don't need a lightening bolt from heaven to tell you that if you have a medical problem you get it sorted out first. That's just common sense. So in the end I went out to Spain in 1994. I went for two years and stayed for eleven so that says a lot about it really. I started teaching and had a tough class of thirteen and fourteen year olds, mainly boys, but then I moved into admin, first with a

department that was doing drug rehabilitation work and then I got involved with working with immigrants and with children and got the admin down to one day a week so I reckon that was a success.

I came home in 2005 for a year's sabbatical but to cut a long story short my mum was taken ill a week after I arrived home and for the first three months I was home I looked after her twenty-four seven, which was incredibly draining emotionally and physically and on every level, but we also had a much closer relationship than we had had for many years. After that we reluctantly decided to put her into a nursing home. My sister and I took her there and, even though it was the right decision, actually physically taking her there and leaving her is one of the hardest things I've ever done because you feel like you're abandoning them.

In 2006 we marked her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday with a party and the home put on a buffet for her. By that stage she wasn't aware of what was going on but it was important for us as a family to mark that milestone. Then she just stopped eating and was put on these high protein drinks so at best they were just maintaining her condition. I'm not sure if I was still on sabbatical then or had leave of absence but I felt I was under a certain pressure to make a decision about what I wanted to do next. But I said, 'No I need this space for myself. I can't make any decisions at this moment.' At that time I really just needed time for myself. However, I was then offered a post here, working in what these days is commonly called 'human resources' and I felt here was something I really wanted to do. So I moved down and went back up north one weekend a month. The last time I saw my mum she was obviously very frail but there was no indication this would be the last time I would see her so I came back here and on the Tuesday my sister rang and by the time I got back she had died. My sister had been there with her.

I have many faults but being materialistic isn't one of them and I define success as being in a role where you feel satisfied and fulfilled, whatever that is, whether it is a job or your kids and a family. We all have frustrations because we're only human but to me success is more about, I was going to say happiness, but contentment is a better word. That's far more important to me than material success. And on those terms I count myself as a success. Interestingly we had a school reunion twenty-five years after we started grammar school and somebody there said to me that the only woman who had made it in their eyes, the only one who had made a real success of their life, was someone who had become a primary school

head. Most of us had been to university and were working in jobs for which we were over-qualified. But I appreciate living and working here and not having to commute because I know people who travel two hours a day and more into London five days a week which is very disruptive of family life. And I don't think I would have found my way here if I hadn't been to university because I don't have any qualifications in HR. So I see university as the start of a life journey really and the starting point of my journey as becoming a Christian. Apart from the academic study I would say that God took me to university to reveal Himself to me.

I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't gone to university but I would not have done what my sister did which is marry so young. This is not a criticism of her because she's brought up three lovely kids and then she went and did a degree which was really tough especially as she fell ill in the middle of it. I think my life may have followed my mum's. She married someone who was not as well educated as she was (my dad left school at fourteen) and, whilst I think personality, similar interests and sense of humour are more important than a paper qualification and there are different kinds of intelligence, I think it's very important to have someone who can think for themselves. But that's easy for me to say aged fifty and never married. I think I would probably have found my way into office work through night school or something though. Like the rest of my family I would still be living in my home town working in an office somewhere and I almost said wasting my life but I don't think it would have been a waste really. It would have been very frustrating. I keep going back to this small town mentality but what university did was reveal a whole big wide world out there. It's interesting that my nephew who is also doing a degree has escaped too. His horizons have been broadened and he will not go back.

I think the value of going to university is different for different people. There are people who love study for its own sake. Others are more vocational and I was thinking that one of the differences between the old universities and the old polytechnics is that the latter met that need. For the right person, who might not necessarily want study for study's sake, there's a big value in degrees that are not necessarily vocational but which have that practical element. I think that's something that's been lost or is in danger of being lost. There is a certain amount of snobbery that institutions that used to be polytechnics are somehow second class universities. And I do think it devalues a degree if everybody has one. There should be

recognition for those who take vocational routes, as my brother did and as another one of my nephew's is doing, instead of trying to get everyone to go to university.

If I look back to where I was when I left university I certainly wouldn't have seen myself as still single at fifty plus. I guess I did expect that I would work for a few years after getting my degree and then get married, or get married and work for a few years and then have kids. My mum was always dropping hints about wanting more grandchildren. I certainly wouldn't have seen myself doing what I'm doing and probably I would not have chosen some of the paths that my life has taken. I wish I had taken a gap year between school and university. It wasn't so common then but I think it probably gives you more self confidence and just experience of the world. I think university gave me more confidence in myself anyway but until recently I've not had that much chance to travel outside Europe. I have been to the States and to South Korea but I would have loved to have gone to South America. However, I have no regrets. All those experiences, some of which were tough, some of which were easier, and all the people I've met along the way have all made a contribution to the person I am today.

## Julie

There were five children in my family and we all went to our local comprehensive which happened to be a really good school with its own sixth form. Apart from me, only my older sister stayed on at school, but she then left to do nursing. The others couldn't wait to quit and my brother left as soon as he could to work in my dad's building business. But for me, going to university felt like a natural progression, the automatic next move from school. I didn't feel I was doing anything special in sending off application forms to university because everybody was doing it, although I do think we could have been much better directed at school, particularly as my parents couldn't advise me because they would not have known how. My dad, being a builder, wanted me to be a quantity surveyor even though I was a very arty person and not at all mathematically minded. So my parents were proud of me and they always celebrated all of our successes but they never pushed me. We did get a bit of careers advice at school and I'd done all those silly 'which job would you be good at' tests. The result was always that I should work with people, which is what I wanted to do anyway. I actually wanted to be a social worker so I should have done a social work degree but as I say, I didn't have anybody to direct me. So I sent off for all the prospectuses myself and psychology seemed like an interesting course, even though no-one knew much about it in those days. If I'd have known I wouldn't have done it either. I remember filling in my UCAS form and sending it off without anybody looking at it. I just ended up doing a psychology degree really. I would probably have been better doing history or English and becoming a teacher but at that time I didn't think I could aspire to that, even though I am a teacher now.

There was actually a teacher training college close to where I lived but I think I had this idea that I wanted to get away. I don't know why I thought that. It was probably because everyone else was doing it and I got caught up in that. Whatever the reason, it was a major mistake because I hated being away from home. I'd been working in a hardware store the summer before I went and was collecting things to take away with me and my mum was also buying stuff for me. I was quite excited until it came to packing it all up in the car and then I just felt absolutely terrible. The whole thing started off badly when we got there because my dad is really soft and by the time they left me I was crying and he was crying. It was really wrenching and it stayed like that for the whole of the three years really. What made it worse was that my dad rang me every day and told me he would come and take me home if that's what I wanted. That's when I found out I was a home bird because I wished I had

never gone. It set the seal on the rest of my life inasmuch as I'd never go anywhere with anybody for any reason and leave my family ever again. No matter how bad things got here, I still wouldn't go. It's pathetic really and has been limiting in many ways. Nevertheless I sit and listen to people at work encouraging kids to leave home and telling them 'oh you need to get out' and I don't usually say anything, but I did once say, 'You know it's not always like that for everybody'. Maybe if I'd gone away later on when I was older and more mature I may have reacted differently, but you just don't know that do you?

On the first day of university everyone was arriving at the same time. Some people had come a lot further than me and most were feeling pretty similar so everybody just mucked in together, which was good. But the accommodation was absolutely dreadful, so basic and unwelcoming with twelve rooms on one floor and one kitchen. There wasn't much to do in the first few days other than to go to meetings and it didn't get much better after that. I found it so boring and pointless. I don't know what I was expecting but it wasn't that. I suppose my expectation was that it would be like school. My teachers used to say I wasn't naturally academic and I guess I never looked like I was academic in comparison to some of my friends who were A grade students, the equivalent of A\* these days. Looking back, my 'A' levels were actually pretty ordinary but at the time they were the best I could have ever hoped for and I was so impressed because I got where I did through hard work. I thought university was going to be a continuation of that, just working very hard. But I was bored. I went from the hard work of sixth form to something ridiculous like eight hours of lectures a week and I didn't know what to do with myself. I should have gone and worked in a bar somewhere of course but I didn't have the confidence. I was out of my comfort zone and I was so bored. I was never one of university's happy people.

All the pretty, confident girls at school were just like that at university whereas I didn't really join anything or get involved in wider things that were going on, even though I was used to taking on responsibility at home. Part of being the eldest of five meant looking after the younger children and being responsible. I was talking about this with my mum the other day. When I was about ten and still at junior school she used to run a little clothes shop in the village. I would go there after school and take over so she could go home and cook tea. At closing time I'd shut up the shop and take all the money and walk home. Now if that happened today - well it just wouldn't happen would it? But it wasn't considered out of the ordinary then. It

was just what we did. And yet somehow that didn't become confidence in the outside world. I could talk to people. I could do all that. But it didn't make me into one of those attractive people, the sort of person you want to be with. I'm much more that person now, but I never imagined that would ever be the case. Had I known then that I would turn into somebody who was also quite confident and sure of herself and didn't need anybody to say, 'You can do this', I might have approached university a bit differently. As it was, I don't feel I ever fitted in to university life and I realise I cut myself off in many ways.

I had been so protected at home inasmuch as we did lots of family things and I didn't go out on my own. It's all so different for my kids now. My parents would not approve of half the things we do with our three. I wasn't allowed to go out until I was eighteen. I'd go to eighteenth birthday parties and my dad used to take me and he'd pick me and all my friends up afterwards. We drank gin and tonics and we'd all end up crying because we'd drunk too much gin. So although it was done for all the right reasons being so protected meant I couldn't cope when I went into this unprotected place and I was like, 'What are you supposed to do now?' I had the perfect opportunity to go wild and I didn't. My sister came up to stay sometimes and we'd go nightclubbing and we had the freedom to do all that kind of stuff but to be honest I didn't do much until I moved back home. That's when I started going out and doing all things that normal nineteen year olds do. At university, I quickly got into a routine of coming home as often as I could. My dad bought me a car and I used to come home on Wednesday and go back on Monday. Of course there must have been some good times at university. After all, I made myself stay for three years. But I was always glad to go home and never glad to go back. I found going back on Sunday night depressing and difficult. I did enjoy studying although there wasn't enough of it and I didn't feel challenged. At the same time I felt unable to do anything about it, which is very sad. I ended up with an acceptable degree but now I'd be disappointed with it. I've done a Masters since then, which I did at my local university and very much enjoyed doing. It was an entirely different experience.

University probably hindered me in growing up because I never did anything while I was there. I didn't go out. I didn't get a job. I didn't do a lot of things until I came home. I suppose being away at university helped me to grow up inasmuch as I was living on my own but you always knew it was only for a ten week period, didn't you? You were always off home after the ten weeks were up. Home was always there. I suppose part of growing up was also getting on with other people because

you're just landed with each other, although it's funny how you sort of tend to be with groups of people who are similar to you. While I was there I had some good friendships and we had some great times but I never felt I met anyone at university who I thought would become a lasting friend so it can't have been that meaningful. I did keep in touch with one person for quite a while but then we drifted apart, whereas I've still got friends from school that I'm still in touch with. I did actually move out with the friends I made in dorm and we got a place together but then one of the girls started a relationship with one of the lads and you know what it's like being part of a three. I went home even more in that year.

I don't know if I was conscious of it at the time, but looking back I think I definitely saw university as a gateway to a better job or some sort of good future without knowing really what I wanted to do. So when I left university in June and couldn't get a job I could not believe it. I went to work in a pub at first but then in November I got a job with Social Services by chance really. I only got it because the first person they offered it to turned it down. I was second choice because I was so young, not that much older than the kids I was going to be looking after. It was quite a commute and when I got my first wage I cried because it was less than I was getting in the pub. But I absolutely loved that job. There were two other people who were taken on at the same time as me who were both older but I quickly became better than them and after a year I could stand at the side of them and say, 'Well it's a good job you took me on'. So I applied for a job on a higher grade and I got it. It meant working shifts and sleeping over but I was single so it didn't matter. Then I got married and got fed up with working shifts because my husband also worked long hours and we just used to pass each other in the night. The kids I was working with also seemed to be getting more aggressive and that sort of job quickly burns you out. I'd look at the people who'd been there fifteen years and think, 'How are you still doing it?' So I applied for a job on the Youth Training Scheme. I did have a great time doing that and the people I worked with were good, but I had a terrible manager and I hated working for him. So, even though I hadn't planned to, when the chance came, I left there to go into business with my sisters because for me it was a get out clause.

This is how it came about. My dad is a builder so we were always moving about. Shortly after I married he was selling his house, which was an old vicarage. Somebody came to view who said 'We're thinking of turning it into a residential home'. My dad immediately took the 'For Sale' sign down, rang my sister who was a



nurse and said 'Can't we do that?' So she rang me and even though we didn't know anything at all about residential care we said, 'Oh yeah why don't we?' and we were up and running within six months. We started with seven beds and ended up with twenty-two. Believe it or not we were there for sixteen years. At first it was fantastic and in terms of size and facilities we were fine when the new regulations came in. But then it became a situation where there was so much paperwork to do and it seemed that they cared more about the paperwork than the quality of care. At the time we were also looking after some really, really dependent people and it got to a stage where we didn't feel we were getting anything back so we decided to close down. We didn't even sell it, we just closed down.

Luckily, a number of years before that I'd again got in the situation where I didn't feel I was being pushed. I was managing the residential home and I had three children by this time so I was busy but I decided I needed something else to do. I'd done my NVQ assessor's awards by then and I'd met a really nice lady through that so I rang her one day and said, 'Look, I think I could do some teacher training. What do I do?' So I went to the local FE College and I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. This is bad when you think about it, but within two weeks I was teaching classes there and getting paid for it. So at one time I was balancing three children under five, managing a residential home full time, working at the FE College, sometimes up to fifteen hours a week, and playing netball. It was manic but I loved it. So I wasn't worried when we closed the vicarage. I increased my teaching load and helped my sister out with her children. When they went to school I went to work full time at the FE College and got promoted a year later. Not long ago I was contemplating going part time because of certain issues in my section, but then I got a job at another institution which was a promotion into management. This gave me something to prove because I know I am a good lecturer and I know I am good with the students but could I lead people in an academic setting? I would have been disappointed if it hadn't worked out but I've not been in post that long and already I know what I'm doing and it's not overly challenging. So now I'm back on the ambition trail again.

I've always thought I've not been particularly ambitious but I was always determined I wasn't going to let getting married and having children stop me doing anything. When I had my oldest child I soon realised I didn't want to be a full time mum. It just wasn't enough for me. It bored me to death. I also missed the people I worked with and the social side of that. So I think I'm probably secretly ambitious. I

think ambition is about getting somewhere and feeling satisfied I can do it and then being bored because it's too straightforward or it's not demanding enough, which then leads me to make myself do something else. If I hadn't done it educationally, I would probably have had to be a high flyer somewhere else and I don't think I could ever have sold anything or been good at that. So it had to be this academic route really. Working at the residential home probably killed a bit of my ambition but it's coming back. In my current post I feel more ambitious than I've ever felt because I look around and I think, 'I could do that' and I've not felt that before. So I'm not convinced I've stopped yet.

The majority of my career has been down to chance. I've been really lucky to have been in the right place at the right time and I've also ended up doing a lot of things because I had no choice, even when I wasn't too sure about them. On the other hand I also put myself about a lot and then you just happen to slot in somewhere don't you? For example I did some training just after I started in my new post which involved going away for a weekend. My friend said, 'Can you be bothered to do that?' and I said, 'No, but I said I'd go'. So I went. I actually made my husband drive me there and pick me up again the next day. And despite asking myself why I put myself through this, it has actually turned out to be very lucrative because it's enabled me to do some external verification work. So I suppose the chance is there only because of what you have done before.

Sometimes I feel I haven't achieved much when I compare myself to other people, but I've not done too badly. I am proud of everything I've done at work and everything I've achieved academically and I have always been financially independent which is very important to me. I could never ask anyone if I could have some money for a dress. I'm also proud of the fact that I haven't failed at very many things. I suppose I do boast about that if given the opportunity and if anybody wants to listen, not that they do. I make a joke of the fact that I failed physics GCSE all those years ago although I also play it safe because I don't attempt things I think I probably won't be able to do. I don't go ski-ing or ice skating for example because I know I won't be able to do that. But the thing I'm proudest of is my children. I think that's probably my greatest success because when people tell me I have three lovely kids I think, 'Yeah, well that doesn't just happen either'. I am also proud of the relationship I have with my partner although I'd never tell him that.

Going to university definitely improved my confidence. I'm a firm believer that qualifications don't really mean very much in themselves but they are quite useful in terms of going places and being confident to apply for things. Also knowing I can do something like that shaped the way I was going to be and the way I saw myself. When you're growing up at school there are always pretty girls and geeky girls. I was always a geek really or I saw myself that way. I can distinctly remember when I was getting married thinking that I wouldn't really have wanted to upset my future husband too much, because if he didn't marry me then who would? Although that changed really quickly, I definitely had that thought. I can't imagine my girls thinking in that way, but we were so much brought up to think that's what we needed to do. However, confidence also comes with maturity because I haven't changed. It's the way I see myself that has changed. It's about thinking, 'What's the worst that can happen?' You don't think that when you're younger do you? I suppose that happens to loads of women doesn't it? If only you knew that at some point you would develop that confidence. If only you knew at seventeen that you will meet somebody if you want to, your single life would be so much better. You wouldn't actually spend it getting drunk and having a good look round to see who you could go with. You could enjoy it more. I think a lot of people don't enjoy being single. They're always looking for somebody and they're worried that they're never going to meet anybody.

I'm not sure whether going to university has meant I can provide more for my kids than parents did for me. It's difficult because the perspective has changed. When I look back, we were quite privileged growing up. There was never a time when we couldn't get what we wanted. We really didn't lack for anything and everything we wanted or needed, we got it. But the idea of 'everything' changes doesn't it? My mum says, 'When you say you got everything you mean we sat watching telly with a bar of chocolate on a Saturday night as a treat. That's what you mean'. Whereas now it's about having more things isn't it, Playstations, cars and the like? On those terms, being able to get better jobs because of my degree has enabled me to give my children more of that sort of stuff. I also think it helps to be able to tell them about your experience and how it was for you. If you've done it, you know all about the down sides too and you can support them in their decisions. For example my older daughter didn't want to go to college and is now doing hairdressing which is totally right for her. Also, I don't know if it's part of having gone to university or part of growing up, but even now you can't have serious discussions about anything with my parents or disagree with them in any way. It's like you are still ten. I feel we are more responsive to our children's needs as they get older. I do

feel I outgrew my parents but perhaps that is part of growing up anyway and has nothing to do with going to university.

It would be very arrogant of me to say I am working class now. When people like us say they are working class I say, 'You need to get out there and have a look at what's going on'. I mean if you watch people on the news, like in that case with Shannon Matthews and all that happened there, you're not in the same situation as them are you? And that's not because you're looking down onto their situation. That's just the situation they're in and you're not and it would just be arrogance to claim it's the same for you. But it depends how you are defining class. Is it income? Is it job status? Where do you draw the line? I still socialise with the people I would have socialised with anyway so is it that? In terms of values and beliefs I think mine are very middle-of-the-road middle class but I have definitely got a work ethic and that is definitely from my parents. We've all grown up with that work ethic that says, 'You're never poorly and you always go to work' and it's something I have also passed on to my children. I think it's hard to define yourself anywhere.

I don't think any one thing has had a major impact on my life. Many different things, some of them small, change the way you are. That said, I don't think I would have been as fulfilled if I hadn't gone because I have this thirst for knowledge and I also need to be challenged or I get bored. So it is very difficult for someone like me to tell anybody else, 'Well I don't think you need to go to university'. However, I also think there's some people putting themselves into massive debt who are not going to benefit from going because we're educating all these people and are there going to be any jobs for them? On balance I think that if you can go you should and see what it's like because you have to work for a lot of years really. I'm so glad my son wants to go. He's a bit of an entrepreneur and people keep saying to me, 'Are you sure he wants to go to university. Are you sure it's not you who wants him to go?' And I say, 'No it isn't. If he doesn't want to go that's fine'. But I think he does want to go. It's a safe place to make decisions and it's mainly about growing up and developing and looking at where you want to go. Well when you're sixteen it's an early age to be out working isn't it? My daughter has worked forty-two hours a week from the age of sixteen doing hairdressing. I mean she loves it so that's really good but it's still very hard and she'll say to her brother, 'Look what I've got to do for my money.'

The biggest thing I got out of going to university was not being pressured to get a job and having that time to grow up. You also get qualifications at an age when that's easy to do. I'm a firm believer that to go to work at sixteen is a very, very difficult thing to do. And going to university, nobody can ever take that away from you and whatever people say it opens other gateways for you. It shows you've studied at that level whether you use it or not. My degree didn't help me get a job until I came into teaching, but the fact that it was there backed me up. So whether you need it in your job it still shows that you are capable of getting it. You know yourself that you've achieved at that level so I think stay in education as long as you can before you get out working. I didn't like university and I didn't enjoy the experience, but at the end of the day it gave me something that nobody can take away. I do regret not being a bit more dedicated while I was there but staying was the best thing I ever did and had I left it would have been a major regret. So maybe it wasn't as bad as I thought?

Julie mentions the UCAS form. The application process for university in England is centrally administered and by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and this is the form all candidates applying for HE will complete. When we were applying the administration of applications to *university* was done through the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA).

She also mentions being an NVQ assessor, referring to National Vocational Qualifications which are done in tandem with work-based learning.

The Shannon Matthews case involves the abduction of a young girl by members of her family, allegedly for financial reasons. The family were from a council estate in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire.

## Linda

Going to university was a seed my parents planted quite early on and from the age of about seven I had this idea to go. My parents had been short of money for a long time and they saw education as my escape route out of that to a better, easier life. I think that was probably the case for a lot of people who had come out of the Second World War. My parents had a massive influence on me but I think it must also be part of my background to feel that push, to feel that learning and education is a route out. It's still stuck in my head now, even though I'm not trying to escape from anywhere any more. My parents also wanted me to have chances they never had. My dad wanted to go to art school but he had to start work at fourteen. So when I seemed to be doing OK at school I think they got it into their head that at last there might be somebody who works through and gets to university. They didn't put pressure on me but they encouraged me. My older sister has told me since that she felt they had given up on her because she went to what was the old secondary modern so because I was the next born, it was my position to do it. I think I inevitably took on my parent's feelings and I grew up with this idea that you worked as hard as you could. This idea of working hard wasn't unique to my parents. It is part of that culture anyway. So that was the beginning of geekdom. It's really embarrassing to admit it but I was always swotty and I still am. When I was eight I used to stay in at lunchtime to go to French classes and even now if I do a course I always do the assignments to get the certificate.

I was probably one of the last years to go through the eleven plus and I got into grammar school. There were two grammar schools in my home town, one fee paying and one free and I was dreading not getting a free place because there was no chance we could pay. The eleven plus itself was very, very disruptive of my relationship with my sister because she didn't get in. She'd have been fine but for that because she was one of those people who was ready at thirteen or fourteen. So the eleven plus was divisive in families and it's difficult for both of you because you get labelled. I was the clever one and my sister was the practical one. I went to university and she went on to train as a typist. But then in her late twenties she decided to train for something else. She then went to university and has just got her PhD and has got stuff published so now she feels great and it's all sorted. But it wasn't at the time.

Although I enjoyed school I was in an advanced stream where we took GCSE's and 'A' levels a year early, which was good for me at the time but it was very pressured and by the time I left I'd had enough. It's amazing, considering where I've ended up, but by the time I left I never wanted to go into teaching or be anywhere near school or education ever again, even though a lot of people were going into teaching. At the time I wanted a scientific career but I didn't get into the university I wanted because I didn't get the grades. I had an offer from another university but I decided I really didn't want to do that. I had only just passed the sciences and in my eyes it wasn't enough just to pass. I wanted to be good at something. At school I had been one of those people who was equally balanced between arts and science and it hadn't been clear at school which route to go. Again it was the labelling but you couldn't mix and match arts and science in those days. Once I started to take exams I knew I wanted to switch but there was no flexibility at my school and no real chance to change.

So after 'A' levels I studied physiotherapy for a while which at that time wasn't a university course. It was almost like I went into physiotherapy just because the family thought 'Oh she's not going to university. You'd better get a job'. I know my older sister was only helping in her way, but it was very much 'Well you can't just sit doing nothing sponging off mum and dad', which is fair enough because we didn't have the money for me to do that. I took the first year physiotherapy qualification but all I thought about while I was doing the course was 'I've missed the route here. I have to go back.' I didn't want to give up on this thing that had been in my mind since the age of seven. So I worked for a little while to save up a bit of money for myself before heading off to university. I was still only nineteen because of course I'd been in the advanced stream at school and had done 'A' levels at seventeen. I applied to do social sciences, mainly politics, because I didn't want to risk going in and failing and I thought I'd have more chance of being successful in this area. I didn't want to let anybody down you see.

By this time I was in a relationship with someone I knew from home and had got engaged and moved to the southwest because he was working there. I can't imagine that now. My daughters don't go following men. The men follow my daughters. My fiancé was also a graduate, which I must admit is very important to me. I was married by the time I started university. It never occurred to me that I would not get married because I just grew up in a world where that was what you did. Everyone got married and I didn't see another option. My mum was quite young

when she got married and I definitely remember her saying that it was better to do it when you are young. So I was escaping from drudge in one respect and I remember seeing friends I'd been in school with who were working in the market hall doing whatever and I just thought. 'This'll open up my life a little bit more.' But in retrospect I was also following some other conventions because there I was getting married and everything.

The summer before I went I was working as hard as I could to save money so I wouldn't be short of money at university. Even though I was married my grant was assessed on my father's income. He didn't earn a great deal so I got a full grant but travelling to university took a lot of that because it was in a different town to where we were living and so I really struggled. I couldn't do some of the things other people did. I can only remember going out for a meal maybe twice and each time wondering, 'How are we going to divide this up?' and 'Oh I'd better take the cheapest option'. You know that awful feeling of thinking, 'If they go to the pub after I can't go because I don't have the money for that'. I worked every holiday because we just couldn't have managed otherwise.

I was also anxious about going back into education because I'd had this short break. And I felt it was horrendous that I was older, even though I was only nineteen. I was so anxious about it that I did a lot of reading before I went because I didn't want to go and be not quite as good as everybody else there. I was frightened about not making it because other people I had met at interviews and so on always seemed much better read than me and spoke with a much posher accent. So on the first day I remember feeling very, very sick and worried. Although there was quite a mix of people on the course there didn't seem to be anyone with a similar background to me. I didn't seem to fit in with them at all at that stage. They were from a much more middle class background and several had been to public school so there was quite a divide there. I was an outsider because I was from the north and I certainly wasn't middle class and certainly had quite an accent and I was married. I quickly learned to lose my northern accent and say 'larf' instead of 'laff'. When I was at grammar school my mum used to complain if I spoke with a local accent but when I started to pick up the accent of other students at university she'd say, 'Don't give me that'. So I had to tone it down when I went home and I had to tone the other side down when I went back. Now my accent tends to come back more strongly when I'm teaching and talking quickly.



As the course progressed I began to feel more comfortable because I knew I could keep up. I did gradually feel I fitted in a bit more but I was never one of the group, although I was a member of the theatre group and I did some voluntary work with other students and that was certainly one of the highlights of university. My husband had finished his studies and was working by the time I started, so sometimes we socialised with people from his work and sometimes with people from university. I also used to come in on my own sometimes and be the student and go to concerts and so on. My husband came once or twice but he didn't really get involved in my student life. Being married and being a student were two different worlds, which looking back now must have involved juggling things around. But at the time all I thought was 'I'm not being distracted by student things'. While they were messing around in each other's accommodation or down the pub I was in the library being the swot or at home writing the essays. I still swotted, still did the extra mile. If there was some absolute reading and some suggested reading I did it all because I didn't dare risk not knowing enough in the tutorial. I always made sure I spoke in the tutorials.

I knew how proud my mum and dad were. My mum will still say to me, 'What's that degree you did again? What grade did you get?' It's incredibly important to her for all sorts of reasons but it's very much a status thing for her to be able to say, 'Oh so and so's daughter's over there. She's got quite a good job in Marks and Spencer's but she didn't do a degree like you'. They came to my graduation which I did for them as much as for me really and my mum just loved it all. They were very proud of me and took a very healthy interest in what I was doing, even though they didn't understand much about it. It's awful to think back now and I feel very guilty about this, but when they came to visit me I always made sure I showed them round where they wouldn't meet anyone I knew because I wanted to keep the two worlds separate. I would have been a bit embarrassed if my fellow students had met them. I know it's generally true that you don't want people to meet your parents but I'd met some of the other parents and they were definitely not like my mum and dad. And I know it's part of the arrogance of the young to think they know more than their parents but I think it was more than that with me. It's sad, really, really sad but I think I outgrew my parents on all sorts of levels and it affected the relationship I had with them.

Apart from passing the exams at the end of the year, some of the friendships I made at university were definitely important. I've lost touch with people now but at

the time they were very important. My closest friend was incredibly upper middle class and he once invited me and my husband to his parents' house. And I've never seen such a massive house! He said, 'Do you want to come out and we'll play croquet?' and so we played croquet on his lawn and I just thought, 'Wow! I wish my mother could be here. She'd think I'd made it'. I felt quite comfortable there because I knew him but there was a strange, other worldly feeling to it. Again you think you're comfortable in one way and all the time you're dreading that you might let something slip or somebody might say, 'What does your father do, Linda?' His mum was a lecturer and I thought, 'I hope he never asks me what my mum does'. You know it made me really ashamed of something that I'm now very proud of but I was so worried at the time. The only thing that kept me confident was that I thought I was cleverer than this lad. I thought, 'I am on a level with you intellectually. I'm there. It doesn't matter.' It made me feel I had a right to be there. It's weird to think of it now.

I suppose I would now say I am middle class in that I live in a detached house and I do middle classy things and I have an awful feeling I think in middle class ways. I feel a bit guilty about it really. It's like you're letting down your background and I suppose I never forget my background and I never keep it hidden. One of my daughters is even more adamant and she says, 'I always tell people granddad was down the pits' and things like this and I'm thinking, 'I'm quite proud of you there because you could keep that quiet if you wanted' because she has a very middle class job and at the moment she's going through a really bad patch partly through not fitting in. In fact she's even been insulted because of her background and she's been told she's not quite good enough for the partner she's with now. So she's giving herself a tough time but she won't drop it and I'm quite proud of her for not doing because she could have.

She also tends to play down the middle class aspects of her background and her accent has become even more northern than when she was here. She brought some friends home recently and they were surprised we have a dining room and things like this so I said to her, 'What have you been telling them?' She says, 'What time's tea?' in front of her friends and I'll say, 'We usually have dinner about.....' and she'll say, 'Oh mum don't start calling it dinner' and I start to wonder when I did start calling it that. I would never say 'dinner' to my mother. In fact I'd probably fudge and say 'evening meal'. And it gets even more complicated if my mum and my daughter are there together. There was always this tension when I went home while I was at university because, despite being keen for me to go, I had to be careful not to do

anything that would be seen to be showing airs and graces to my sister or any of the rest of my family. When I went home I also realised I couldn't be close friends with people from home any more. They were actually better off than me with houses and cars but something had changed me that hadn't changed in them and that separated us. I probably thought I knew more than them which was quite arrogant at the time. But I was only twenty-two.

Despite all of this, going to university was a very positive experience for me. Probably like a lot of people from my sort of background, having parents who had been through the war, I had very specific ways of looking at the world and at life. University opened my eyes politically and I stopped taking things for granted and I challenged things more. It still affects the way I look at things, the way I analyse and question things. Mixing with people from *completely* different backgrounds who were a lot wealthier than me and more widely read and had different thoughts and views also made me more assertive. I think I grew up a lot. I had felt a very second class citizen when I first came away to university and when I came out I didn't have that feeling any more. I thought 'Well I've done this and I'm equal to it'. All that came out of that period of my life. It also made me understand much more about studying and opened my mind to a lot of things. I suddenly realised that education was a lot broader than that which the grammar school had given me, as good as that was, and so teaching then became another option for me.

I didn't have a career plan, it just evolved and there was an element of luck and chance to it but despite this I have had a good career anyway. I hear my daughters planning their careers now and I think, 'Wow'. That kind of thinking never occurred to me'. We did get some careers advice at school but I had been thinking of doing teaching at the time, very specialist teaching, support work actually and I was just told, 'No your qualifications are too high for that'. At university I was probably heading off towards the Civil Service but I think I just wanted to do something I enjoyed rather than what I ought to do. My mum and dad were keen for me to get a good job rather than have a career and they saw getting a degree as a way of getting a good job and not being short of money. I think I was of that generation where you fitted a career around your family if you had time for it.

I left uni in 1980. I gave birth to my first daughter in 1981 and I had three children under seven by the time I was thirty so I couldn't do a full time job. We had come back north again because of my husband's job. My husband's family were middle class and through my mother-in-law I became a volunteer in a literacy class.

I then started doing a few paid hours as a tutor which then became a full time post and that's still my area, although I don't actually stand up in front of a class and teach very much at all now. A big change in my life was when my husband died a few years ago. I reassessed everything and just left the job I was in. I came here just to do a few hours and then I applied for a senior position and that's where I am now. Despite the lack of planning I've done well in my career anyway and I'm very happy with where I've landed.

However, even if I hadn't gone to university I think I would have got here because I know people here in similar posts who studied later. But I definitely took the easier route because I studied at a time when I had nothing else to think about. Having a degree has helped me enormously because even though you didn't need specific qualifications to do this job, it was the degree that opened the door. Getting qualifications does become a habit though. I've now done an MA and I've already discussed doing a PhD with people at a summer school I'll be doing. They say, 'You need to think about whether it's worth all the effort and all the money and what you're going to get out of it ten years down the line' and I think, 'Well ten years down the line I'll be retired. I won't get anything out of it.' That's not the reason for me doing it though.

I have had moments of regret about going to university. I have often wondered over the years if I would have been better carrying on with physiotherapy. As a physio in private practice you could earn a heck of a lot. Going into teaching was definitely not the better option if you wanted money. But I think the major difference university makes is in confidence building. As well as the piece of paper helping me into places, I am without a doubt a more confident person for having gone. Certainly professionally I'm much more confident and I'm conscious of that in meetings when there are other members of staff who work here who didn't go. I hope it's not bordering on arrogance but I feel I fought to get there and so now I'm here with good reason if you like. I have worked also with people who came here to do their first certificate in literacy who then have gone on to get a degree through the access course and when they come back or write to you, you see the difference with them too.

I have mixed feelings about more and more people going on into higher education. In one way I think it's great that there are more courses and we're all more open-minded and cleverer and it's great when I see people from here go off to do that. But theirs is a very different experience from the one I had and I feel good

about mine. People can go and come out with a piece of paper but what that piece of paper represents seems to be different now from what it was then. I'm not sure there are the same benefits we got from it. Now you have to go and get a second bit of paper. These days higher education seems set up for a purpose and degrees are more practical. I saw that with my own kids. But that wasn't why we went. My degree wasn't linked to a job. It was education for its own sake and for changing the way you looked at things and for changing you as a person. It makes me sad that that's not part of it any more.

My parents did not overtly put pressure on me to go to university but it was definitely implicit and the down side of that is almost a feeling of resentment. The being clever bit does have two sides to it doesn't it? So I always thought, 'I will never do what my parents have done', but strangely when my son said he didn't want to go to university and I said, 'Well fine. That's not a problem', he said, 'Oh I thought you'd really mind'. So somewhere along the line I must have implied that university was the best route and he picked up on that. Then when he actually went to university after travelling around for a while, part of me was really chuffed. My mum was not happy when he said he wasn't going and I had to ask her to back off because I didn't want that pressure on him. I have been able to give my kids that kind of understanding of the pressures involved and also a more realistic view of the benefits of having a university degree. My parents didn't know how the system worked and they couldn't give me that.

I wish I had known a little bit about what a university environment was like before I went. I was very ill-prepared for the whole process of lectures and the process of assessment and this idea of tutorials and all of that. It was just completely new to me. I thought that I would sit in this massive lecture theatre and take notes all the time and just walk around looking superior and of course the reality's nothing like that. I wish I'd thought a bit more about the topic I'd done at university and asked myself, 'Why am I really doing this?' It was almost like university was the end bit not the beginning bit. It's like when you think about giving birth. You think about the day of the birth and then you have the baby but you don't think beyond that. I think that was it.

## Liz

I went to university on a kind of conveyor belt from school in a lot of ways. I was fairly bright with a mum who talked to me all the time so I picked up language quickly and soon learned to read when I went to infant school and got put in the A stream at junior school. There were forty eight kids in my class would you believe. I then passed my eleven plus, got put in the grammar school and went through 'O' levels and 'A' levels. And because it was a grammar school it was assumed that if you could go to university you would go. It was also just understood that polytechnic was second best and teacher training was third best so going to university was what everybody was doing. Despite these expectations from school, it wasn't until I was sixteen that I realised people like me went to university so I didn't spend my entire school career thinking I would go. Until then my ideas about students came from watching University Challenge. I saw them as a rarefied elite, a different class of people who were very clever. When I say class I don't mean that I thought I was working class so wouldn't go to university because of that. I don't define myself in those ways. It's just it was outside my experience and I wasn't aware of anyone who was going until I had this boyfriend when I was sixteen and he was talking about applying, which came as a surprise to me. I think I would have gone to uni anyway because once I was in the upper sixth it became apparent that most of the other students were applying to uni. I think prior to that I thought I would get a job, but my expectations changed in the sixth form. Actually in those days with 'A' levels you probably got a job in a bank but I wouldn't have wanted that. I wanted to work with people and thought I would go in to teaching.

I wasn't sure what kind of teaching I would do and changed my mind depending on my favourite subject at any given time. Careers advice was useless because it was just the biology teacher but my mum didn't help there either. She didn't see them as being able to help me and told me to tell them anything because they just wanted to put something on their bit of paper. But when I was a teenager we had this Pears Cyclopaedia and I got interested in psychology through reading that, although it was only later that I found out it was actually psychology I had been reading about. Longer term I thought about becoming an educational psychologist but I really had no idea you could do a degree and then a one year PGCE. I thought either you did a degree or you became a teacher and it was only when I was applying to do psychology that I discovered you could train as teacher in one year as well.

My parents were not at all pushy. In fact my sister was just as bright as me and actually passed her eleven plus and could have gone to the grammar school like me. But they sent her to the secondary modern because they thought she'd be happier there. That school became a comprehensive and she did go on to do 'A' levels. So there was no expectation that I would go to university, and when I first talked about it my dad wasn't happy. I think he was concerned about how much it would cost, but also he was in his forties when I was born and was kind of old fashioned. He probably thought I'd just get married and have children and waste it so there was no point. Maybe there was also some resentment there because he never had those opportunities and left school at fourteen with no qualifications at all. Although my mum denies it, I think he was probably dyslexic. He used to refer to my homework from school as 'swotting'. Even though my dad wasn't keen on it I was determined to go. I arranged to meet somebody from the local education authority and found out that I would get enough grant to allow me to do that.

I don't think my mum resented it. She was surprised when I went to university because she always thought I'd work in a shop or an office and wasn't expecting me to be bright enough. But she had her school leaving certificate and was very, very good at what she did and had some quite high powered jobs for which she was very well paid and she was happy doing that. But my parents were proud of me too and I actually went to my graduation ceremony just so they could come and watch. But I don't think they ever really understood and my dad still sometimes referred to me as 'the educated one'.

The summer before I went to university I was a bit nervous that I wouldn't cope but I thought I'd be OK. But when I got there I just felt totally out of my depth and overwhelmed really. I once read about something called 'the late adolescent identity crisis' in a psychology book and I thought 'yeah that's what happened to me'. It had nothing to do with the work because it was Fresher's Week and term hadn't started yet. Things were going on but with great long gaps in between and suddenly I was responsible for meeting all these people, doing my own cooking, doing my own washing, doing everything. What I should have done of course is gone along to the kitchen and waited for someone else to appear instead of going back to my room with a cup of coffee. I should have focused on getting through the week instead of wondering what I was going to do with my life. As it was, I felt lost and lonely and I went home that first weekend and didn't go back.

I think my parents were quite glad. It was never a case of taking me back and telling me to face up to it and, because of some problems with the car, I didn't even go back with them to get my stuff. My mum then rang the local teacher training college, got me a place and I started there within the week. It wasn't really a decision I made myself and all the time I was thinking 'I shouldn't be here I should be at university'. I started to be haunted by it and one day I skived off, went back up to uni, asked to go back and they offered me a place for the following October. So I immediately dropped out of teacher training college and worked as a waitress until it was time to go back up.

Being one year older I was much stronger and more determined to do it. And whether it was because of this or due to luck, I met a girl on the second day who I stayed friends with for a long time. But I probably didn't have a 'normal' student experience. I mean the first year was OK although I didn't like being on campus and tried to get off as much as possible. And academically I did alright and almost got a first. I always found psychology interesting and still do, although back then it was trying to prove itself as a science so there was too much focus on little experiments to do stats on and too much ignoring the wider picture. But I had complications in that I took up with this lad when I was in the first year who dropped out and came back to live with me. This meant he couldn't get dole and I was only getting half a grant. My parents were supposed to be making up the difference but they didn't because they couldn't afford it as my sister had just gone to university as well, so financially we were really, really struggling.

I couldn't afford to get the bus to uni so I hitched in every day and did all my work in the library there. I did very little work at home. In the evenings we'd just watch telly and if ever we went to the pub we'd each have a half and make it last all evening. It was so grim. Every time I went on campus this feeling of gloom would come on me and at the start of every term I'd think 'oh no I'm back here'. I'd actually forgotten how bad I felt until I went back there last year and within about five minutes I started to feel really, really depressed. Awful. It just all came back to me how awful I found it.

We were together about four years this lad and me but in retrospect I should have broken up with him really because I wasn't happy. I cared about him but not enough to put myself through what I did. I think I just kind of went along with it. But I'm glad I stuck university out. Having dropped out once I was determined to go back



and ever since then I don't tend to drop out of things. I stick at them and see them through. My sister dropped out of university and I think she regrets it because everyone around her has got degrees and I would also have had that regret if I hadn't done it. If I hadn't gone to university after school I would definitely have done so as an adult. It makes you feel better about yourself doesn't it? This is not the reason I went at the time, but looking back now I know I've got a degree and I know I'm not stupid

After graduating I stayed up near university and got a job in social care and that's where I met my future husband. I think this has had the biggest impact on my whole life. Meeting him and falling head over heels in love with him feels like a pivotal moment in my life. Realistically, having the children has had the biggest impact but meeting him always feels bigger than that. And even now we are not together any more he's still important to me and always will be. I can't just write off half my life.

After we'd been up near university for about eight years we both got bored. Then by chance my future husband came down here to stay with a friend. He liked it very much and was keen to move down. I am someone who has always put personal relationships first and I go with the flow so that's what we did. We were both unemployed for a time and when I returned to work it was in social care again. After some years I got fed up with working holidays and shifts and finally went to do my PGCE. I think I'd applied to do it about four times before but had never gone. By this time it was no longer a step towards becoming an educational psychologist because I was already in my early thirties and had been trying to get pregnant for years. I'd decided at the age of sixteen that I wanted children and never wavered from that.

It was a very stressful time because it all started to go wrong and I certainly don't think I was supported enough by the college. I think if I hadn't have dropped out of university the first time I might have thought 'sod this' but I stuck it out to the very bitter end and failed. I could have gone back to try and pass my teaching practice but the summer after I failed I had my first attempt at IVF and managed to get pregnant with twins. Two women on the course had had miscarriages and I didn't want to risk the pregnancy so I didn't go back to college or work while I was pregnant and didn't get another job until the day they started infant school. Since then I have always fitted work in around them, doing qualifications as I went along.

So now I'm in my early fifties and am still wondering what I'm going to do when I grow up. And I do feel I haven't achieved what I could have done so I want to prove to myself that I can do it really. I still have time but if I'm going to retire at sixty-five I really need to get a move on. That's why I'm going to do an MA next year. I actually had a place to do it a few years ago but the summer before I was due to start my marriage broke up so I didn't go. I told people I didn't have the time or the money but the real reason was that my situation had been very stable when I applied for it but then everything was thrown up in the air. I had been feeling I needed a challenge and then suddenly everything seemed challenging enough and I didn't need another plate to spin. Now the kids are grown up and I'm in a new relationship, things feel more settled and I do feel ready for the challenge again.

It's strange but I was at a party recently and I'm not sure how it came out but at one point it became apparent that everyone in the room apart from me was a director of something. So I suppose I've underachieved in that sense. If I had been focused on a career I might have planned it more and been more advanced in it now. But there wasn't an expectation when I went to university back in the seventies that it was to get a good job. It was more 'you can go to university or you can do the hippy trail in India' or whatever. The university was like an end in itself. I think the focus changed in the eighties when a lot of people got into money and a degree became a move towards an end. Kids today have to see it more as a means to an end because they don't get grants and they're going to be in debt when they come out of university. Because you are having to pay for it, it's seen as an investment in your future career and almost as vocational training for your work. Having said that my son wants to do philosophy and he has even less of a clue about what he wants to do afterwards than I did.

So the people I knew when I was in my third year at university weren't applying for jobs and most people left the university and didn't work for a while or were on job creation schemes because there was a lot of unemployment then as well. You just gradually found your way into a job didn't you? And yet a lot of those people do have quite high powered jobs now, including the lad I lived with that I told you about. And when you see these people with all this money and holiday homes abroad or whatever I think 'Could I? Should I? Why didn't I?' What was the difference? Would I feel out of my depth? Would I feel uncomfortable? Is it because I'm not very ambitious as a person? Was it laziness? Is it just circumstances? I

wonder if it's because I don't come from that sort of academic background that I don't have those kind of expectations of myself? If my dad had been some kind of senior accountant and my mum was headmistress or something maybe I might have achieved more perhaps.

But higher level jobs are about managing other people and I'm not comfortable with telling other people what to do and being prescriptive. Maybe other people are more secure and confident in themselves. I have too much insecurity for it to be easy but I push myself and there's a little walnut inside me that is quite secure and that's probably from being loved as a child. There are different kinds of success and it comes back to being true to yourself and being the person you are supposed to be. I'm not sure whether I'm there yet but there's more to life than work and getting a qualification and getting a good job so I don't envy people in high powered jobs at all. Life isn't about just getting a qualification and getting a good job. It's all about the other things as well like having two kids who are doing OK and about whom I think, 'Yeah, they're alright'.

I do think of myself as middle class now whereas I didn't before, although I don't think my family were stereotypically working class. We lived on quite a nice housing estate and my father had a skilled trade and my mum was a secretary so they had good jobs and we owned our house. It wasn't a pint of ale and a flat cap and a whippet kind of working class. So jumping classes hasn't really caused me any problems. I have moved from something that was, I suppose, upper working class to something that feels kind of middle class but not massively further away. I'm not married to a doctor and haven't got loads of money you know. In terms of finance I've probably actually got less money than my parents had but I suppose the change is in your head not your circumstances isn't it? It's not to do with money it's to do with attitudes and values and the newspaper you read and what you do in your spare time. It's probably university that makes a difference.

It feels elitist saying this but it's fairly important that people I am in relationships with have degrees. When I first did internet dating they asked if it was essential that someone had a degree and I put down that it wasn't because it shouldn't be a defining characteristic of the person. But I did want a certain kind of person, probably someone who could have gone to university if they'd wanted to, and as time went on I realised that I would have more in common with someone if they had been through that experience, because it actually makes you who you are.

So now I've had several relationships with people who weren't graduates I do think it matters.

When I first went to university I thought that I'd be meeting lots of really interesting people who were very bright and very articulate and probably more interesting than I was and more right on than I was and all this kind of thing and actually it all seemed a bit middle class, a bit boring and over-protected. But then whenever I went home in my early twenties I used to feel like I was regressing. I used to try and fit in with the role my parents expected of me. It was different when we stayed with my husband's parents. They were both graduates and this was the kind of environment where people read the Guardian and talked about ideas and had debates over breakfast. My family was somewhere you didn't talk about stuff like that. I think going to university and mixing with people like that maybe made me more open to that sort of thing. I think I moved into a middle class intellectual kind of a place and as my parents were not in that place I suppose I moved away from them. My own kids have had a solidly middle class upbringing in that respect. They have grown up in an environment where it's OK to talk about feelings and to discuss your views on things.

But I also think that how I am as a parent is to do with how I was parented myself. I didn't get on with my dad as a teenager but he liked small children and babies and both my parents doted on us. My memories of childhood are that they were quite strict but also that their lives revolved around us which gives you a sense of security doesn't it? And I was also very happy as a teenager at home, had some really good mates that I used to do stuff with and it was lovely. But I also wanted to do some things differently to my parents of course and studying developmental psychology at that time, when the emphasis was all on nurture, made me determined to bring my kids up in a non-sexist way. So they both had Lego and cars and they both had dolls. Then you realise a lot more is innate than I was taught! And I have been very lax as a parent really. I let them do their own stuff pretty much and I just trust them. They're actually no bother and they're lovely; a great support and a comfort to me and I wouldn't want to be on my own. It's nice having them here you know?

I always just expected they would go to university. My son is very bright and wants to do philosophy and I'm sure he could have an academic career. I don't know what else he'd do with a philosophy degree. But I would still support him if he

wanted to be a plumber even though I would be disappointed because I also think it's even more important these days to have a degree. The fewer academic qualifications you have, the more likely it is for your job to be boring. Having said that my daughter wants to be an actress and I support her in that. She's realistic about having to do hair braiding and face painting or teaching to bring in a bit of cash but she still has to go for it. I still want her to do well academically but there's different ways you can do things and it's never too late and you've got to go with what feels right as well. I think the most important thing is being yourself and being true to yourself.

I am divided in my feelings about mass higher education. The standard of teaching in schools has definitely improved and most bright kids get degrees now. So part of me feels education should be open to all, everyone should have that opportunity and why shouldn't kids be getting qualifications? I also think students should have a grant like we had no matter about the expense, so that getting an education is not just seen as a means to an end. That said, I am concerned about the constant raising of the bar in terms of qualifications. If a degree is now the equivalent of 'A' levels when we did them, then soon the standard qualification will be an MA. So another part of me really feels like it's dumbing the system down and devaluing the qualification that I've got.

I also think 'what are all these people going to do with all these degrees? There aren't that many graduate level jobs around'. And then again part of me also thinks that there's loads of jobs out there that we don't know about and things change all the time. The jobs that are around now are very different to those that were around when we graduated. So it depends how you're looking at it.

If I hadn't gone to university I think my life would have been far more conventional than it is now. I had quite a conventional upbringing and my sister and I both thought we'd recreate the same kind of family we had grown up in, with cousins and things, just a generation further on. I probably would have stayed at home, married younger, lived out on a little modern estate and worked in a bank. Having said that, for a long time my life did look very conventional on the outside. I was married with two kids and a husband who went out to work. I found I was put in this box and I was living this stereotyped life and I found it strange how I had ended up like that. But on the inside I felt that I was different. Moving away from home to go to university had changed my life and my mindset. I'd done things I would not have

otherwise done such as hitchhiking all over the place in summer, living in a shared house, taking drugs and this kind of stuff so that changed me, my life and my mindset.

I did jump categories when my marriage broke up. In one fell swoop I went from being someone who was very respectable to someone who could be seen as quite feckless, you know a single mother living on benefits. Whereas, actually, I was the same person inside. But I don't feel I'm very straight and normal and I do like people to think I'm a bit left wing and creative and I like to mix with people who are a bit different and interesting and who think about things and challenge them. And I don't want people to think I'm feckless and disreputable, just a bit unconventional.

So this determination to see things through and my degree are the things I got out of going to university. Although I haven't done degree level jobs it looks good on paper, people are impressed by the fact that I did psychology and I think it helped me get the jobs I have done. And, strangely, it's helped me in my relationship with my partner. He's a professor and although I am impressed by that I'm not overwhelmed or tongue tied because I know I'm capable. That's the difference it makes. And when I was stuck at home being a full time wife and mum I always knew there was more to me than that. It's that one piece of paper that matters and not the rest of it.

Liz mentions *The Pears Cyclopaedia* which is an annually published, one volume encyclopaedia.

## Sally

I say that I come from a working class background but I suppose, looking back on it, we were probably middle working class. My mum was a hairdresser and had her own shop and my dad was an electrician. There's an historical aspect to it as well because my grandparents would be horrified if I said I was working class. They all fought all their lives to get away from that. They all had their own houses and cars and probably voted Conservative for the snob value. But my mum's parents felt they were less than my paternal grandparents because my paternal grandfather was a foreman. It used to wind me up how my maternal grandparents always seemed smaller when they were all together. So they all wanted to be middle class but I am a socialist and wanted to be working class. My dad was staunchly red. He used to drink in the Conservative club in our village because it was cheaper but he always wore a red tie when he did.

But you move on and change and now I am middle class because I've been to university, I've got a fairly middle class job, my kids are middle class, the house I live in is middle class and all of that. That's the way it is. I still feel that I come from a working class background but I think it's a romanticised view because I want to feel like that. I don't want to be thought of as somebody who is boring and middle class but I am. Well I'm middle class but I hope I'm not boring. I'd much more be a bit avant-garde and a bit different. But I'm very proud of my working class, middle class-ish background and I would never want to lose that. For me the pride in that is about coming from the north. I absolutely love the idea of being from here. I think it's hard and gritty and working class and we stick at things and we work and work and work. That's what people did up here because they had to. We don't have any of this effete southern nonsense up here!

Actually I do love the South as well. I also quite enjoy being the token northerner. When I first went to university I was the only student on my course from the north. I met a girl from Guernsey who told me she had never been to the north and asked if we all still wear flat caps and clogs and fly pigeons. I know it was thirty years ago but she actually thought it was like that up here. So I just said, 'Yes it's just like Coronation St. and we don't want any Southerners up here'. She obviously thought, 'How have you managed to get out?' But I love the idea of coming from hardworking stock where people call a spade a spade. Although I no longer speak with a broad accent I am still fairly direct and I have been told I am quite scary. That

upset me at first because I wouldn't want to hurt anyone's feelings but as I've got older I have become more outspoken. I suppose I want to get things done more urgently and that comes with age and having had kids who take up so much of your time.

I had to rack my brains to try and think who else in my family had gone to university. At first I couldn't think of anybody and then I remembered some distant cousins who were older than me and different to me and with whom I didn't have much contact. So I don't know why I decided to go. I suppose it was just a matter of course because I went to a very academic school, although I'm not particularly academic. I've always been interested in literature and music but at that school you went off to do history or Latin at university and I was most definitely not like that. I left at sixteen to do a two year art course at the local technical college and I think they were relieved when I went. I suppose I was also pushed, but not pressured, by my parents. Although they assumed university was the next step because I'd been to grammar school, they would have accepted whatever I did and it wouldn't have made any difference to them. My brother is much younger than me and possibly he would have gone and done art like me. But he was only teenager when my dad died and I think he then decided to follow in dad's footsteps and become an electrician. He's never said as much but I think he regrets not going.

I don't know where I got my information about university from. I can't remember getting any specific information about courses or about which college specialised in which particular area, but I must have done because places that do art and design are usually good at that and the course at the technical college automatically led on to university. School hadn't provided much information although one teacher was really helpful. I suppose you just talk to people and I just thought I'd have a great time and didn't want to miss out.

Two friends of mine didn't go to university. Actually quite a few people I was at technical college with didn't go, or they started and then they left. I was shocked and horrified by that. I suppose I didn't know what else I could do. Also if you've struggled to get there why just pack it in? I found it really, really hard when people left. They've all got different careers now and I wonder where their creativity goes. I cling on to mine. I like doing anything creative whether it's sewing or decorating or doing craft fairs or whatever because I think, 'Yes. This is what I can do.' Even though I work full time as a teacher I still do my own work because I get so much out



of it. I am a textile designer and if I don't do that it's as if I'm not quite all there. I feel as if I'm missing something.

I specialise in woven textiles and I even used to wonder why friends diversified from this, but I don't do that as much now. Now I think that if you have design ability you also have transferable skills. Mind you, I've recently been working with paper and found myself wondering if I should really be doing that! I'm also thinking of starting a business with my son because I am easing off my teaching. Teaching is definitely a younger person's profession and I am finding the students I teach harder and harder to work with. Starting a business entirely unrelated to my creativity would have been unthinkable ten or fifteen years ago. Even now I feel guilty because I think I've had all this training that I will no longer be using. I'm sure I'll come home and do art work just to keep my hand in.

I had quite an unusual experience of university. I had met my future husband at technical college. He was fifteen years older than me and a tutor on the course. He had originally come up north with his wife and children but they were in the process of splitting up and we started seeing each other. When I went to London he came with me. It was like being married and I didn't get as much of that student way of life where I could think, 'Oh I can just sleep in today' or 'I can go out all night'. I had to be an adult almost straight away really, even though he sort of looked after me too. I did have somebody there to help but I still had to just get on with it.

In a way I also had a personal tutor and a kind of double learning experience. He taught me an awful lot about reading, about writers and films and everything really. Also our friends were mainly his friends, artists, publishers and writers and those kinds of people. We spent a lot of time in the pub with them and because they were older and more experienced I also learned a lot from them. So I was quite privileged because that went on alongside whatever I was doing at university. It was like I had two lives and I probably grew up much faster than many of my friends. I stopped being as shy as I had been. I don't know what my experience would have been if I'd gone to university on my own. I had been excited at the thought of going down to London but I think I was more relaxed than if I'd been going on my own. I remember quite clearly what I wore on the first day. I had been thinking hard about it and I turned a forties' floral dress I had into a jacket which I thought looked fantastic.

I did feel lucky to be there. I don't mean lucky in the sense of being a poor girl from a working class background, although it is quite a lucky thing to go when you've not had anybody in your family go before. What I mean is that I had always wanted to go to one of the London colleges but maybe didn't think I was good enough and so I had to work really hard to get there. But I was accepted at a really prestigious institution. I do get a certain pleasure from telling people I went there because they are always very impressed. But I never know if they're thinking, 'How the hell did she get there?' But I knew I had the ability because I was really young when I got a place. Most of the people there had done a foundation year after sixth form and were older than me. I now feel that maybe I should have gone somewhere a bit more experimental and crafty but I would not have dared refuse an offer from them. I do wonder what would have happened if I'd gone to a different college.

I also liked everybody on the course although there were some weird people. A lot of people on my course were upper middle class and it surprised me that they were alright. I suppose when you're working class you get this idea that they are painful and not very nice. The tutors were odd in the main. I suppose I was quite in awe of them because I thought they were far cleverer than me. When I look back now I think 'Why was I even bothered?' They were interesting people but some of them were rubbish teachers and I used to fall asleep in lectures sometimes when they turned the lights down. I think it was the subject that really carried me along rather than anything else because I loved doing it and did it all the time. I hadn't gone far enough with it at college up to being eighteen and I knew there was a lot more to come. I didn't think about doing anything else. What else would I have done?

I was also lucky to have absolutely loved university. It was great to be there. I was in a lovely old building in central London. I remember hearing dray horses walking past sometimes and it was a special thing you know? People had been there before me who I respected and the college had a great history. I also loved living in London. It was brilliant. But I felt quite on my own in a way. Even though I was there with my future husband, when I was at university I was often on my own because I wasn't part of the group that lived together and did things in the evening together. That didn't bother me though because I'd been an only child till I was fourteen so I was used to being on my own. I did have friends but I was quite happy to go wandering off on my own and go to a gallery or go to the V&A, things like that. I still enjoy wandering round London on my own to this day.

I can't remember any downsides. The hardest part for me was doing the essays and even that wasn't a downside really. I've never been particularly brilliant at writing and I'd never been taught how to write. I can't waffle either so I think my writing is sometimes a bit boring but I loved the subject and did enjoy reading and researching. We were also short of money for a while because my future husband didn't have a job and we were living on my grant. But we were living rent free in the house of one of his friends and we always got by. We never had any money but we had a very rich life.

My future husband moved back north just before my final year because he had found a job and his children were here. I used to come home every weekend which was a strain and I probably didn't do as much work as I should have done. Even though I used to stay late at college most evenings, I probably didn't fully commit myself to the work and I was disappointed with my final grade. Because I was so young I wasn't strong enough or forceful enough to say, 'Right. You go back and take the job and I'll do my thing. I'm not coming home every weekend'. Equally perhaps he should have said 'Look don't come home every weekend'. At the time I thought everything was great, but looking back I was only sixteen when I met him and I probably missed out on some things by not doing it on my own. I would have loved to have travelled for example. I feel sad because I know that I'll never go to all the places I want to now because I will never be able to afford it. But there's no point in regretting it. We were together over twenty years, it wasn't a bad relationship and we had some fantastic times.

When I finished university I had expected to be more ready to get a job. These days there are so many courses you can do, but when I went to university there was little choice within my subject area. So it became clear that I would have to do a postgraduate course and I was torn about where to do that. I do remember thinking 'Am I ready to go back?' Should I stay another year and do a postgraduate course down here?' I don't actually think I was ready to come back and all these years later I still miss being in London if I don't go back regularly. Logically the relationship was a pull that I should have resisted, but you're not always logical where relationships are concerned are you? I had found it very hard to come up every weekend but I needn't have continued to do that. I could have come up every month or every fortnight but I was young and I didn't think like that. Now I'd be up every six months.

So I did a year's postgraduate study at a university near our home. I had wanted to come back to this area eventually and work in the mills as a textile designer and, as my undergraduate course had been very design orientated, I wanted to do something technical that would prepare me better for industry. But the course I did was so very different to what I had been doing and I failed the dyeing exam so that meant I failed the whole course. This has haunted me ever since and I hate telling you this even now I am in my fifties and have completed an MA since then.

When I went to university I just wanted to go and didn't really think about jobs at that time. However, I did expect that I would be able to do anything I wanted after my degree. Then when I applied for jobs in mills, everyone said I was over qualified. In those days mills round here would take in kids of fifteen and sixteen and teach them to do design if they had an aptitude for it. They weren't going to have anyone coming up from London with their fancy ways telling them how to do it. I would probably have been better off staying in London but my romantic idea was to go and work in the textile industry where it's gritty and real. Even after all these years I would still love to work in the mills. I love the big stone structures and the smell of wool grease and the sound of the machines clanging away.

Actually one of the reasons I may have failed my postgraduate course was that I was working part time at an FE college at the same time. I gradually built up my days and have worked in colleges and universities in the area ever since, although I have always done other things such as freelance work in between. When I was small I did think I wanted to be a teacher but I also thought I'd like to be a nurse or join the navy. But being a teacher was always there in the background. Now I think I should have maybe done something different because I have never got used to doing it. I still find teaching hard and scary, although I love working with the students and I do enjoy showing other people how to do things and sharing my knowledge.

I'm not particularly career minded. When I was young I thought I could conquer the world but you need to be like that at that age, don't you? I've actually never wanted to jet off and work for a big high flying company in America or be principal of a college. I've never been that pushy and have always wanted to do the things I enjoy. Of course I would love to have a job that I enjoy which also pays

extremely well and teaching certainly doesn't do that. My husband was much more career minded and had a good job when he retired and he always encouraged me to apply for things with more money and more responsibility. But I look at people who are higher up than me and I think, 'You might earn more than me but look at all the stress you've got'. I think life's stressful enough without adding to it with work. I want a life as well as work.

I did once apply for a job and then afterwards I thought 'Oh God. Why did I do that?' I had to commute and by then I had one child and when the other came along I just couldn't cope and I gave up the job. Both my stepsons came to live with us when their mother died and we eventually had three children ourselves. I always wanted children and would have been devastated if I hadn't have had them, but having children changes your life completely doesn't it? You have to fit in with them because they don't fit in with you. I would say having kids, more than anything else, has had the greatest impact on my life. And I think it's hard enough going to work and doing what you do with kids without all that added stress of being this amazing career woman. I wouldn't have wanted that really. I think that would have been too hard.

I actually think things have just happened to me in my life. I seem to have just bumbled along and I sometimes ask myself why I wasn't more dynamic in forcing my career to go a certain way, particularly now I'm starting to grumble about it. But it's my own fault because I must have been fairly happy with it or I would have made changes. Looking back I have done quite a lot. I've had three kids who are doing well and if I didn't have anything else that alone would be enough. I also had a good marriage as long as it lasted and I've done things at work and had students through my hands who have gone on to be successful. But I do think I've got loads more to do and I think that's why I'm always rushing around. I see the years just go zipping past. Someone said to me the other day that when my boys have kids they'll be bringing them to me to look after. I was horrified. People might think I'm freaky but I can't do that. I've got too much else to do. When I spoke to my eldest about it he just said, 'Oh mother I wouldn't feel that' and I said, 'Good because I'm not looking after them'.

Going to university is a special experience and I think everybody should have the *right* to go. And I am absolutely against students now having to pay for their degrees. I think it changes the experience completely for them. They should be

concentrating on study and having a good time and dragging everything they can out of it because you don't get that time again and it's part of growing up. They shouldn't be under pressure of thinking how to pay it back. For me it is one time in your life when you are not under pressure. I did used to think that everybody *should* go and at one time would have pushed my own kids in that direction. Then my son only lasted a term at university and after a couple of years of doing nothing much he got a really good job. He might have missed out on certain things but he didn't want to do it. So now I think the government pushing everybody into it is absolutely ridiculous. Why shouldn't someone be a joiner if they want to be? We've always been a bit like that in this country though. It's beneath us to be waiting on in a restaurant.

I have been able to do things for my kids that my parents couldn't do for me. So when my son dropped out he asked if he could come home and I said yes and we were able to look after him financially. I would have felt guilty about living with my parents for that long. I was always a bit sensitive about asking for money and I worked in my mum's shop from being very young. But there is less reason for our kids to leave home because we talk to them on an equal level about books, poetry, art and films and don't stop them watching certain things on the television and discuss things with them. As educated middle class people we're more like our kids whereas I outgrew my parents. And I do think that's to do with education rather than class as such.

If I hadn't gone to university I think I'd have probably gone mad. I'm obviously saying this with hindsight but I know in my own family there have been people who have been cut off photographs. It's frightening really because there was one of my relatives who liked a good time and liked a drink and she was put in a lunatic asylum. When my mum told me I thought 'That sounds like me.' I like a drink and a good time and have done things I'm not all that happy about. And I look at my own mum who had the chance to be a dancer in London but her father wouldn't let her. I'm the next generation and I don't think I would have stayed and done what she's done, even though she's less conventional than she seems on the outside. Although university has allowed me to be less conventional I think I would have been unconventional anyway. And I would definitely have had to do something creative. University was a springboard and if I hadn't gone I think I would always have been searching for that springboard to give me that lift.

It seems like only two minutes ago that I was at university. Sometimes my students, who are only sixteen, ask me when I went to college and I think, 'Oh God I'm not going to tell them' because they'll say, 'Whoa! That's a long time ago'. But it was a massive thing in my life. I was the only person in my year who went to London and I'm really proud of that and I'm not a snob about much but it was a fantastic achievement to get into the college I went to. So I look back on it as if it was very recent and I can't think of my life without having done that. It was brilliant. It was.

## Yvonne

Until my son started university in 2008 I was the only person in my family to have gone into higher education. In fact I can only think of my sons and one of my nieces who have ever stayed in school beyond the compulsory leaving age, and even she dropped out. And my crown as 'the only girl with a degree' is likely to be mine for some time yet. This may make it seem that I come from a family that doesn't value education but this would be too simplistic an assessment, although I certainly come from a family that has had some problems with formal schooling. I was in school seven years before I stopped dreaming about leaving, so I can empathise with those of my siblings for whom that yearning did not abate. One of the great benefits of doing my research is that I have been able to tease out various strands from the densely woven fabric of my family's (and lots of other families') relationship with education. This is not the place to tell these stories, but the complex, often inconsistent, contradictory and dissonant messages about education that came from my parents has ensured that I don't have a straightforward view of the meaning and purpose of higher education in general and my place in it specifically. This is not to say I think my parents' views were idiosyncratic. I have heard similar views articulated at various points in all the higher education stories I have heard for my research. I have also come to interpret their attitude as the collision between their emotional investment in their children, their own experiences (and/or lack of them) and the degree to which they took up or resisted the dominant discourses that prevailed at those particular points in time. So, for example, my parents could simultaneously revere someone with 'letters after their name' or disparage them ('never done a day's work in their life') and when they referred to me as 'clever' this could either be an expression of their pride in or disapproval of me.

I went to a girls' grammar school even though my parents had been told there was 'no chance' of me passing the eleven plus. I had never felt happy at primary school, although I had started to feel more settled in my last year there, but when I started at the grammar school I plumbed new depths of misery. The only time I have felt comparably despairing was when my first marriage ended. I had always felt 'different' at my primary school, which had a lot to do with having parents who weren't English, but at grammar school I actually felt inferior, a feeling that the head and some of the teachers actively fostered. So, in addition to my inability to get to grips with school in general, I felt I definitely didn't belong in this school and the effort of pretending I did literally made me ill. It wasn't just a general anxiety. It was



a repeated, specific and daily pressure to dissemble. One tiny example was when we talked about our houses in French. I listened to girls say, 'Dans ma maison il y a neuf pièces' (there's nine rooms in my house) and 'J'ai une chambre à moi' (I have my own bedroom). How could I tell them how tiny my house was ('cinq pièces'), particularly when earlier we'd revealed how many people there were living in it (six personnes). In the end my shame won out over my honesty and I based my description on some new build houses near my primary school. Luckily the friend I had at primary school had an aunty who lived in a similar house and I had been there a couple of times. I'm not sure what I would have done otherwise.

Luckily for me West Yorkshire embraced the comprehensive system early and our school was earmarked to become a sixth form college. The head and most of the older, stern, unmarried women teachers had left by the second term of my second year and the whole atmosphere of the school changed almost overnight. I'm not sure I would have survived otherwise but I'd already made up my mind at the beginning of the year that I was going to make a better fist of my second year. I was not going to be beaten, particularly not by what I considered to be unjust treatment. I have read about 'resilience' being a factor in whether you do well at school and I definitely have that. But I'm not sure I'd have survived if the whole regime didn't change as well. As it was, I knuckled down and did really well in the exams we sat just before Christmas in my second year. I felt elated and, it must be said, triumphant and from then on doing well at school became associated in my mind with being happy. I felt that my wellbeing depended on getting good marks so I just got my head down and worked and worked and made sure I continued to produce educational success. I hardly missed a day of school after that and doing my schoolwork was not a chore really. Hard work was a fact of my parents' lives and I just expected that I would always have to work hard. One of my friends told me recently, 'You were such a swot' and I was because I really did enjoy the work. I still do love academic labour and my husband says he often catches me smiling as I work. I don't always agree with his conclusion that I am 'living the dream' but I am certainly doing what I enjoy the most.

It seems strange to say it, but I never gave any thought to where all this hard work and doing well at school might lead. I wasn't thinking, 'If I do well I can go to university.' If anyone had stopped to ask, 'What are you going to do when you leave?' I'd have told them I was going to go work in a bank because that was a good, secure job for a girl in those days. Both my younger sisters went to work in

banks after leaving school. However, there was never any question in my mind that I would want to stay into the sixth form. Why wouldn't I when I enjoyed school and learning so much and had the chance to do what I loved? But I never gave university a second thought. However, once into the sixth form it became clear that everyone assumed, at least the teachers did, that it was preparation for university or for teacher training college. I didn't really know anyone who had gone to university. There was Ken Barlow from Coronation Street and he was so dreary I didn't want to end up like him. The students from University Challenge also seemed a bit stuck up. I suppose the only graduates I knew in the flesh were my teachers. As a teenage girl interested in clothes and make up and boys, I certainly didn't aspire to be like the spinster teachers we had when I first went to the grammar school. Some of the teachers who replaced them later became colleagues when I was teaching and a few became friends, which is when I realised how different my life was to anything I might have imagined aged eighteen.

I suppose what really made me think I could go to university was when some of my friends started going out with students. A couple of these guys were at Oxford and they actually seemed quite normal and OK and so I thought, 'Well if they can do it so can I'. But the defining moment for me was when I was called into the principal's office because I hadn't done a practice UCCA application, as UCAS was called in those days. This is how my school was at that time. He more or less told me I should apply so that was it really. I sent off for prospectuses but I didn't have a clue about how to go about it. I'd obviously not paid any attention to any advice on decision-making and I applied to a right motley set of universities. I chose Sheffield because some students from there had been to visit our school and they seemed really nice. I went on an open day there as well. My sister came with me and we met these nice lads who took us around and that's why I picked the university I did. I used the same objective criteria in rejecting another of my choices. I'd gone up there with mam on a freezing cold January day with the wind blowing off the North Sea. By the time I got to the interview I decided there was no way I could survive in these conditions. I also remember feeling ashamed that day because mam had taken her shopping bag as usual instead of a handbag. Now I'm ashamed that I was ashamed.

I took my last exam at school on Friday 24<sup>th</sup> June 1977. That date is imprinted on my brain because I felt such a sense of relief that the hard slog was at an end. It didn't enter my head that it might all be starting up again if I went to

university. As soon as I put my pen down I remember thinking, 'This is the end of this part of my life and the start of a completely new phase'. I had become really tired and run down before my exams and I think I was actually burned out. There was no space in our house for doing homework, no quiet time set aside, no routine established that would facilitate doing it. I mainly did mine lying on my bed but it was not unknown for me to do it in the living room while family life and the television went on around me. But I felt I needed a more conducive atmosphere in which to revise, so a couple of months before my A levels I started going straight from school to the library in town. I'd walk home when the library closed to clear my head. Mam saved my tea for me and I ate it when I got in, prepared for the next day and then went to bed. I had also kept my Saturday job during A levels. As I say, this kind of schedule was the norm in our house. I never expected anything other than hard work but the drudge of this existence did get to me now and again. One Monday afternoon I felt so low that I snuck out of school after registration and when I got home my brother was there as well.

I think I saw university not as the continuation of my education but as a completely new start. I was looking forward to going somewhere where nobody knew me and to having a bit of fun. Strange as it may sound I was also looking forward to having my own front door key. Mam was very strict and I never had a key for my parents' house. Years later when she went into a home and I went back to box up stuff from her kitchen I had to borrow a key to get in. The summer before I went to university seemed to hold all kinds of omens and portents that 'life will never be the same again' and the most momentous of these was the death of Elvis Presley. My older siblings were both Elvis fans and he'd always been part of my life and now he wasn't. It was definitely a sign. Another epiphanic moment for me was deciding I was never going to have kids. I'd had to go and look after my older brother's kids while my sister-in-law was in hospital and it took drudgery to new heights. I was so worn out at the end of the day that as soon as I put the kids to bed I went as well – at seven o'clock usually. I was determined this was never going to be my life.

I had no qualms at all when the day came to set off for university. I don't know how my parents must have felt to see me so eager to be gone. My younger brother had been roped in to help me on the train with my stuff because we didn't have a car. He was only fifteen and should have been in school but by this time he was truanting so much my parents thought he might as well make himself useful.

However, when we arrived in Sheffield we discovered there was a bus strike so he caught the next train home and I got a taxi to my digs. I had been devastated that I'd been put into digs because I'd become almost desperate for my own space and had dreamed of getting a flat. However, I had been told that once I was there I could always look for something else. But in the taxi that day I could have cried. My accommodation was miles and miles away from the university. I still consider these digs were really unsuitable because they were so far out. In fact I shared for the first two weeks with a girl who decided it would be easier for her to commute from home than to live there. I feel sorry for my landlady because she tried her best but it must have been obvious I hated being there. I had to walk into university that first afternoon but, by a stroke of luck, the very first person I bumped into was a girl I knew from school and I ended up sleeping on her floor a great deal. She had also met a group of people already so I literally walked into a social life. I often wonder how things would have turned out if not for this chance meeting.

Once my room-mate had left I had started coming home at weekends because it was just easier and I was beginning to feel very unsettled. Between bus strikes and sleeping on floors and going home at weekends I gave up trying to establish a routine and my work suffered. I still loved my subjects, French and German, but I seemed to have time only to do the bare minimum. I know I did go a bit wild in the first term and was out all the time but it was more the lack of routine than the constant partying that did for me. It was only six weeks before I found alternative accommodation, a result of mam phoning the accommodation office, which was a truly selfless act on her part because I know she'd have been delighted if I came back home to live. But those first weeks had set the seal. In the Easter holidays I realised I had messed up. Thanks to a massive fire-fighting exercise I managed to pass all my exams but with very mediocre results, certainly not good enough to satisfy me. As I stood looking at the results board, I determined that this would not happen again. Over summer I spent ages thinking how I could do well academically without missing out on the fun and I wrote out a plan, a glorified timetable, which I put into action in my second year. Many years later and as a result of this experience I trained as a life coach and found myself charging clients to go through the very same process.

I don't have a memory of any real highs or lows at university. I have memories of some challenges, such as when I developed a very painful condition in my feet, similar to gout, and couldn't walk properly for a few weeks. I also hated

learning to drive. I was obviously upset when I had to leave at the end of the second year for my year abroad because my very close friends were staying, but I never once questioned the need for me to do it. I was also upset when a man with whom I had a mad fling just before my finals went back home to Germany, but it didn't take me long to get over it and we are actually still friends now. Similarly there were some lovely times such as camping one weekend and watching deer from the doorway of our tent, but nothing I would class as a high point. Instead, from the very start of my second year I felt totally settled and happy at university. I really felt this was the place for me. I had a lovely, lovely boyfriend, a good circle of friends, my own flat, enough money, freedom and independence and I loved the work. I didn't do anything worthy or that would look good on a CV other than help out at a youth club in my first year. I didn't think that way, unlike my boyfriend who had been to public school. I didn't realise at the time that he was doing lots of things that would help him 'get on' and to be fair I don't think it was a conscious thing for him. It was something he'd just imbibed at school and he was as much a product of his background as I was of mine. I was never comfortable in those social settings where he was at ease, the sailing and rugby clubs and the formal dinners he insisted it would be good for us to attend. I always preferred it when we were out camping or backpacking. When I started talking about doing a PhD he immediately told me to talk to the Head of Department. I'd have never thought of doing that. My boyfriend, quiet and gentle as he was, definitely had *savoir-faire* and I relied too much on his lead.

It was only when I went to Germany on my year out that I discovered I too could be resourceful. I had deliberately chosen an area where not many English students went but where the purest German was spoken, allegedly. I was very single-minded about doing well because I knew that's what would make me happy. I had no thought about what doing well might lead to. I think it was the year out in Germany, rather than my experience at university per se, that gave me confidence in myself. This year was the greatest benefit to me of going to university. It was a test of my mettle to go live abroad at the age of twenty and, despite the difficulties, make a good fist of living there. By the end of the year I knew what I was capable of and was very confident in my abilities. Before then I was still more likely to avoid or run away from situations where I felt out of my depth than tackle them. For example I had dropped French down from joint honours to subsid at the end of the first year because, although I loved French, I felt uncomfortable in the department. I thought the people were too 'full of themselves'. Had I also seen the German department in

that way I'm not sure I would have stayed at university, regardless of how much fun I was having, because so much of my educational resilience had been used up at school. Ironically when I got my first teaching job I was delighted to become part of a clique in the staffroom who were very like the people in the French department I had so roundly condemned as an undergraduate. This speaks volumes about how I had evolved and my changing perspective and perceptions.

I didn't have a clue about what I wanted to do when I finished my degree. By the end of my course I knew I didn't want to do a PhD in German which is fortunate because no one in the department had so much as hinted they might want me to stay. My purpose in going to university had been to carve out a space for myself away from home and, once I got there, producing educational success became an end in itself. As the end drew near my one motivation became the avoidance of being poor. I had been financially very secure at university. I got almost a full grant and my parents did make up the shortfall, small as it was, and mam sent regular food parcels. But I also got a grant from the American owned company where my dad worked that was almost equal to the one from the LEA. In Germany I had worked three jobs, language assistant, au pair and giving private English lessons, and I had earned a great deal. I had never had to get a holiday job while at university and my overdraft when I left was £64. The thought of returning to a life of hiding behind the sofa if there was no money to pay whoever was at the door terrified me. And yet I did turn down the opportunity of a management training scheme with the same company that were giving me a grant, because it involved doing a year in Wisconsin and I was still getting over my year in Germany, which, brilliant as it was, had been tough. I think I decided to do teacher training in a state of panic because, at the beginning of the 80s, the job situation wasn't rosy. Up to that point teaching was something I definitely did not want to do but, in the absence of knowing what I did want, I fell back on something with which I at least felt familiar. My career since then has been chequered rather than glittering. I think I've never really known what I want to do and have just ended up doing things because circumstances, particularly around getting divorced and being responsible for the kids, dictated them.

Although going to university was a catalyst for me 'growing up', the biggest impact on my life in terms of what I have done is the death of my older sister in 1988. This in itself was seismic but it was the aftershocks that have been significant because it was at this time I decided I did want children after all. I am persuaded

that if my sister had not died I probably would not have children now. Of course I can't know for sure but I have researched this and I am as certain as I can be. Having children has in its turn meant that I have made different decisions to those that I would have made otherwise, particularly after my first marriage broke up. On the surface it doesn't seem as if I have been particularly ambitious and my CV looks a mess. However, I am ambitious and, for whatever reason, I am always challenging myself. There are sound reasons attaching to every one of my CV entries. However, employers are not really interested in the story behind the story so a few years ago I decided to become a self-employed life coach and that in turn led to me setting up a company with a couple of other people, running development courses for managers and individuals, something else I could never have envisaged at eighteen. Unfortunately there were internal tensions between the directors and when it became clear the company would not survive our disagreements I decided now was the time to pursue my long held desire to do a PhD. It frustrates me that, after all these years, I have the same lack of direction and the same fears about the future that I experienced when I did my degree.

Going to university definitely impacted on my class identity and class position, but not in a straightforward way, so it's not easy for me to say now whether I think I am working class or middle class or whatever. I don't think going to university meant I left the working class behind or became middle class. This is not just because I think it is difficult to say what class is and to justify the criteria you use to define it, although this is part of it. It's also to do with having been part of certain worlds without ever feeling I belonged, which was the case both in the white working class setting of my primary school and the white middle class setting of my grammar school. It's also to do with feeling comfortable in a certain milieu before being reminded I don't belong. When I was doing teacher training in the southwest, a girl there didn't invite me to a party because she didn't think I would 'fit in'. Was it my accent, the way I dressed, my behaviour or something else? She didn't tell me. I only found out I had been excluded by chance. It's also to do with feeling 'split' between worlds. When I was teaching we often spent Saturday tea-time back with my parents watching Play Your Cards Right and things like that and I know some of my colleagues would have been surprised at that. Even now I feel I have a split personality. At home and with my family I am much louder and I swear like a trooper and my accent is broader than in 'public'. I also have friends from all walks of life, including a fair few from school whom I have had for almost forty years and some from university.

So going to university can be a great thing. I am glad I went and I have encouraged my boys to go and to do the subjects they want rather than what might get them a job at the end. I believe that everyone who wants to go to university should have the chance to do so, but equally it annoys me when people who don't go for whatever reason are cast as lacking in aspiration. I know from my own family that is not the case. If you are working class, university is sold to you as the chance of a lifetime, something that will have the biggest, most positive impact on you, but again in my experience this is misleading. University has obviously shaped and mediated my later experiences but it has not been the supreme defining moment of my life nor has it had the impact that going to grammar school did. For me its greatest value was probably that it allowed me to have a lot of fun and to do work I love and which makes me feel good. I see my higher education experience as mixed in with many other things that have impacted on me, not least marriage, divorce and having children. Having a good degree and postgraduate qualifications has opened doors for me sometimes, but it has not guaranteed a great job and it certainly has not brought the financial rewards implied in the ads. The most I ever earned was in financial services, for which I did not need a degree. My parents thought having a university education would protect me from the worst of life's hardships which it has to a certain extent and in some ways. However, it has also propelled me into situations where I have felt vulnerable and I sometimes wonder, would I have ever been made fun of because of my Yorkshire accent if I'd have stayed at home and would I feel, as I do now, that my final report card will probably say 'could have done better'?

The LEA is the Local Education Authority. At this point they were responsible for allocating and administering grants to students.



## **Reading the life histories. Part 2**

*The process of theorizing, analyzing, and categorizing personal narratives is shot through and through with the imagination and ways of seeing of the interpreter. When I'm the one interpreting the story, I'm no more free from the cultural frames of reference in which I am embedded than is the storyteller. In this sense, I'm inside what I'm analyzing and part of it. If the storyteller is a cultural production, well, then so is the analyst.*

*(Bochner 2001, p.136)*

You will probably by now be unsurprised that I cannot make a quick and clean transition from the reading of the stories.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) see the challenge of analysis as that of finding a way to honour participant stories whilst simultaneously critiquing social structures and they are critical of manoeuvres that reduce stories down to themes or upwards into overarching categories (p.143). My response to this challenge and to the demands of my commitment to praxis and to an holistic methodology was to embed analysis in the stories, to make the basis on which I did this as transparent as possible and to collapse the categories of 'reading/analysing/interpreting/theorising' (which I condense into the term 'reading'). Whether or not you have done so, you have now had the opportunity to read the stories on this basis and to engage with the two interrelated and interdependent questions that guided your reading: 'What is the value of higher education to white working class women in England? and 'How far and in what ways did going to university increase the substantive freedoms these women had to achieve the beings and doings that they value and have reason to value?'. But what if I'd responded differently to Clandinin and Connelly? It is no secret that different analytical practices produce different kinds of knowledge, as MacMath (2009) demonstrated when she tested the concepts of paradigmatic and narrative analysis (Polkinghorne 1995) on the same data. Well, actually, I did grapple with a number of different ways of meeting Clandinin and Connelly's challenge and one of these did lead me to a different way of reading the stories.

### **Analytical motifs**

I had run into trouble with analysis before (Downs 2007a) and knew that unless I found a way of doing it that could be justified both methodologically and morally then I was heading down a 'sterile dead end' (Nixon, Walker and Clough 2003, p.91). Reading through the transcripts I noted down what I called 'points of recognition',

common themes between stories. The purpose of this early teasing out of threads, was primarily as a way of understanding that individual stories are not, can never be, idiosyncratic (at least not in every respect). However, I was uncomfortable doing it, anxious that it might undermine the integrity of the fabric of the stories. My project was to write life histories, not to shred transcripts. I understood that I needed a way of conceptualising prominent ideas in the stories other than as recurrent themes within them or common strands between them. I thus considered Rose's (1999) notion of the 'analytical dimension' because it allowed movement back and forth along various axes, relationships with others for example, obviating the need to tease out details first. Using this concept was helpful in embedding analysis when I crafted the life histories, but I found it wanting as a way of reading them because it is too heavy-handed and can give no sense of 'the unbearable lightness of being' (pace Kundera). That is, it cannot cope with transgressive data (St. Pierre 1998, p.175), those aspects of a story that are beyond immediate definition. It was then I came across the concept of the analytical motif (Kidd and Finlayson 2009) which seemed to unite both the power and the subtlety that I was searching for.

My co-participants told me they had not previously related their stories to anyone. I had not even told my story to myself, in fact had struggled to do so for this thesis. The stories did indeed have an unrehearsed quality about them, containing contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambivalences. I considered it essential to retain these in the crafted life histories which I justified on the basis of their presenting as honest fictions. I was mindful that this required assisting readers to negotiate a way through them which also met my obligations to the storytellers. Therefore Kidd's lament that 'life is messy and the more I tried to tidy it up, the messier it became' (2009, p.981) struck a chord with me and her concept of the analytic motif seemed to offer a way of including 'transgressive data' and of recognising their transcendental characteristics whilst also endowing them with more earthly qualities. The concept of the '70s zeitgeist can on these terms be considered an analytical motif. Unlike analytic dimensions which allow movement *along* axes, analytic motifs enable one to 'go deeper without being disrespectful' (2009, p.983) and to 'evoke, resonate, and illuminate meaning, leading the way to a deeper interpretation' (2009, p.993). Of course readers know that ultimately I also found this analytic concept too restrictive and settled finally on that of the 'space', specifically the capability space. However, this was not before I had put the analytic motif to work.

An analytic motif is a 'collection of "things" that add up to something more than their sum' (Kidd and Finlayson 2009, p.991). It is this alchemic aspect of the motif that distinguishes it from the 'point of recognition'. Thus I tested several themes to ascertain if they were motifs: confidence, being different or unconventional, luck/chance/serendipity, feelings of underachievement, 'addiction' to learning, ideas of success, belonging/not belonging, understandings of class, northern-ness, the notion of a graduate identity and a concept called 'future perfect'. The latter is a mutation of the concept of 'imagined futures', where instead of looking forward to how your life *might be*, you look back to consider how it *might have been*. These were in addition to and crossed over with themes of social mobility, career, relationships with others and identity that I mentioned earlier. Whilst these are all worthy of consideration in their own right they did not serve as motifs, either because they were too diffusely and diversely represented or addressed within and between stories, or conversely they were not sufficiently robust to withstand a slide into categorisation or generalisation which is precisely what the analytical motif was supposed to prevent. I want to re-iterate that, whilst I wanted to avoid fragmentation, I was not looking to categorise or to smooth out the stories to 'fit' pre-conceived ideas I had for my research. The point is precisely that a motif had to do all the work by itself to convince me that it was saying something of import.

Thus following the strand 'relationships with others' showed up a 'point of recognition' in the stories that many of us re-located because of a relationship with a man. Pursuing this theme further and, in line with the notion of the analytic motif, going deeper, led me to fresh insights about other points of recognition which then coalesced into an analytic motif for which I coined the term 'compulsive heteronormativity'. The final step was to re-cast compulsive heteronormativity as a conceptual space for a reading of the life histories, one which could be used in tandem with and as a counterpoint to the capability space.

### **Compulsive heteronormativity – a second analytical space**

This is a hybrid term, drawing on theories and concepts that overlap considerably and proceed from specific understandings of heterosexuality. I thus deconstruct it first before outlining the purpose of its inclusion here.

## Heterosexuality

Although it would be a mistake to see feminist theorists as divided on this issue, as it is generally understood that the social and the sexual cannot be kept apart, heterosexuality is usually theorised as a sexual category (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993), even when sexuality itself is explicitly conceptualised as socially and materially constructed (Richardson 1996, Jackson 1999 and Jackson and Scott 2010). I proceed from Hockey, Meah and Robinson (2007) who, rather than taking a completely different approach, rotate these theories on their axes so that heterosexuality is first and foremost theorised and empirically pursued as a social phenomenon (I also read Finch's 1983 study of the incorporation of wives into men's work as an empirical example of social heterosexuality). Hockey et al do not discount heterosexuality's sexual content, but regard sexual practices themselves as only some among many of its constitutive practices, of which marriage and having children are the most obvious and, on their terms, also some of the most extreme. More important still in the constitution of heterosexuality are mundane actions such as going to the pub and buying furniture and even quotidian practices such as preparing and eating food and doing housework. They conclude that these mundane acts are more significant than heterosexuality's sexual aspects, perhaps inevitably, given their aim to explore 'the fine grain of everyday lives organised according to heterosexual principles' (p.15) and to reinvigorate feminist theorising on the subject. But, drawing on Butler (1990), the reason they focus on this fine grain is because they regard heterosexuality not as something you are but something you do and must be seen to be doing.

Within this conceptualisation, sexual acts are matters for the private, even intimate sphere and therefore, they reason, these very visible everyday acts take on heightened significance, Berlant's argument that the lines between the intimate and the public are dissolving and that 'intimate things flash in people's faces' (1997, p.1) notwithstanding. They also theorise desire as socially mediated rather than the manifestation of natural drives or essential natures. Most importantly for my study, however, is their analysis of their empirical data which highlights the way heterosexuality is perpetuated in the personal sphere of everyday practice and buttressed by social structures and legal and institutional forces. On my understanding lived realities at the interface of private practices and public structures are expressed in the term 'heteronormativity'.

## Heteronormativity

Penelope (1993, p.264) states in respect of heterosexuality, '(r)emove the social institutions which support it, and the whole fragile edifice will collapse'. However, I agree with Hockey, Meah and Robinson's analysis that it is not these external forces alone that ensure the position of heterosexuality, but their dialectical relationship with private, personal and inner lives. It is this reciprocity that serves to position heterosexuality as a normative state and moreover, like whiteness, as an invisible category, an unquestionable given, a 'silent term' (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993, p.3). This is not to suggest, as Richardson (1996, p.2) does, that heterosexuality is monolithic, stable, fixed and coherent. There is no hegemonic heterosexuality and Hockey et al also contend that its 'shelf life' (p.37) is due not only to its changing forms through history but also to its adaptation to changes through the life course and across generations. For example marriage, once regarded predominantly as an institution is now conceived of as a relationship, reflecting a shift in emphasis from management of behaviour to management of emotions (Hockey et al 2007, p.166). Pertinent here is that heteronormativity, through its merging of the public and private, expresses the idea that heterosexuality is not something that one chooses but that one must opt out of, which is a key underpinning principle in the notion of compulsory heterosexuality.

## Compulsory Heterosexuality

The following explication of Rich's (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality succinctly captures its salient points:

(c)ompulsory heterosexuality isn't just about compelling people not to be gay. It's about the social pressures to perform heterosexuality that are put on everyone, regardless of sexual orientation.

(Marcotte 2008)

Originally Rich did focus on the sexual aspects of compulsory heterosexuality, tracing its contours with 'lesbian existence' but like Hockey, Meah and Robinson, Marcotte places more emphasis on its social rather than sexual aspects and its realisation in everyday actions and practices (but I re-iterate that this is a shift in focus rather than evidence of divisive theorising). Thus the term compulsory heteronormativity is apposite here. The particular practice to which Marcotte was alluding was the 'prom' and the edict from a Staten Island girls' school that a requirement of attendance had to be a male date. Again this needs little further

commentary from me, encapsulating as it does the very essence of the meanings of 'compulsory' and 'heterosexuality' and its social enforcement that inheres in the notion of heteronormativity.

Whilst heteronormativity encapsulates the dialectics of the sexual and the social, the personal and the institutional, I do not consider the notion of 'compulsory' sufficiently capacious or forceful because it overlooks the role of agency and the power people have to resist and subvert the forces that are brought to bear and importantly also to choose to do that which works against their own interests. I therefore required a concept that could account for the overwhelming of agency and the translation of public issues into private troubles (Mills 1959).

### **Compulsive heteronormativity**

The relationship between power and constraint that underpins the notion of compulsive heteronormativity is summed up by Fairclough (2001, p.23)

Part of what is implied in the notion of social practice is that people are enabled through being constrained: they are able to act on condition they act within the constraints of types of practice – or of discourse.

Thus I am not invoking the powerless victim here or implying an absence of individual agency. For example, the idea of forced marriage is abhorrent to feminists and most non-feminists alike. And yet the interplay of narratives of romantic love and individual desire means not only do individuals still choose to get married, some overcome significant hurdles to do so despite the risk it may not succeed and the knowledge that even if it does it may entail significant privations. Likewise, having children is so entangled with notions of heterosexuality embedded in a framework of normalcy and maintained through a dialectic of everyday practices, social and legal institutions and discourses of health and sexuality that most women do have children despite awareness of the material impact it will have on them (Novakovic 1993, Gray 2009). Indeed, within discourses of compulsive heteronormativity to be married and not have children is illogical in the extreme and must be accounted for (Busfield and Paddon 1977). What this means is that there is often a significant psychological, social and material impact, especially in terms of their physical health, on (particularly) women who are married but who are involuntarily childless (Lechner, Bolman and van Dalen 2007, University of Gothenburg 2010). Indeed a common strand I found in my reading of over one hundred letters to the Miscarriage Association from 1982 to 1992 was that most women referred to themselves as

failures and most declared themselves willing to 'try anything' to have a baby, and indeed some had already gone to what I considered extreme lengths (Novakovic 1993).

In short compulsive heteronormativity can be seen as the manifestation of agency freedom (Sen 1999) par excellence, the freedom to do that which we know may not be in our personal interests<sup>1</sup>. On my reading, the longing to be different or unconventional expresses imagined futures outside the parameters of compulsive heteronormativity and the consequences of not staying within its orbit. The alternative for women, it is understood, is less likely to be the 'lesbian existence' than heterosexuality's 'shadow self' (Hockey, Meah and Robinson 2007, p.10), a poignant example of which can be heard in Sally's story about one of her relatives.

### **Compulsive heteronormativity as an analytical space?**

What kind of questions, then, could we ask in the space of compulsive heteronormativity? We could of course ask questions that interrogate the value of higher education in mitigating the effects of compulsive heteronormativity. Alternatively we could focus on its *contribution* to heteronormativity. Thus Aiston (2005, p.407) asked how women graduates 'balanced their personal and professional lives' and the women participant's in Dyhouse's study (2002a) valued their higher education for the help they could provide to their children and grandchildren. Echoes of these studies can also be heard in the life histories in my thesis, particularly in terms of supporting children but also in the way several women stated it was important to them that their partners were also graduates. However, the reason that I am now drawing attention to this concept is not because of the work that it does as a second analytical space in which to read the stories, or because I think it generates more incisive questions than those to be found in the capability space. Indeed, overlapping capabilities with compulsive heteronormativity

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<sup>1</sup> The following is from an article in the *Independent on Sunday*:

The effects of divorce upon income are so marked that they are enough to haul men out of poverty while plunging women into it. The incomes of ex-husbands rose by 25 per cent immediately after the split, but women saw a sharp fall in their finances, which *rarely regained pre-divorce levels*. Some 27 per cent of women ended up living in poverty as a result – three times the rate of men – and only 31 per cent received maintenance payments from ex-husbands for their children... In reality, women often suffer economic hardship when they divorce. In addition, the resentment caused by unfair financial settlements has many knock-on effects.  
(Gray, 2009, my emphasis)

could expand the reach of both. Instead, I wanted to illustrate that knowledge is not immaculately conceived.

In the first place I cannot help but see the appearance of an interest in heterosexuality as a return to ideas that were germinated in an earlier work. Superficially, research I did between 1991 and 1993 on why women have children (Novakovic 1993) would appear entirely unrelated to my doctoral research. However, in both I was asking a counterfactual question and trying to gain purchase on something that seemed glossily logical and beyond interrogation. Equally, however, I may have manufactured a link between them because what we find tends to be what we look for and I was explicitly looking for the articulation of higher education with other aspects of women's lives. Furthermore, I have reported on the evolution of the concept of the 'analytic space' rather than deleting it along with or instead of some of the other 30,000 words cut from this thesis, so that any subsequent reading of the stories is bound to be influenced by its inclusion. Thus, as you and I move to the concluding part of this thesis, let it be on the understanding that nothing is concluded it is merely brought to an end.



## Conclusion

After my upgrade from MPhil to PhD, it was recommended that I think about coming to some conclusions about my research. I had argued that, because life and lives are messy, it was not possible to conclude anything for all time. However, my arguments did not persuade and I take the point that, if I have spent so long doing something, I must be able to make some concluding remarks without presenting those as definitive of either the participants or the value of higher education. Thus this chapter is a compromise, a recognition that it would be helpful to readers if I set out some of the salient points that have come from my research (although I have also tried to do this all the way through) without freezing the stories in perpetuity. At the very least this would offend against the idea of the life history as an historically situated life story. I have addressed these competing demands by taking definitions from <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=conclusion>, and then addressing each different interpretation separately. However, I am omitting one, 'the act of making your mind up about something', because to include it would undermine the methodological and epistemological ideas that have permeated my research.

Epistemologically I have emphasised the relationship between process and product (particularly in setting out the concepts of the analytical spaces). Methodologically I have created a patchwork text (Winter 2003) stitched together by the unifying thread of my research philosophy. I have represented this commitment to embedding process and product, one within the other, by producing an actual patchwork. The patchwork is not complete, it could be taken apart and reworked, as indeed I had to do when I made a mistake calculating how much material I would need for the side strips (see Appendix 1), different patches could be introduced, it could be made bigger or smaller. This symbolises the futility of seeing research products as finished. It is also symbolic of this thesis as an artful creation, an artefact, the synthesis of process and product. But leaving the back on view, the loose threads, the crooked seams and mismatched corners, epitomises also my commitment to honesty and integrity even when I fall short of my own ideals.

These then are the definitions of conclusion that I have admitted to my thesis.



Relatedly, although I emphasised a diachronic temporality, I wish I had appreciated sooner and more fully the implications of that and made change a more prominent feature of my analysis and linked up with the, albeit fledgling, interest in change within the capabilities literature (Comim 2004, Yaqub 2008). For example, Ingram's (2009, p.432) statement that a 'working-class identity is not easily reconciled with educational success' seems to have less salience for me and for my co-participants than it does for the 'many female academics' cited by Ingram and whose stories are told in Mahoney and Zmroczek (1997). I can only speculate on the reasons these academic women from working class backgrounds find their positions problematic but it may be due precisely because they are in the thick of the academy. Thus their accounts *may* be telling us more about the space of the academy than about shifting class positions. However, I find myself wondering if the passage of time may also be an important mediating factor. Richardson (2005) for example touches on her changing subjective experience of class as she gets older and it would also be interesting to ask contributors to Mahoney and Zmroczek's book if they still feel the same way now, some thirteen years later.

I wish I had read Barone's (2007) defence of narrative construction as educational research earlier and Brinkman's (2009) confident explication of literature as qualitative inquiry. The experience of researching for my research methods dissertation meant that I was (almost) from the outset methodologically and morally committed to the approach I have taken here so I am persuaded that Barone and Brinkman would not have exerted too great an influence on me. However, I would have spent less time and expended less energy defending my decisions (often to my own inner critic) and wondering if others would acknowledge my justification for presenting what I was doing as social science research.

I wish I had understood the dialogic relationship between the personal and the political sooner. I still wish I understood it better.

I wish I had *trusted* more in (and not just believed in the existence of) emotional cognition and transgressive data to inform my treatment of class instead of basing it almost exclusively on accounts where notions of psychic damage percolate tales of shifting class positions (Sennett and Cobb 1977, Mahoney and Zmroczek 1997, Plummer 2000, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2001, Reay 2002). Whilst the oft overlooked psychic, moral and emotional aspects of class are a feature of the stories told (Sayer 2005), I am not persuaded that these can be

predominantly construed as reflecting damage done. Indeed, given the way white working class women in official and common sense higher education discourses are construed (and which I outlined earlier), I am reluctant to position myself and my co-participants in this way.

What did come across to me was that we can never make a clean break with our working class past and *at times* we had to expend more energy in interpreting, negotiating and mediating classed encounters (as Linda's account of her daughter's visit home and the naming of the evening meal epitomise). But these negotiations seem to break down only in extreme circumstances (such as when Yvonne is said not to 'fit in'). Moreover, most of the stories contain examples that show classed transitions have had a positive impact on relationships with others (such as that between Alison and her mother) as well as examples of relationships that were strained and had to be renegotiated. I am not implying that classed transitions are easily accomplished. Indeed they are invariably problematic, but the corollary is not a lifetime of hurt and pain. I no more believe in the notion that my life and the lives of my co-participants are primarily lived in mitigation of the harm done to us by virtue of our problematic class positions than I do in false consciousness. To do so would at the very least be to ignore human resourcefulness.

Equally, I wish I had realised sooner that I would never make much sense of class issues in narratives of social mobility which invariably equated this to income mobility or where understandings about career were based on its narrow definition as an upward trajectory through paid employment.

I wish I had got to grips with the capability approach sooner and been better at seeing through its 'elitist mystifications' (Jackson 1999, p.84) so that my embedded analysis contained a more nuanced account about the extent to which higher education enhances substantive freedoms. I also regret my failure to integrate the analytic space of capability with compulsive heteronormativity because, within understandings of capabilities, I think compulsive heteronormativity must be theorised as more than simply a 'social conversion factor', that is as a structuring force that facilitates or impedes the conversion of primary goods (such as a degree) into substantive freedoms. It does do this of course, but I think leaving it as a conversion factor alone fails to account sufficiently for agency, for its compulsive aspect and for the social mediation of desire. Failure to achieve this integration has led to a more optimistic answer to the question I have placed in the capability space

(‘How far and in what ways did going to university increase the substantive freedoms these women had to achieve the beings and doings that they value?’) than might otherwise have been given.

That said, I wish I could have omitted the complicating matter of compulsive heteronormativity altogether. How much easier it would have been to grapple with capabilities alone. But Liz’s account of falling in love with her husband, Julie’s fears on her wedding day and Heather’s willingness to lose her job to continue in a relationship she later construes as causing her to ‘lose’ ten years of her life, set up too clear a resonance with Firestone’s (1970) contention that love, rather than childbearing is pivotal in women’s oppression. Given my commitment to setting stories in conversation with the extant literature, I could not simply ignore this. My inclusion of it and my failure to adequately address its articulation in the capability space highlight the sometimes serendipitous nature of knowledge production.

But enough of this lament, although I thought it best to get it out of the way first. After all, this is not only the conclusion of my research but of four years of my life and there is bound to be a tinge of regret, not to mention grief, as well as relief that it will soon be over.

## **2. A position or opinion or judgement reached after consideration**

### **This is my truth. Tell me yours<sup>2</sup>.**

I want now, with the benefit of hindsight and in retrospect, to summarise what I wanted to achieve in undertaking this research and how far I think I have done that.

My aims were to:

- **contribute to a critical conversation about the value of higher education for white working class women in the context of a life lived over time.**

It seems that the question, ‘What is the value of higher education for white working class women?’ usually serves to divert our gaze from conceptualisations of higher education in which white working class women are positioned as subjects or objects

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<sup>2</sup> Aneurin Bevan

of value (Skeggs 2004), where the price of participation is a requirement to be successful (Bradford and Hey 2007) and where 'finding your dream job' is not an offering but an obligation tantamount to responsible citizenship. Rather than providing answers that would leave these conceptualisations unchallenged I chose to hear this as a counterfactual question and, paradoxically, also to take it literally. In this way I wanted not only to make other, background conceptualisations visible (Daly 1991), I also wanted to provide alternative ways of articulating what that value might be. Through the life histories themselves with their foregrounding of a diachronic temporality, a retrospective view and the analytical spaces of capabilities and compulsive heteronormativity, I am satisfied that I have gone a long way in this aim. I construe my efforts as having contributed to a critical conversation about the value of higher education, one that recognises and redefines its instrumental value. Through the concept of compulsive heteronormativity I also believe I have pointed it in a different direction, albeit one that requires far more attention.

↓ **trouble prevalent conceptualisations of the value of higher education.**

Focusing on the value of higher education to white working class women rather than vice versa is always already to trouble prevalent conceptualisations because the title question itself is counterfactual. Thus, through incorporation of capabilities, no matter how imperfectly, I have transcended externally sanctioned utilitarian, economic, consumerist ideas of the purpose of higher education (to 'get': a better job, on in life, up and go) to include that which the persons themselves value and have reason to value. In other words I have restored the human to accounts of the value of higher education (in this specific context). This has also included saturating notions of value with those of compulsive heteronormativity and demanded cognisance of the socially mediated role of desire and the adaptation of preference. Moreover, I have also foregrounded the gendered aspects of the construal of value. What I have not done is to tell individual women what they should value. Whilst the capabilities space is a normative one, it is generally and broadly normative, eschewing specification of which particular 'beings and doings' they *should* have reason to value.

↓ **ask participants to reflect on how the experience of higher education and of being a graduate has articulated with subsequent life experiences.**

The presence of a 'conceptual end point' after graduation (Archer et al 2003) reflects the assumption, enshrined in Aimhigher, that the purpose of going to university is

primarily to get a 'good job', with gendered notions of what constitutes a career and the concomitant idea of social mobility implicit in that. Situating the experience of higher education and being a graduate in the context of a life lived over many years and focusing on its articulation with the big and small events of life, I have not only redefined ideas of value, paying attention to the episodic (Smith 1988) and to the ebb and flow of fortunes over time, but also paved the way for richer, more nuanced and layered understandings of value that take account of structuring forces as well as of individual agency.

↓ **crafting counter-narratives about the value of higher education from the perspective of being a graduate and in the context of a life lived over thirty years.**

This goes to the very heart and soul of my thesis. Embedded within it is my commitment to respect participants, to honour their stories and to meet Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) charge to also say something about the relationship of the individual to the social. I thus crafted the transcripts into life histories, ensuring in the process that they not only encapsulated important themes, but also that they were framed by and imbued with the specific historical, social and cultural conditions in which they were engendered and related, symbolised in the notion of the '70s zeitgeist. Inhering in this concept is a sense that sometimes we are unable to properly interpret the conditions in which we are situated, compensating instead with interpretations that sit on the surface of our lives rather than being fully integrated with them. This is not to say that we are unconscious of these conditions or that we misrecognise them. It is precisely because they are misrepresented to us that we have to work to achieve a coherent narrative. This comes through most strongly for me in Fiona's story as she works to find a way to explain how the optimism she felt in the 70s about women's changing role became translated into her present lived reality.

I also conceived the idea of the analytical space in which to read the stories, suggesting both the capabilities space and the space of compulsive heteronormativity in which to do so. In this way my intention was to obviate the necessity of fragmenting and atomising stories even before they could be appreciated in their entirety. I considered it vital that they were a 'still small voice of calm' in the noise created by powerful and prevalent discourses that objectify white working class women in higher education. I knew that they could never hope to triumph in a shouting match. In this I believe I have succeeded but at the price of a

concomitant lack of trust in the reader through the closing off of certain interpretive avenues and my directing you to particular understandings.

↓ **outlining a conceptual language in which to express notions of value that resonate with experience and lived realities.**

I saw no contradiction in my profession to be concerned with material lives, with lived realities and with the everyday and the mundane and my simultaneous focus on language. Language itself in these terms is not divorced from the material aspects of quotidian life but is inflected by and influential in the structures in which it is situated and which it calls into being. Thus the '70s zeitgeist, articulated as it is through reference to specific items of clothing, particular foods and concrete artefacts encapsulates the relationship of the material, the ethereal and the textual. I have suggested a way of talking about value that transcends a definition of 'valuable' as that which serves the country in the context of the global economy. I have done this firstly through commitment to rhetorical sovereignty, ensuring all the participants had a chance to tell their stories with minimal interference from Yvonne Downs (and it was particularly difficult to do this in Yvonne's case). I have done it secondly through implied inclusion of 'nuanced silence' (McIntyre 2001, p.216) and transgressive data and thirdly by foregrounding affective lexis to facilitate the expression of emotional cognition. Finally I have done all this in conjunction with the language of capabilities.

#### **4. Finish**

I find I have little else left to say. My commitment to reflexing has ensured I have stayed vigilant about the Background and the Foreground (Daly 1991) of my research. I have been explicit, if somewhat prescriptive, about how I thought you should read the stories. I have outlined my commitment to an holistic methodology for the translation of my research philosophy into praxis. I have been explicit to the last about positioning this thesis as an artful creation, making no claims to a static and monolithic truth, although I made a strong case for the notion of the honest fiction. Eschewing the creation of dichotomies I sought instead to highlight commonalities and create syntheses, being particularly anxious not to buy into the 'good/bad' dichotomy of educational research. I have therefore made admittedly imperfect attempts at bivalent theorising (Walker 2003). I am happy with the way I have conducted myself throughout my research. You may disagree but I think I have also grown in ethical wisdom and, if nothing else, this piece of educational research



has been educational for me in this respect. So it remains only for me to leave you,  
as I joined you, with a poem.

### **The Middle-Aged**

Their faces, safe as an interior  
Of Holland tiles and Oriental carpet,  
Where the fruit-bowl, always filled, stood in a light  
Of placid afternoon - their voices' measure,  
Their figures moving in the Sunday garden  
To lay the tea outdoors or trim the borders,  
Afflicted, haunted us. For to be young  
Was always to live in other peoples' houses  
Whose peace, if we sought it, had been made by others,  
Was ours at second-hand and not for long.  
The custom of the house, not ours, the sun  
Fading the silver-blue Fortuny curtains,  
The reminiscence of a Christmas party  
Of fourteen years ago - all memory.  
Signs of possession and of being possessed,  
We tasted, tense with envy. They were so kind,  
Would have given us anything; the bowl of fruit  
Was filled for us, there was a room upstairs  
We must call ours: but twenty years of living  
They could not give. Nor did they ever speak  
Of the coarse stain on that polished balustrade,  
The crack in the study window, or the letters  
Locked in a drawer and the key destroyed.  
All to be understood by us, returning  
Late, in our own time - how that peace was made,  
Upon what terms, with how much left unsaid.

(Adrienne Rich)

# Postscript

## Reflections

I have now had the opportunity to hear from some readers of this thesis (my examiners) and have been asked by them to include a reflections section as follows:

you should give a clear statement about the original contribution to knowledge made by this thesis in terms of its content and/or methodology. You should also include some reflection on the thesis in the light of discussion in the *viva voce* examination and of your own thoughts three months after its completion. In particular, you should refer to the notion of 'trust' in the reader and in the nine stories themselves; and to the things to which you now feel committed as a result of having undertaken this work.

I therefore address these points but I have found it impossible to be as brief as they advised me to be. I do not think I have been unnecessarily verbose in exceeding the recommended limits. It is now four months since I submitted my thesis and I have found this exercise of looking back extremely productive and educational and it would not do justice to my reflections to have to trim them any more than I have done so here.

## Original contribution to knowledge

It has taken quite some willpower to overcome my resistance to making such a bold statement. Firstly, I am not persuaded that such a thing as an original contribution exists, and particularly not within the social sciences where one must always, and quite rightly, acknowledge and proceed from what has gone before. I felt less constrained and at greater liberty to be creative when I worked in the arts but even here, consistent with the argument I made for setting stories in context, it would be impossible not to imbibe the ideas that imbue a particular zeitgeist. Secondly, my inclination is to leave others to judge for themselves what they believe this original contribution may be and leave me to my own thoughts on the subject. However, I know it is required of a thesis that it does make such a contribution and that the hints I dropped in the main body of my work about what was 'unique, innovative, novel, inventive, creative, new, unusual, imaginative'<sup>1</sup> do not suffice here. So, uncomfortable as it makes me this is what I am saying about its original contribution to knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> These synonyms for 'original' are those given by the Thesaurus facility of my word processing software package

## **Substantive contribution**

In broad terms, seeking to establish whether higher education is universally beneficial and a worthwhile aspiration rather than assuming that it is, this thesis has conceptualised and evaluated higher education as a life experience, one among many, rather than as a resource or a primary good as is usual. It has, moreover, evaluated the 'benefits' of higher education not in abstracted and generalised terms (such as getting a dream job, entering a richer cultural scene) but in terms of how far it has increased the actual freedoms of individuals to achieve the beings and doings they value and have reason to value. Whilst this evaluative framework describes the capability approach, the approach has not been used before to evaluate the meaning and experience of higher education. Indeed it has hardly been used in connection with higher education at all. In this way this thesis has avoided perpetuating the good/bad dichotomy that Halsey et al (1980) claim is a feature of much educational research, rightly in my view. It runs counter to the basic tenet of the capability approach to make sweeping generalisations, because it holds that it is individuals themselves who must determine the beings and doings they value and have reason to value. However, what this thesis does that has not been done before is to acknowledge and include expansion of freedoms as an important criterion in judging whether higher education has been a valuable experience in the lives of and from the perspective of some participants in it. Thus, finally, I believe that this thesis makes an original substantive contribution by restoring the human to accounts of the outcomes of higher education.

## **Methodological contribution**

1. This thesis is retrospective rather than predictive, focusing on graduates rather than students and taking a time span of over thirty years
2. It assesses the value of higher education to the person rather than vice versa (and this point has become particularly pertinent in the light of the sharp increase in fees for higher education study).
3. It expands the criteria for assessment to include other life experiences
4. It uses a longer time span for assessment
5. It applies the capability approach in two innovative ways: in conditions of relative affluence rather than deprivation and for higher education rather than basic education.

6. It fuses and collapses categories. In an early draft of the thesis I suggested it does so in the following areas: literary/sociological writing and references, aesthetic/analytic considerations, theory/experience (after Bourdieu 1977), knowledge/culture, words/ artefacts, process/product, tangible/intangible products, reason/intuition, emotion/cognition, arts/social science, intellectual/manual activities, and substantive/imaginative content. What makes this original, I contend, is not so much that I take this approach but that I justify doing so on the basis of a return to the fusion of the aesthetics with knowledge.

### **Trust and relationships in research**

In my thesis I addressed the issue of trust in my relationship with the reader (p.233) and I will pick this up again here. However, I was not prepared for the critique that this involves a concomitant lack of trust in the stories. Having reflected for some considerable time now, I accept the arguments on which this critique is based but not its conclusion. I have concluded that my relationship with readers does not automatically impact on my relationship with the stories. Therefore, whilst I accept that each relationship does contextualise the other, I am not persuaded of the primacy of my relationship with the reader and that this must colour every other aspect of my thesis.

#### **Trusting readers**

Before I address the point about trust in readers itself, I must make some general points about the outcome of my intentions to 'negotiate a 'social contract' between reader and author (p.6), to establish an ethical relationship with readers and to carve an 'expansive role' (p.5) for them. The feedback I have received suggests that I failed to realise these aims and to meet my intentions to the extent where I wonder if I alienate readers so much that they would not read further than the introduction of my thesis if not required to. However, given that readership was likely to be small anyway and, much as I regret alienating two readers who would probably have freely offered generosity and criticality without a word from me, I am not moved to be repentant. The fact that I have been asked to reflect again on this aspect of my approach confirms to me that my thesis has succeeded as a piece of educational research. In other words, I may have got it wrong now, but it marks the beginning of an ongoing educational process. I will do better next time. What I have learned here is that negotiation is an interactive activity; it has to be conducted face to face and in

'real time', which is also, I would argue, a feature of the educational process. I was wrong to think my introductory monologue would serve as well.

Turning now to the issue of trust itself, I must emphasise that, consistent with my general approach, I do not see trust as an absolute in opposition to distrust. I therefore tried to map out how this translates into relationships with readers (pp.130-132) in the context of my other research relationships, which itself was central to my understanding of the ethics of those relationships. I have no need to repeat myself here but in short, participant trust in me might not be easily reconciled with my trust in the reader and the ideas outlined in this thesis mark only the beginning of a process of exploration of these possible tensions. However, I re-iterate that this does not mean I distrusted the reader. I am disappointed that I was not given more credit for my honesty and for my courage in grappling with an idea that is seldom explored in research reports. However, I felt it would be duplicitous not to do so. Perhaps I might have been wiser not to delete a story about having to resubmit my MA Women's Studies thesis for reasons I felt had more to do with its non-conformity with the mainstream than its scholarly shortcomings. Perhaps this would have assisted readers in understanding why I was at pains to ensure this would not happen again.

Thus the issue of trust is sited in a broader context than that created by the boundaries of any particular work or any particular relationship. It is also entwined in concerns about identity formation (how does one become recognised as a *bona fide* scholar?), the dynamics of the personal and the political, the issues of power inherent in those and Strawson's thinking on the nature of narrative coming to us not as self-experience but as self-knowledge. For example, after delivering a paper to a group of scholars researching in the field of higher education I was told that my work was not theoretical, with the definite implication that it was not scholarly, and it was also suggested I should use Bourdieu to help me out theoretically. I considered this suggestion condescending (as it assumed, wrongly, that I hadn't already considered doing just this and rejected doing so) but it undermined my confidence for a time nevertheless. I questioned whether I would ever be an academic, determined as I was to 'do it my way' (Taylor et al 2011). The issue of trust in readers as part of an ongoing project of how to forge ethical relationships with them thus marries with my ongoing thinking around the relationship of the personal to the political. This in turn feeds into my concern with the boundaries between self-experience and self-knowledge.

## **Trusting the stories**

It was suggested that being overly prescriptive with readers implies that I do not trust the nine stories. Whilst I acknowledge that this is a reasonable conclusion to reach, I contend here that it rests on the assumption that the relationship with the reader is the lodestar for all others in my thesis. However, as I indicated above, the most important relationships for me were with my co-participants and my primary concern was to do justice to the trust they placed in me. I was at times overwhelmed by this. Where there is lack of trust therefore, it is in my abilities, primarily as a writer but also as an academic more generally, to adequately convey not just the substance but also the spirit of what was told to me. Having already let my co-participants down by using extracts (pp.130-131), I was wary about doing it again and in fact including extended narratives is a sign I do trust the ability of this kind of narrative to remedy my shortcomings. Thus it is reasonable to talk here of a lack of confidence (in my abilities) rather than a lack of trust in the ability of the stories to do justice to storytellers' perceptions of the value of higher education in their lives.

Confidence is a capability, as a substantive freedom, and my lack of confidence here is due to my still emergent identity as a scholar as I touched on above. Thus, again, trust in the stories can not be seen as an absolute but as a dynamic of the processes involved when the diverse and sometimes competing demands of all those who people research (participants, researchers, readers, examiners, absent others) are contained within the parameters of a thesis. I would argue that letting the life histories stories speak for themselves, albeit with the provisos I set out in my methods chapter, shows the utmost faith that they can withstand scrutiny whatever my shortcomings in the crafting of them. Some of the comments I have received confirm to me that I was clearly right to be cautious about my powers of representation. Mindful of the need to make clear the criteria and principles which guided my crafting of the life histories and to make transparent the extent of my interference, my efforts were sometimes clumsy and heavy handed. Having now had the opportunity to re-read my work in the light of critical feedback, I understand better that the balance between transparency and prescription is not easily achieved and the line between letting stories speak for themselves and leaving readers to fend for themselves is also a fine one.

Therefore, having had the opportunity to discuss this aspect of my work with readers I have come to see that they felt simultaneously overly directed and overburdened and yet not sufficiently guided. As one reader explained:

I had a sense of being led up a mountain, with accompanying graphic detail of all the struggle that had been involved; shown a panoramic view (of the participants' stories) from the top; and then being left with relatively few pointers to find my way down and to answer the question 'Why did we make that climb?'

On reflection I still maintain that I may not have supplied signposts but I equipped readers with a map from the word go. However, it is clear I failed to supply a legend to that map. In particular I clearly failed to show the place of aesthetic considerations in the structure and presentation of the thesis as an artefact. Thus I use different fonts for aesthetic reasons rather than to signify a change of voice for example, I format in ways that are pleasing to my eye rather than because of the function they perform (and I tried several different formats) and in a previous iteration I used endnotes rather than footnotes because footnotes make the page look scrappy. I hinted that I saw my thesis as a picture. I produced a patchwork to convey this but I should also have been more explicit about how I was realising these aesthetic aims in the body of the text.

### **The things to which I now feel committed**

Since completing my thesis my lived reality is such that it may be difficult to keep faith with the commitments to which I will briefly allude below, at least in the short term. I was never in any doubt that setting my own research agenda was a privilege afforded by my receipt of funding. However, my reflections cannot help but be coloured by my current material reality and financial concerns now that I no longer receive it and by the fact that I have failed to secure even an interview for employment, let alone employment itself. The following lines from 'My Fair Lady', based on George Bernard Shaw's play 'Pygmalion' are intruding on my thoughts here:

Colonel Hugh Pickering:      Have you NO morals, man?  
Alfred P. Doolittle:          Nah. Nah, can't afford 'em, guv'nor. Neither could you,  
  if you was as poor as me.

This must be seen as the context for any statement about commitments below.

Since I completed my thesis Lord Browne has reported on the future of higher education (Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finance England

2010). This is not the place to explore these recommendations or their implications. Nevertheless I see the proposed increase in tuition fees and the interest payments that will accrue on fee loans as confirming my contention that the significance of the human has been lost from higher education policy. I say this not primarily because I take issue with arguments that divorce concerns about fees from the decision making process of those with no previous exposure to higher education. I say it because it evidences my contention that people have not been central to notions of social justice, laudable as it is when social justice is a feature of higher education policy at all. However, conflating social justice for the individual with what is good for the state and for the economy as I argue in this thesis has allowed an almost seamless transition to policies which are likely to perpetuate the (self)-exclusion of certain groups. Thus the question is not how far particular policies serve the interests of social justice. It is whether the basis on which those policies are built takes as its starting point the decisive preference of individuals. Browne has confirmed to me that the freedom to prefer is not available to certain groups, or as Bourdieu puts it, certain groups have no say in setting the rules of the game. Thus I am committed to continue researching the mechanisms of exclusion from (higher) education and to argue for ways in which to restore humanity to policy so that certain groups, and my focus is white working class women, are not reduced to subjects or objects of value. This involves a concomitant commitment to the capability approach and to charting its application to areas of privilege and affluence.

In the light of the above I am therefore also committed to methodologies that support the perspectives of those usually acted upon and I envisage that this will perforce include a commitment to life history research.



# **Appendix 1**

## **A summary of and commentary on my journal entries about creating a patchwork to represent my research**

In this account I interweave some original entries from my journal *in italics*.

At that time it was my intention to produce a finished item, a quilt. When it became clear that I was going to leave it unfinished, to leave the back of the fabric on view, I changed my terminology to 'patchwork' (the term I use in the body of my thesis).

Both terms, patchwork and quilt, refer to the same artefact.

Preparing my journal entries for inclusion as an Appendix to my thesis reminded me again that the process of producing the latter and that of producing the patchwork were so closely allied that they might be said to mirror each other. I certainly felt that the time spent working on the patchwork supported my thinking and in this respect it is a process akin to Richardson's (2000) writing as a method of inquiry. It would therefore be unnecessarily tedious for me and for you if I were to interrupt this summary and commentary to point out every instance of convergence. I have fashioned the following account in such a way as to make obvious my contention that the two processes are intertwined.

### **June 2009: conceptualising the quilt**

My activities at this point can be summarised as 'socialising myself into the world of quilting' and 'conceptualising the quilt'. The two cannot be held apart. I wrote in my journal:

*I did not have the specialist, disciplinary knowledge to translate my feelings into words or to test those hunches against my experience and a bank of knowledge gleaned over the course of years.*

Moreover, the design of the quilt was dependent on practical considerations and certain quilting conventions. I had originally intended to buy old fabrics, cut my own patches, and design it from scratch but I scaled down my ambitions once the cost and the difficulty of such an enterprise became clear and once I appreciated the limits of my abilities. I therefore decided to use pre-cut fabric and a ready-worked design. I found a design built around a 'nine square block' (that is one based on nine patches), which fitted my idea to make the nine life histories the heart of my thesis. This in turn determined the size of the quilt as squares came in standard sizes. I decided to use 'charm squares' (5x5 inches each) rather than to cut my own from

'fat squares' (50x56cm). However, using pre-cut fabric did not obviate the need to do some complex calculations to allow for seams and the matching of corners.

Thus my thinking was for a long while largely shaped by 'practical' considerations and the latter also underpinned more 'creative' decisions, such as choosing the patterns and colours of the fabric. However, choosing the fabric was also a creative enterprise because I wanted it to reflect the 'feel' of the stories to make visible that which could not be expressed in words. It was also an iterative process. Shade, tone and hue were as important to me as the colour itself and pattern was more important still as it had to:

*convey the complexity and richness of the stories, of the lives, and of my research methodology... I hoped here some spirit of the 70s might be brought to bear. I was looking for confident, bold patterns, not tiny intricate ones because the stories told covered a lot of ground rather than dwelling in detail on any particular aspect of a life.*

I finally bought fabrics from a collection called 'collections for a cause', the cause being ovarian cancer for the particular batch of fabric I bought. Proceeds from the collection in general were donated to UNICEF. I felt that this fitted in well with the feminist aspects of my project. The patterns were also reproduced from an old quilt:

*I felt this link with the past was in keeping with my project which is a collection of stories about the past told from the perspective of the present... I am aware that the colours (muted and dark) are the opposite of what I originally intended (vibrant and rich) and that the patterns (small, sometimes intricate and 'flowery') are also the opposite of the boldness that I previously stated was required. However, this mirrors the way my intentions for the project in general sometimes changed. It reflects, in other words, what happens when the methodology is 'emergent' rather than pre-conceived. It also reflects the compromises that are made in the course of research.*

At this stage of the process it meant a good deal to me that I was able to call on Sally to help me. She is also sewing a quilt and one Friday afternoon after she finished work she drove me to a neighbouring town (and back, in rush hour traffic) to a fabric warehouse. It was here that the cost implications of my ideas were made real to me. Later both Sally and another artist friend of hers gave me huge encouragement and feedback on my work and confirmed my experience of the transcendental nature of creative enterprise.

## July 2009: designing the quilt

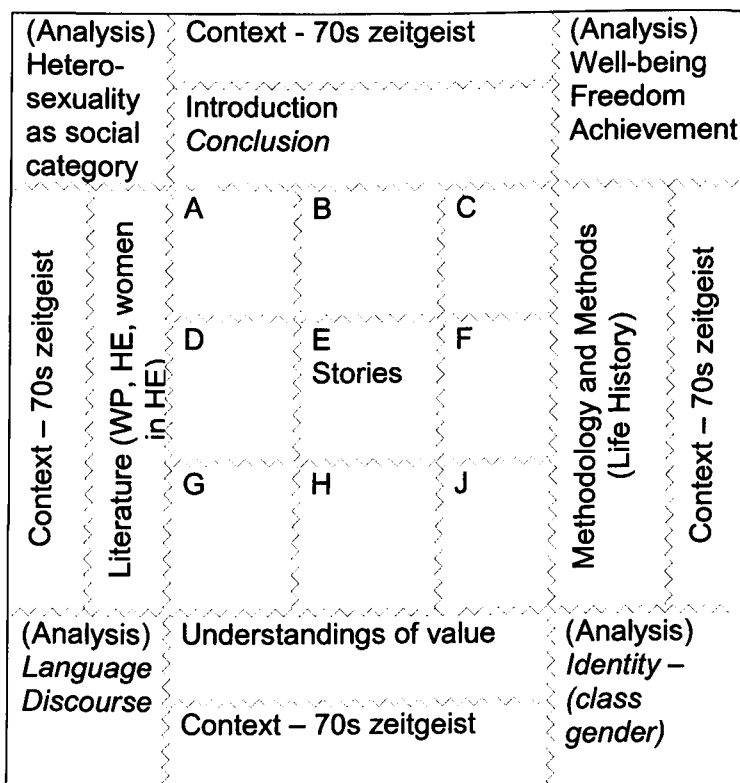
This was a most laborious, time consuming process. I tried several designs taking into account colour and pattern and what these were required to represent.

Choosing which square was to represent which story and then arranging these in such a way as to be aesthetically pleasing was challenging in the extreme. Whilst I wanted to convey some of the messiness of the stories, I also knew that creating a hotch-potch was not an option. I therefore photographed various designs which I then turned into a movie.

*I produced the above not as a 'record' of the development of the design but as part of the process. Stopping to take photographs and to write out what I was doing created spaces for 'thinking through' in much the same way as I think things through and write them 'down' before writing them 'up'. It was also another way of engaging with visual representation and the processes involved in the production of cultural artefacts.*

I watched the movie numerous times before I 'felt' my way to a decision. I wonder if I would have come to the same decision had the digital technology not been available and I had viewed only stills.

At this point I also tried to use the design to assist my thinking about how I might structure my thesis thus:



I see my research philosophy as the unifying thread that binds the whole, in particular my commitment to doing feminist research.

*Quilting is totally addictive - it is such a powerful medium with a long, diverse and rich history and it is evolving all the time. It's like research coz there is a very scientific and technical approach and also a very arty/crafty creative one (but you still need the skills to execute it). You can be interested theoretically or in the 'doing' or in the ways of doing (like methodology). I have become totally hooked.'*

(Personal communication to Pat Sikes 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2009)

*Throughout the design of the quilt I have been conscious of the fact that I have not been in total control of the process. I have been constrained by practicalities (cost, available materials, time, my own skills and the limits of these) and also guided by the materials and the acts of production. As all projects do, I felt this one took on a life of its own. I thought I could produce a quilt as a metaphor for research. What transpired is that during the production of this cultural artefact I became aware that there are similar processes and factors influencing the production of all cultural artefacts. I became aware that the creative process and creative impulse is not something that is entirely controllable or harness-able. Sometimes I was driven and guided by something I could not totally comprehend but just had to trust. I felt this letting go of control and 'trusting in the process' as a liberating experience and I like that what I have produced is the result of a union between discipline and reason and something which is beyond my naming.*

### **August 2009: sewing the quilt**

This was a testing time. I had hoped to use a sewing machine but it transpired that I was unable to retrieve my old machine from the place I had left it. This turned out to be a blessing because sewing by hand, although time consuming and laborious, enabled me 'to experience in a very concrete, experiential way, things I have up till now subscribed to on an intellectual or philosophical level'. Unfortunately, and although I took great pains to measure accurately, it transpired that I had gone wrong after all. I had to unpick the outer strips (the nine squares in the middle were safe). After a false start and bearing in mind the costs involved, I reached a compromise that would not entail buying more fabric but which was faithful to the underpinning criteria for my design decisions. Although I was initially upset and frustrated by what I saw as my own limitations, this was a period of useful reflection and led me to see the making of the quilt as 'my methodology made concrete'.

*What this has demonstrated to me is the need always to link disparate elements of a thesis in some way without making them the same. In this case therefore it was either through pattern, or colour (not both). I believe this final design does not seek to smooth over the tensions (the bordering*

colours do not necessarily complement each other) but their plainness does give a sense of coherence.

## **September 2009. Reflections**

I reflect on the relationship between producing a quilt and a thesis:

*Having now completed the front of the quilt I have come to view this process as more than I originally anticipated. Making a quilt not only represents my research process and what I anticipate will be the end product of research, it has also provided insights into how I do things ...I would (not) have gained if I had not done this. I am also becoming aware that doing the quilt has shaped and influenced the way I view what I am doing...I did not deliberately or consciously set out to do this, but the quilt I am making is no more or less than the thesis I am writing and vice versa and these are no more or less than cultural artefacts.*

I also reflect on the role of chance:

*If I had been able to get hold of my sewing machine it is unlikely that I would have come to the conclusions that I have. Because I have been hand sewing and because I am not very good and must therefore work slowly and painstakingly, I have been forced to sit for long periods engaged in the repetitive work of stitching. I often put on some background music while I do this, or listen to the radio, something I would not ordinarily do because it interferes with my thinking and hinders my concentration. Whilst I do have to concentrate hard while I do this, what seems to happen is that another part of my mind becomes unhitched from the task in hand and, almost without my being conscious of it, I am clearly thinking around what I am doing. This would not have happened had I been using a sewing machine simply because what I achieved in weeks without one could probably have been done in a matter of days. Thus what initially seemed to be merely time consuming and inconvenient has proved to be an opportunity for quiet and sustained reflection.*

I reflect on the 'hidden' aspects of research:

*What disappears from view? I had to redesign my quilt because I made a mistake with measurements. But if I did not tell you, if I had not photographed the original design, you would never know. And yet this is the design I would have realised if things had not gone wrong. It was not my decision to change it. How much of the knowledge produced by academics is the result of random error, of mistakes, a product of our lack of care and skill? It has prompted me to consider the relationship of ability to outcomes. The finished article looks reasonable overall. But closer inspection reveals the many flaws and imperfections that my lack of handicraft skills produced. For example I watched a video tutorial on 'nesting' seams, bringing corners of fabric to a point and getting a smooth finish. I practiced doing this. However, my efforts fall down on all three counts. Applied to academic settings, this raises questions about the role of 'rigour' and of critical abilities. Do these carry more weight than say, the ability to produce something aesthetically pleasing that people would want to engage with? Is a paper that delights and that is read by many a better paper than a turgid one that gathers dust on a shelf even if the latter is actually more erudite?*

I ask:

*What is lost when the 'messiness' of research is hidden from view. The back of the sewn pieces will eventually not be seen. And yet, looking at how the pieces are assembled, the straightness or otherwise of the seams, seeing the threads that hold it all together, the loose ends and the knots and tangles you get a much clearer idea of how the whole has been produced. Why is it that it is usually only the 'right side' of our work that is displayed?*

Then I ask:

*What do I now do with this flat piece of fabric? What do I make of it? I had thought of making an item such as a wall hanging but am having second thoughts. Would a wall hanging be too two-dimensional, 'art for arts sake'?. Nothing wrong with that in certain settings but is it enough here? It is like the argument about whether it is enough in social science research to tell the story without offering an analysis of the same. I feel the quilt should maybe be something that has another dimension. Therefore I am considering what else I could make of it. It has been suggested I could make it into a cushion and I am mulling over that idea at the moment. The possibility of turning it into something functional has appeal because don't I hope that what I write in my thesis will have some purpose beyond getting me a PhD? Don't I hope others will find it useful too?*

I conclude:

*So this is more than simply noting the parallels between producing a quilt and producing a thesis. Producing a quilt has provided for a richer and deeper understanding of the issues involved in academic production.*

### **Postscript**

Ultimately my written thesis evolved in a way that diverged from the design of the patchwork, particularly in respect of analysis. Having thought about whether it would be possible to re-work the patchwork (theoretically, I have no intention of re-working it yet again), I concluded it would not. It would require a completely different design. This drove home to me the potential of artefacts to fix and reify that which they purport to represent. In this respect they become detached from the meaning of 'actual worlds' and rather than representations they become significant in their own right.

Below is a still image of the completed patchwork which I have included to satisfy regulations and on the recommendation of my thesis examiners. I have reservations about representing my patchwork in this way because it suggests the important aspect of creating it was the end product and moreover it fixes one particular version in perpetuity. It also belies the iterative nature of the creative process. Therefore I have also uploaded the movie of its evolution and some stills

photographs of my original design and the final amended design to my blog <http://www.phoenixrising-mindingthegaps.bogspot.com> in a post dated 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2010. As I say in my post, I had considered various options before deciding to do this but I like the idea of merging these two aspects of my research process and it extends the notion of the messy text to that which spills over into other media.

Still photograph of amended design of patchwork



## Appendix 2

### Outtakes

1.

I was bilingual for the first five years of my life, until I got lost in Woolworths and in my panic could only speak German, at which point my Austrian mother reversed her decision to speak only German to her children. Nevertheless enough must have stuck in my mind and I ended up doing a degree in German and teaching it (and French) for thirteen years. Perhaps my desire to ensure I am properly understood emanates from this.

2.

Although my concern about categorisation is most often manifested methodologically it springs from actual sources, mainly the history of nationalistic categorisation in the former Yugoslavia, and is ethical in nature. My dad was Serbian, from Krajina, a Serbian enclave in Croatia. I believe one of the reasons he died suddenly and prematurely was the stress and anxiety over family that remained there during the conflicts in the region. Moreover, as Dowden (2009) points out, both German and Belgian colonial rule contributed in different ways to the creation of categories (both real and perceived) that led to genocide in Rwanda. Thus for me categorisation and attempts to tame the wild profusion of things (Redwood 2008) can have violent and destructive consequences (Zizek 1991 and 2009, Sen 2006)

3.

My mother was a mender in the textile industry. Working with huge bolts of cloth (pieces) she removed every tiny imperfection in order to make it ready for sale. Before I was born she worked in a mill but menders with children (mending was a woman's job) often did 'piecework' at home, that is they were paid according to how much they did, and mam was no exception. It was back-achingly intricate work requiring great dexterity and skill and conducted at first at a huge table in our living room and later in an unheated, unventilated, poorly lit garden shed. I recall at one point reading an interview with the 'film star' James Mason who had been born in my home town and who proclaimed that he was wearing a worsted suit produced there because it was the finest quality cloth in the land. There was no mention of the skill of those who had produced it particularly, I felt, that of the menders. Thus the germ of an idea took hold that there was something profoundly cavalier (I would now call this unethical) in presenting products as immaculate conceptions. Leaving in imperfections is therefore an ethical as well as methodological undertaking.

4.

When I was young and I thought you had to agree that everything was one thing or another, I vacillated terribly between being 'arty' and 'bookish'. I was also a passionate learner but at my grammar school, passion, indeed any display of emotion, was shameful. It was 'rational argument' that was lauded, so for many years I ignored and tamped down my creative fervour. Some years later I did a 'creative arts' module as part of my PGCE at Exeter and, after grading my module assignment, the tutor added a personal comment. 'PLEASE follow your heart. You can do this'. I do not recall my reaction but I didn't heed those words. I didn't believe I had the technical ability to match my enthusiasm.



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## **Appendix 3**

### **Savos Funeral**

#### **Part 1**

'Hallo Yvonne. It's Mark'

'Oh, hiya Mark! How are you?'

'I'm OK. Listen. Are you going to Uncle Savo's funeral?'

'Of course. So are the boys. As if we wouldn't go.'

'That's what I wanted to know. I was wondering whether to take Nyall. If Wilf and Jonah are going to be there then I will.'

'Well he's thirteen. He's never been to a funeral before and perhaps this will be a fairly safe place to start because he didn't know Uncle Savo all that well. He's not so emotionally involved.'

'That's what I was thinking. I've only got the morning off work so I won't be going to the pub afterwards. I've only just started there and they've been very good so I don't want to push my luck.'

'I think we will go, just to raise a glass. It's what Savo would have wanted.'

We laugh because this may be a hackneyed phrase but our uncle did in fact love going to the pub and raising a glass.

'Do you know Yvonne, that's the last of them now. All of them who came here. Uncle Savo was the last.'

'Not just those who came to England. All the uncles and aunties are gone from everywhere. We're the grown ups now.'

'Aye.' (Pause). 'Well look, I'll see you Tuesday.'

We laugh again because 'see you Tuesday' has been a family catchphrase for the past twenty-five years. It's amazing how often we need to say it.

'Yeah. See you later.'

After I put the phone down I burst into tears. My sons rush to me and put their arms round me.

#### **Part 2**

I feel awkward at the funeral home. I don't know my cousins all that well. Passing my 11+ and then going away to university meant I didn't belong to the same crowd. My cousins and my brother Mark and my sisters were all young together, going to young people's pubs and clubs, bumping into each other, exchanging a few words,

keeping up with the latest. The only times I have seen them in the last thirty odd years is at my parents' funerals.

Pete and Milan are at the door as we walk in but I am able to duck out of speaking to them because my brothers get to them first and I allow them to do my speaking for me. I know this is not right, but telling my cousins how sorry I am for their loss feels awkward. They must know how sorry I am. And I literally have nothing else to say. I go to make coffee but I find this beyond my capabilities and give up. A moment later my husband puts a cup in my hand. I wonder where Dusan is. I wonder if I will recognise him if I see him. When I do spot him in the crowd my heart constricts because of all three brothers he looks most like his dad, who in turn looked like my dad.

### **Part 3**

We are ushered into the room where the service, a traditional Serbian Orthodox one, is to take place. The priest has come over from Bradford and I notice how much greyer he looks since my dad's funeral in 2001. My dad was given a room twice this size though and today we are all packed in. Although we are required to stand throughout the service there are still chairs in the room. A detail overlooked. The smell of incense evokes a memory, just one composite memory that must comprise many, of following my dad round the house while he prayed and burned incense himself. Mark turns to me. 'Do you remember how mad mam used to get when dad burned incense?' I tamp down the urge to roar with laughter and convert it into smile. 'Yes. He used to wait until she went to town on a Saturday and as soon as she was gone he'd do it. As if she wouldn't notice when she got home.'

### **Part 4**

The service, a lengthy affair anyway, is made almost interminable by the fact it is conducted in Serbo-Croat and then delivered again in English. 'Imagine being five years old and having to stand through church services every Sunday,' I whisper to Wilf. Mark turns to me again. 'Do you remember church? It's more like torture. And all this Serbo-Croat for the sake of five people.' I look around to count the black hats. The wearers will be those men remaining from our parents' generation. Mark is right. There are many Slavic faces but very few native speakers of Serbo-Croat. Savo was eighty-eight and most of the mourners are his English friends and family. But I know my uncle would have wanted this as much as the drink in the pub after.

## **Part 5**

At last the priest invites us to file past the coffin, adorned with the Serbian and Chetnik flags, a cross and a photograph of my uncle. As I get near my knees tremble. The photograph is a good one. It makes me recall my uncle's sense of fun, his laid-back attitude, his kindness and generosity. I find it hard to stifle sobs and my tears splash my shoes. I miss another opportunity to speak to my cousins, to tell them how much I loved their dad. To tell them that I could hardly bear to talk to him after my dad died because the brothers, Savo and Petar, were so alike in voice and mannerisms. After a time not talking to Savo became a habit and at some point it became too late to resume contact. I am ashamed of myself and this stops my tongue, adding another layer of shame.

## **Part 6**

After we regroup in the foyer I am talking with my brothers when Milan comes over with a photograph of a wedding, taken in the 50s judging by the clothes. All our parents are there.

'Your mum was a looker wasn't she?'

'They all were,' I say, glad that the ice is broken.

'I remember when we used to go down and play football at Leeds Road Playing Fields. The whole team used to go to your house after and your mum would give us all squash and biscuits. The whole team. She was really good'

'They were all good, Milan'

'Just think, they were younger than we are now when I played football.'

We fall silent. I don't know about Mark and Milan but this thought makes me feel stronger and more capable.

## **Part 7**

We stand round the graveside in a blizzard in the worst winter in decades. The formalities are mercifully brief and it is soon time to lower the coffin into the grave. It is a comfort to note that he is in the plot next to my parents. My brothers help lower the coffin ('I nearly bloody slipped and joined him', Mark tells me later). We believe it is all over but one of my uncle's friends is insisting on delivering the graveside eulogy. He has hand written it on a piece of paper and, due to poor visibility and obviously poor eyesight he makes slow and stumbling progress, in Serbo-Croat. Most people are dressed for a funeral not a snowstorm and we are all in danger of hypothermia. Eventually Milan tactfully intervenes. It is over.

## **Appendix 4**

This is a creative representation

It is April 2010 and I am out with six of my friends from school. We are trying to fix up our next meeting.

Belinda        Sorry can't do that date I am at V&A doing a paper  
                      at the Oral History Society conference.

We discover for the first time that Belinda is doing an oral history project on women textile workers of the mid-twentieth century and it transpires that, out of seven women round the table, five had mothers who had worked in the textile industry and four of those mothers had been menders, including Belinda's. I had not been aware of this despite knowing her for forty years.

Y                Mam would have loved to have spoken to you. You  
                      couldn't have shut her up.

K                Yes my mum too.

C                Best hurry up Belinda they're all dying out.

B                I know. That's my problem.

S                My mother-in-law was a mender as well. I'm sure  
                      she'd talk to you. I'll write down her number for  
                      you and I'll let her know you'll be calling.

B                I appreciate that. You only have to look up and  
                      down the Colne Valley to see that soon no-one will  
                      remember what it was like.

Y                Did your mum do mending at home when you were  
                      little?

All four mothers did.

B                    That huge table! It filled our garage. It blocked the door through to our kitchen

Yvonne            My mum worked in a shed in the garden at one point.

D                    And the smell. God I remember the smell

All of us, whether our parents had worked in the mills or not, stop talking as the smell of lanolin overpowers the garlic and basil and tomato aromas of the Italian restaurant in which we are sitting, because in the Huddersfield of our childhood it would have been impossible not to know the smell of the mills. We let out a collective sigh and then laugh.

Y                    One of things that attracted me to my husband was that he smelled of the mills when I met him.

J                    It's funny isn't it, how we all remember the same things. None of the kids in my Year Two class are having this kind of shared experience. Their parents all do different kinds of jobs.

The waiter arrives to hand out dessert menus and talk turns away from our past to the more immediate concerns of justifying our decisions to order dessert or to stick to just coffee.

My friends and I get together only three or four times a year and we have so much to talk about that no topic of conversation holds our attention for long. However, since this conversation I have thought a great deal about the world of my childhood, a world that one day will only be remembered through projects such as Belinda's.

## Appendix 5

### Participant related facts and figures

<b>Facts</b>	<b>Figures</b>
Participants I knew before starting research	3
Participants who work/ed at the same FE college	5
Participants who, unsolicited, asked me if they could participate	3
Participants who enquired but did not fit my profile	1
Participants who enquired but later withdrew	1
Participants born in the north of England	7
Participants now living in the North of England	7
Participants who trained as teachers/and or worked as teachers	7
Participants still teaching	4
Participants involved in education	7
Participants who went to grammar school	8
Participants who went to pre-1992 universities	8
Participants who graduated in the '70s	7
Participants who graduated in the '80s	2

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