# Education: what's in it for mature women?

*An analysis of the experiences of mature women returners to education.*

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the experiences of mature women students who return to learning after a number of years out of the education system. It is a qualitative study based on loosely structured in-depth interviews with forty nine women attending college or university on a variety of courses in and around a northern city.

The research, set within a theoretical framework of patriarchy, began as an exploration of the barriers which mature women meet when they return to education. These issues were very real in the women's lives, though they did not necessarily conceptualise them as barriers. In addition though, the appreciative, ethnographic style of research which I adopted enabled the women to tell their own stories, and totally unexpected data emerged. Around half of the students told me of painful experiences in their lives, either past or present. These stories became the central theme of the research and are presented in the main empirical chapter, largely in the women's own words.

The central analytical question became 'what are the links, if any, between the women's experiences and their return to education?' I found from the research that this group of women were gaining far more from education than just paper qualifications. They talked of factors such as increasing confidence, an improved self-image, independence and fulfilment and I have made connections, which are drawn out throughout the main part of the thesis, between these factors, education and the trauma in the women's lives.

The results were then used to examine the value of patriarchy as an illuminating framework for the women's experiences. In general, the women's stories are supportive of this perspective but they also highlight areas where there appears to be little research or discussion in the existing literature on patriarchy. These areas include psychological violence, the guilt feelings of the students, the control of women by other women and finally and perhaps most importantly, the agency which the women have shown in their determination to take some control over at least a part of their lives.

Overall, it seems that whatever their story, this group of students are using education as a vehicle to transform their lives both socially and psychologically.

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# *Introduction & chapter summaries*

My interest in the experiences of mature women returners to education began around fifteen years ago when I started my own career as a mature student with three children and a husband to care for as well as a home to run. Following my graduation, I worked first in further education and then in a number of higher education institutions, primarily with mature students. Many of these students talked to me about issues connected with their return to learning, including child care, finance, travel, workload, time tabling as well as confidence and relationship issues. My involvement with mature women returners led to my enrolment for a Master's Degree in post-compulsory education, where this subject formed the dissertation topic, and culminated in this ethnographic-auto/biographical study for my doctorate.

My original intention was to investigate the barriers met by mature women returning to education using both quantitative and qualitative data collecting methods. However, my reading and thinking led me towards a more appreciative, ethnographic style and I adopted a qualitative open-ended grounded theory approach which was also much more in tune with my growing interest in feminist research methodology. This approach enabled the women to tell their own stories and facilitated the emergence of totally unexpected and unsolicited findings. Around half the students told me of extremely painful experiences in their lives, either past or present. The stories were so powerful and so frequent that what I later termed 'trauma' became the central theme of the research and I have made links between these experiences and the women's return to education.

What has emerged from the findings is that women gain far more from their return to education than just paper qualifications. The students talked of things like increased confidence, an improved self-image, fulfilment and increasing personal independence. It seemed to me that as well as gaining paper qualifications, education was a vehicle which enabled the students to see themselves in a different way and have some control over at least part of their lives.

My initial theoretical framework was based on patriarchy, power, ideology and structuration, but the women's revelations forced me to rethink my theoretical position and to adopt a theoretical perspective grounded in their own experiences. I have therefore used the findings to critically examine the theory of patriarchy.

These three changes; in methodology, central focus and theoretical framework have resulted in a radically different piece of work from that originally envisaged.

Interviews took place with forty-nine mature women students attending college or university in or around a northern city which I have called Austen. Austen College has six sites the catchment areas for which range from a deprived area in receipt of European Social Funding, to a clearly affluent area with very different incomes and lifestyles. The college outside of the city boundaries has just one site but draws students from an equally wide social distribution. I talked with women from this diversity of backgrounds and discovered that there were commonalities across the interviews which were due to gender rather than social class membership. It must be pointed out here though that my interpretation of the socio-economic group and life-styles of the women with whom I spoke is both speculative and subjective since I visited some homes but not all, as I discuss in chapter four. Neither did I ask about social class, nor about father's or partner's occupations, although this information was volunteered by some students. However, women from all backgrounds talked of issues such as child-care and domestic responsibilities, and the stories of traumatic experiences were not located in any particular social group. In other words, the women's experiences were rooted in their being women rather than in their material circumstances.

Because of the nature of the findings, and my desire to represent the women's stories accurately, it is mostly their words which have been used in the thesis. The women's names and the names of the institutions they were attending have been changed to protect their anonymity. I have mostly used the students' words verbatim and although I have occasionally paraphrased and edited what they told me, this has been very limited. As Reissman says:

> *Speech that has been "cleaned up" to be more readable loses important*
> *information.                     (Reissman 1987, p189)*

# Outline of the chapters

## Section I: Getting started

**Chapter one** is a discussion of the change in my thinking and perceptions in relation to the design and conduct of the research. It outlines my original aims, research design and theoretical pre-disposition. It then lists the reasons for my growing dissatisfaction with the design and outlines and discusses the change in methodology, the shift from barriers to trauma and the re-focusing of my theoretical structure from an eclectic pre-conceived perspective to an approach grounded in the data. It concludes with a discussion of the grounded theory approach.

**Chapter two** outlines some of the history of feminist sociology and examines my reasons for using a feminist ethnographic grounded theory approach, linking this with a critique of positivist methods. The chapter then discusses some of the issues pertinent to ethnography, such as the importance of locating both the 'researcher' and the 'researched' in the process, and the terminology which is used; the distribution of power and the importance of reflexivity which is concerned with the reciprocal relationship between the players; the importance of recognising researcher partiality and its influence on the data collection and presentation. Feminist researchers have tended to favour qualitative data collecting methods because they allow women to tell their own stories. The chapter goes on to discuss this and presents evidence that interviewing may not always be women's preferred method before concluding by outlining some of the ethical issues which researchers need to address when conducting social research of this kind.

**Chapter three** is autobiographical and is concerned with my own experiences insofar as they impact on the research process. It tells of my growing awareness of the influences on my own educational background and goes on to outline my own childhood, early education and adult life as it has informed the research. It discusses my increasing interest in the difficulties which mature women students face when they return to education and how this interest developed from my experience as a mature student and then as a lecturer in both further and higher education.

**Chapter four** outlines the primary research, giving a general overview of the students and the institutions. There is then what could be considered to be a biography of the primary research process, which describes the way I contacted the different colleges and universities and approached the lecturers and the students prior to starting the interviews. This is interspersed with my reflections of the process and the changes I made in the light of what was happening, before going on to a discussion of some of the emerging issues which were related directly to the interviews themselves. The chapter concludes with a general overview of the primary research process and outlines some of the overall difficulties and pleasures I experienced during the data collecting period.

## Section II: The findings

**Chapter five** is concerned with the problems and difficulties which mature women experience when they return to education. Although this area is not now the central focus of the thesis, I felt it was necessary to include at least a section on the topic since many of these issues, to varying degrees, circumscribe the lives of mature women students. The whole concept of barriers is discussed, and the point is made that the women themselves do not use the term barriers, rather there are issues with which they have to deal as part of their lives as students with domestic and caring responsibilities. The chapter then discusses the more frequently mentioned difficulties such as finance, caring and domestic responsibilities and the attitude of partners, before concluding with a summary which looks also at the difference in impact according to the social and economic position of the student.

**Chapter six** is the major empirical chapter in the thesis, and is divided into three parts:

Part 1 begins by outlining and examining the reasons which mature women gave for returning to education. The women's stories, presented in their own words, start with talk of factors such as a better job, better qualifications, contributing to the family income, a testing of ability and a realisation of their potential in comparison with significant others. There was however a major shift in their explanations and later in the interview they talked of status, proof of ability, a public as well as a private identity and a general need to 'do something for myself'. This section is followed by a discussion of whether these explanations are complementary or contradictory.

Part two begins by discussing the emergence of the trauma in the students' lives and my difficulty with both defining and analysing it. Connections are made between the women's stories and their return to education before presenting their experiences which are divided into two broad categories. The stories are grouped according to broad similarities in the nature of the trauma, although the women's experiences may have been different. The first group of students include women who have experienced major life events which have either been sudden or unexpected or which have created dramatic life changes. In the second group, the stories are much more concerned with restrictive, stultifying relationships.

Part three is entitled "Mega trauma" because of the nature of the experiences and the on-going effects on the women's lives. Della's story, which concludes the chapter has been included separately, not only because of the extreme nature of her experiences and the accidental way in which her story was collected, but also because of the influence it had on my decision to shift the empirical focus of the research.

# Section III: The findings in context

**Chapter seven** starts by briefly outlining my original preconceived theoretical framework before moving on to discuss the clarification of my theoretical focus as clearly located in the data. It moves on to discuss the development of patriarchy as a theory in feminist literature. Using Walby's six patriarchal structures, it then examines the strengths and weaknesses of patriarchy as an analytical tool in relation to the research findings, drawing on the students' stories in illustration. Prior to the conclusion, Colette's story is told in order to illustrate the relationship between patriarchal control and agency. Her story is presented separately because it tests the power of patriarchy in a very different way from the other students. She sees herself as deviant, because she is contemplating leaving her children as well as her husband. She is aware that what she is planning to do is not what women are expected to do in this society, which is a reflection of the power of patriarchal influence but at the same time she seems determined to carve out a new identity for herself.

**Chapter eight** concludes the thesis by giving an overview of the research and highlighting the positive and negative aspects of the research process. It documents some of the difficulties I had, particularly with the analysis and organisation of the material on women's experiences. It moves on to discuss some of the difficulties of working within a grounded theory approach, particularly the questions I wished I had asked and the directions I could have taken. It highlights the need for more empirical research into the lives of women, particularly in the areas of women's agency/autonomy, psychological violence, guilt, and the control of women by women, all of which are neglected, to a greater or lesser degree, in the literature on patriarchy. It also highlights the need for further investigation into the links between trauma, education and identity to build on what has been a small-scale in-depth but productive piece of research.

# Section I: Getting started

# *Chapter 1: Sorting out an appropriate approach and focus*

## Introduction

> *It is the requirement for methodological rigour that every ethnography be accompanied by a research biography, that is a reflexive account of the conduct of the research which, by drawing on the fieldnotes and reflections, recounts the processes, problems, choices and errors which describe the fieldwork upon which the substantive account is based.*
>
> *(Stephen Ball 1990, p170)*

Ball's quote formed the starting point for this biography of the research process. However, no matter how reflexive or full the fieldnotes are, a research biography, begun at the start of the research, can tell only part of the story. The process of my research started well before the doctorate was begun and continues still. The physical conduct of the investigation and the associated problems and choices are certainly important, particularly with this research, which has changed in both focus and theoretical orientation. But equally if not more important, are the intellectual challenges and processes which I have experienced. I have lived through a three year research process in which I have read extensively, discussed, written, reflected, rewritten, edited, considered options, discarded ideas, resurrected them in a different format, had flashes of insight, been side-tracked and tempted into interesting but digressing analyses and have changed and expanded my views in many areas.

This mental experience of the research process has been drawn on where relevant throughout the thesis.

The biography of this research process then is much broader than Ball's quite narrow definition which focuses upon the actual research itself. Because of this broad focus, to discuss many of these issues in a single and separate research biography would not only make for a very lengthy chapter, it would also create a somewhat stilted and artificial setting for issues where the context and background are also important. This chapter will therefore discuss primarily the major changes which occurred at different points during the research process. Some of the background, the original aims, proposed design and intended theoretical structure of the research will be outlined, followed by a discussion of my growing dissatisfaction and a number of shifts in my thinking. This resulted in a move to a new methodology, a shift in the central focus, and a change in the theoretical approach. All of these areas are discussed again in later chapters where contextual factors are relevant and important to understanding the moves.

# The original research aims

My original research aim was to investigate the backgrounds of and barriers experienced by mature women students who enter further and higher education after a number of years out of the education system. I was interested in the students' social and economic background; their early education and employment; why they had returned to education and chosen the institutions and courses they had; what support the women had, both within the college and outside, from family and friends; what, if any, the main difficulties were for the women and whether there were any patterns according to factors such as age, marital status, family responsibilities. I was also interested to know whether the government rhetoric of encouraging mature students back into education, which had received considerable publicity in the 1980s, was matched by the reality of the women's experiences.

# Initial literature search

Until relatively recently, there has been little research on mature women students as a specific group of adult learners. Some work - mostly but not exclusively quantitative, has been done on mature students generally regardless of their gender and provides general information. (Britton & Baxter 1994, Wakeford 1993, Kearney & Diamond 1990, McNair 1990, Alloway & Nelson 1987, Smithers & Griffin 1986, Bell, Hamilton & Roderick 1986). Government statistics also provide basic numerical information (Social Trends 1996, Annual Abstract of Statistics 1996). There is also an increasing amount of research into Access courses, which offer a third route into higher education for mature students. This route is increasing in popularity over the traditional A-level and vocational qualifications, with the number of Access courses in colleges of further education and university extra-mural departments proliferating over the last few years. Their structure, provision, and clientele are documented (Wakeford 1993, Kearney & Diamond 1990)

Much of the existing literature which has discussed barriers indicates that a variety of hurdles are faced when adults return to learning, but has tended not to focus on women as a group (FEU 1992, Pye 1991, Browning 1990, Hughes et al, 1989, Woodley et al 1987, Schutze et al 1987, Charnley et al 1985, Lucas & Ward 1985, ACACE 1982). These barriers may be grouped under 5 broad headings:

- Psychological - for example, am I too old? Am I good enough? Will it be the same as school?

- Practical - concerned with travel, childcare, domestic responsibilities

- Institutional - concerned with time-tabling, choice of courses, availability of information.

- Economic - how will I pay for books, courses, will I get a grant and if so, will it be enough?

- Personal & social - effects on relationships - partners, children, relatives, friends.

These areas are obviously not discrete - there is clear interaction between the students' personal and social position and some of the difficulties they experience when they return to education. It is important to note also that some students appear to have no problems at all, many students have one or two problems, but a few students have multiple difficulties, of both a personal and practical nature.

Although much of the literature has tended to focus on mature students generally, it is not difficult to speculate on the types of barriers which women are likely to meet. My own experiences as a mature student and then as a lecturer in further and higher education, together with research for my Master's degree, indicated that the barriers were gender-related, particularly if the women were partnered and/or had children. The literature on gender socialisation, particularly in education, shows clearly that there are still powerful gendered influences on the lives of both men and women (see among many others Sharpe 1994, Draper 1993, Thorne 1993, Riddell 1992, Banks et al 1992, Bates 1991, Delamont 1990, Jones & Mahoney 1989, Deem 1980).

More recent work which has centred upon adult women as students is emerging to fill this gap in the research. For example, Coats (1989) discusses provision and resourcing to meet the needs of women who return to education. Her 1994 work focuses on 'Women's Education' that is, education which is provided for women by women, taking women's needs into consideration. Oglesby (1989, 1991) highlights institutional issues and adopts a European dimension when she argues that:

> *The problems for women arise where it is not organisationally*
> *acknowledged that the women are subjected to the cultural, social and*
> *domestic pressures of being women.*          *(Oglesby 1991, p137)*

Pascall & Cox's (1993) work is longitudinal research which draws on semi- structured interviews with mature women students at two institutes of higher education in the East Midlands, looking at backgrounds, early education, careers, domestic situations and reasons for returning to education. The later interviews focus on the students' interpretation of the effects of education on subsequent careers and personal lives. Early education appears to have directed girls towards domesticity for most interviewees; but later education was a clear route away from it. McGivney's (1993)

· research discovered that the barriers to education and training were pretty much the same as those found in the existing literature. The research therefore focused on facets of a range of courses which encouraged and enabled women to access the education and training they required. Finally, Edwards (1993) looks at the relationship between higher education and family life for a number of mature women students at various stages of their social science degrees. Drawing on in-depth interviews with partnered mothers from different social groups, she examines the way in which education and family, two *'greedy institutions' (pp 62-64)* make competing demands on women's lives.

The experiences of mature women returners to education then appears to be a growing, albeit still very small, area of academic research.

# The original research design.

My original research design was to use both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Questionnaires would be sent to mature women students at all colleges of further education likely to act as local feeder institutions into Austen University, and to first and final year undergraduates at Austen University. The aim was to collect the following broad information:

- Demographic information - age, ethnic group, current domestic circumstances, for example whether the woman is single, partnered, divorced/separated, widowed; whether she has dependent children or dependent adults for whom she was responsible.

- The student's social and economic background - the attitude of her parents to her education, the type of education she received and what sort of employment she had.

- Why has she returned to education and why has she chosen the courses she has? Does she have a particular goal in mind?

- What support/guidance/counselling has she received, both formally and informally?

- How has her return to education affected relationships with her close and extended family and friends?

- What practical issues has she had to deal with in her return to learning?

This was to be followed by in-depth interviews with a small group of students from both further and higher education institutions, and with a small number who had 'dropped out' of the courses.

· With this plan in mind, I spent a large part of my first research year reading the literature and developing a questionnaire to be sent out at the beginning of the following academic year. Concurrently I was considering and developing a theoretical analytical framework based on patriarchy, power, ideology and structuration..

## The original theoretical framework

Before starting the research, I already had a predisposition towards patriarchy as a theoretical construct. Patriarchy is discussed extensively in chapter seven so it is sufficient here to give a brief working definition. Whatever the perspective taken (for example, whether it is radical, marxist or liberal feminism), most feminist theorists agree that we live in a society in which men have power over women. Sylvia Walby's definition summarises this well by defining patriarchy as:

> *'A system of social structures and practices in which men dominate,*
> *oppress and exploit women'.*                                                      *(Walby, 1990, p20)*

My interest in patriarchy defined in this way grew with the literature I was reading and raised a number of a priori questions in relation to my research:

*'Does patriarchy explain the erection and maintenance of the barriers which mature women experience when returning to further and higher education?'*

*'Is there a fit between the broad structure of patriarchy and women's everyday lives?'*

*'If women surmount the barriers, does this call into question the explanatory reach of patriarchy as a theoretical structure?'*

Although my inclination was towards theories of patriarchy, I felt that much writing on this issue was rather deterministic and that it marginalised notions of agency. There seems little doubt that  the major institutions in our society are male dominated and there was ample evidence from my earlier interviews of patriarchal influences on women's experiences,  but does this tell the whole story?  The fact that women *were* returning to learning appeared to be indicative of agency. Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration takes account of both structural influences and agency and argues for a relationship between the two. It treats power as a fluid negotiated phenomenon, which can be enabling or repressive, rather than a given, top-down, repressive structure. This led me to consider the nature of power and to reflect on ideology.

Historically, theories of power have not addressed the issues of gender or of women having power. It has generally been assumed that men have power and the focus has generally been on political power. However, I was attracted to Lukes' 3-dimensional view of power. Although he does not directly link power and gender inequalities, he

suggests that the most effective exercise of power is when people are persuaded that a situation is right and proper. I felt that this could prove relevant to the apparent acceptance by both men and women of gendered social roles. The main thrust of his third dimension is that the ability to shape people's thinking is the ultimate expression of power:

> ..... is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable or because they define it as divinely ordained and beneficial?                         (Lukes 1993 pp 135-6)

What Lukes is talking about here is latent conflict, in the sense that conflict would arise if the powerless had some autonomy. These potential wants (or needs or thoughts) are considered as real interests by Lukes. The crux of Lukes' argument rests on his notion that our needs and wants are shaped, so any decision about 'real' interests is bound to be evaluative, as Lukes himself points out (1974). Although he does not mention the term "ideology", the concept may be helpful here, particularly Gramsci's work on ideological hegemony, which suggests that there is an dominant set of ideas in society which is in some way connected to the nature and distribution of power in any given society.

According to Gramsci (Bocock, 1986), ideological hegemony is the result of a slow social process in which consensus between dominant and subordinate groups is built. This consensus is manifest in the acceptance as legitimate by subordinate groups of the values, beliefs etc. of the dominant group. If the dominant group is male, then the way men define values and beliefs will be seen as right and proper by all members of society. This consensus, creating social cohesion, which of course underpins the power of the dominant group, is reinforced through the activities of social institutions such as education and the media.

My initial theoretical framework then had a number of elements: patriarchy, power, ideology and the relationship between structure and agency. This eclectic approach seemed to me to fit well with my experience of being a mature student, a lecturer in further and higher education and my previous research.

## Questioning the design

The original research plan then was to examine the barriers which mature women experienced when they returned to further and/or higher education, using both

, quantitative and qualitative data collecting methods and an eclectic theoretical structure - primarily a positivist approach. However, towards the end of my first research year, I grew increasingly dissatisfied with the idea of using quantitative data collecting methods for the primary research. This dissatisfaction with the research design developed for a number of reasons:

- The crucial factor was the growing awareness that I was looking more for explanations rather than "numbers of women who ..... " I realised over the months that my if my real interest was in explanations and perceptions then it was greater depth rather than breadth which I needed in the research data. This depth in terms of explanations and perceptions could only be achieved, I felt, by listening to and hearing what the women themselves had to say. During this period, I was reading an increasing amount of literature on feminist methodology and moving away from a positivist approach towards encompassing an ethnographic grounded theory approach, where the emphasis is on understanding the social and cultural context of events as well as the events themselves. Within my area of research, this is concerned with the women's own perceptions and explanations of their situations.

- This change in my thinking then led to a rejection of a large-scale survey design, appropriate for enumeration, but which would be inappropriate for a study based on in-depth understanding and explanation. The focus would now be on small-scale in-depth qualitative research. My growing dissatisfaction with the research design came to a head during a presentation of my research and the problems as I saw them to other postgraduate students and staff at the end of my first year. As I was talking through my presentation, the doubts in my mind came together and I realised that this broad-scale, primarily quantitative type of research was not what I wanted to do.

So, a major re-think of the research methodology resulted in the jettisoning of primarily quantitative data collection methods in favour of a qualitative approach. However, the considerable time I had spent developing a questionnaire was not wasted since the questions could form the basis for a loosely structured guided interview containing key areas in which I was interested, but with enough leeway built in for the women to digress or expand as they wished. I was also increasingly influenced by the grounded theory approach, developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and which has extensively informed qualitative research since then (Bryman & Burgess 1994, Miles & Huberman 1994). This approach is discussed later in more detail.

# The new approach

So, my primary data collecting became entirely qualitative, using an ethnographic 'co-researcher' approach, essentially biographical, which is discussed more fully chapter two, with existing statistical data being utilised as background information.

This qualitative approach highlighted what had been a major issue in my mind and which I felt would be emphasised with the relative intimacy of a loosely structured interview situation, where I had a great deal in common with the women with whom I was talking. I aimed to create an easy, comfortable interactive situation in which the women could ask questions of me. I wanted to answer these questions as honestly as possible without driving the interview down a particular route. My own values had clearly informed the research but I did not want them to unduly influence the women's stories. My interest in this area stems from my own experiences as a mature student and as a lecturer in further education, being primarily involved with mature students, but to what extent would my background and experiences be a double-edged sword? To what extent would my own internalised concepts limit my perception and thus my ability to be open and receptive to new ideas and approaches? What measures could I take to avoid shaping responses?

It is impossible of course to ignore one's own values, and in fact all recent feminist methodology emphasises the fact that it is important for the researcher to locate herself in the research and acknowledge the inherent bias, which can be viewed as being positive as well as negative. Chapter three therefore discusses my own background and how it has informed the research area. The steps taken to limit the negative influences of any bias are discussed in the general methodology chapter and also in chapter four, which is concerned with primary data collection.

# Emergent data and the shift from barriers to trauma

Right from the start of the interviews, unexpected and unsolicited findings were emerging. All the hurdles which I had expected the women to have to negotiate in their return to education were there. In addition to this though, the students were talking to me about personal issues both current and in their past. These ranged throughout the women's lives from things in their childhood, such as having a controlling and manipulative parent and very intimate issues such as sexual abuse, to painful adult experiences such as difficult divorces, the death of a child and physically abusive partners. It seems that within the relaxed and non-judgmental structure of the interview, women were willing to address some of the issues which they may not have discussed in a more formal setting. Because I was focusing on barriers, I did not at

first see the importance of these stories, but I felt that if the women had been prepared to give precious time in a busy schedule to talk to me, the least I could do was to listen to what they wanted to tell me - in ethical terms, a "win-win" situation (ethical considerations are discussed in more detail in the next chapter). I noted these stories with interest though and can remember commenting to my supervisor about the trauma in some of the women's backgrounds.

I used the word "trauma" because of the powerful and painful nature of the stories which the women were telling me. These experiences had clearly had a major impact on the lives of the students, and the effects were ongoing. These stories also had a considerable impact on me and left me exhausted, as I discuss more fully in chapter four. As I interviewed more students, I began to realise that these stories were common, and seemed to be as much the rule as the exception. I did consider though whether the impact of these stories was staying with me and colouring my thinking. By this time I had completed about fifteen interviews and when I listened to the tapes and examined the transcripts, I realised that a large proportion of the women with whom I spoke were talking of painful experiences in their past.

By the time the interviews had been completed, twenty out of the forty-five women with whom I talked told me of painful life experiences which could be significantly linked with their return to learning as adults. Dilys for example, talked of her poor relationship with her mother who would not allow her to stay at school after the minimum leaving age. She went on to talk of her long-held desire to return to education: '*I've waited all these years to go back .....* ' Jenny had to leave her nursery nursing course when she became pregnant. She felt that she was and is still, restricted and controlled by her subsequent early marriage. Education was her way of ameliorating this situation: '*It's not just job prospects ..... It's the way that I escape the unfairness I suppose.* ' The links were not always this clear and direct, but education seemed to be a vehicle which the women used to deal with some of the consequences of their experiences.

I was stunned at the frequency of these stories, and overwhelmed by the implications for my research. I was faced with a dilemma of fair proportions here. I had considerable data on the barriers, ranging in proportion from minor to major, which mature women have to negotiate when they return to education. My original intention had been to examine these hurdles and the students' perception of them and I felt that I could write up the thesis, using this data, the planned theoretical structure and a broad literature review, completing the task without too much difficulty. My other option was to take the trauma about which the women had spoken and the links they were making with education as my central topic. This was uncharted territory - I could find

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no literature on this topic and was massively uncertain about what was going to emerge once I started to analyse the data in detail. I felt I was facing a task of epic proportions and was sinking in a morass of data. My supervisor was very encouraging and supportive, and at this stage his confidence in me was considerably greater than my own! However, two opportunities to present a paper arose and I decided to 'test the water' by discussing some of the early broad findings on trauma, using verbatim material from the transcripts and asking for comments and suggestions. The responses were very positive, with the overall feeling being that this was a topic well worthy of investigation. There was also considerable anecdotal support for the women's stories from friends and colleagues in different walks of life. I must admit that my orientation was towards focusing on the trauma despite my trepidation, and after more thought and discussion I decided that this should be the focus of the thesis. However, I still felt that a section on barriers should be included, since they were the starting point for the research and very evident in the women's stories. This data, which showed ongoing constraints and controls on women's lives, is worthy of discussion in its own right and is accorded its own chapter.

## Changing the theoretical structure

Consequent upon the shift from barriers to trauma was a shift from an eclectic theoretical approach to a single focus on patriarchy. The frequency of trauma in the women's stories, the ongoing effects and the links which the women were making with education was new, exciting and different from what I had expected would emerge from the interviews and made me question my original theoretical orientation. What emerged clearly from the data was the extensive and pervasive nature of male dominance which affected all areas of women's lives either directly or indirectly, and was unequivocally linked with the trauma which the women presented. I became increasingly dissatisfied with my initial theoretical structure as an explanatory framework for this gendered imbalance of power as it relates to trauma. Grounding the theory in the data made me question the usefulness of using an eclectic approach, and working and re-working the data led me back to a single focus on patriarchy as a conceptual tool. Patriarchy can also be closely linked with identity which I used as a concept to describe the changes in themselves about which the women were talking. This is discussed in chapters six and seven but is implicit throughout the thesis. Since its emergence as a popular theoretical perspective in feminist literature, the location of power within a patriarchal framework has been debated, covering such areas as male violence, control of sexuality and women's position in the household. Walby's (1990) work suggests six interrelated sites of women's oppression and this is the theoretical structure which I found most useful. However, even this broader theory did not seem

to explain some of the data and I needed to explore the concept further, drawing on the research data to examine its explanatory power and reach.

Thus the theoretical framework has moved from an eclectic approach, encompassing theories of patriarchy, power, ideology and structuration, to an examination of patriarchy as a useful conceptual tool, grounding the theory in the data

# A grounded theory approach

Being led by the emergent data fits with the grounded theory approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This approach involves a constant interaction, right from the start, between all the research processes - data collection, analysis, the development of conceptual frameworks and theories. Taylor & Bogdan (1984) define this approach succinctly:

> *The grounded theory approach - discovering theories, concepts, hypotheses, propositions directly from the data, rather than from a priori assumptions, other research or existing theoretical frameworks.*
> *(Taylor & Bogdan 1984, p126)*

Clearly one cannot go into the research process without some a priori assumptions. A 'tabula rasa' state does not exist; researchers are focused, if only loosely on particular areas about which they want to know more. In most research, for a variety of reasons, it is necessary to submit at least an outline of the proposed topic; in this instance the experiences of mature women returners to further and higher education. Glaser and Strauss do allow for this however, by suggesting that the research may be started with a few general ideas of the topic area:

> 'The sociologist may begin the research with a partial framework of "local" concepts ..... these concepts give him a beginning foothold on the research' *(Glaser & Strauss 1967, p45)*

I must admit to a more defined framework than this. My original intention was to gather information on the experiences of adult women students, with special attention to the hurdles they may have to negotiate when they return to study. Perhaps though the grounded process starts well before this. My interest in the topic is rooted in personal experiences as a student and tutor with both formal and informal contact with other mature students. The questions I was interested in asking and the group I was interested in asking them of were derived from an analysis of collected past experiences, pre-conceptions, life experiences, received wisdom, identity and so on - thus concepts and ideas were grounded in the available data both formal and informal and determined the topic and the methodology.

A strength of the grounded theory approach though, is in the emphasis on open-mindedness, a willingness to listen, hear and act on the results at all stages in the research process. My analysis of the research data began after the first few interviews, though not any formal way - often just playing the tapes through as I was driving. Some key issues such as finance, domestic responsibilities and the care of dependents had emerged clearly and appeared to be linked with age and marital status. The painful experiences about which the women told me were to the forefront of my thinking but at this stage, they were simply that - painful stories which I had heard as incidentals to the focus of the research. As more of these stories emerged, I mentally fitted them into my original framework of barriers - these painful experiences were major hurdles which the women had surmounted, or were surmounting in their return to education. At this point I decided that a more formal approach to analysis was needed.

I decided to work with transcripts rather than tapes because I felt that working with hard data was for me, a much easier way to handle and sort information than working from tapes. For a variety of reasons, discussed in more detail later, I did not transcribe the tapes myself. However, both as a form of checking accuracy and so that nuances and inflexions were not lost and interpretation was appropriate, I read each transcript through once whilst listening to the recording. After this initial reading, I worked primarily with the transcripts and decided quite soon that in order to get an overview of the interviews, I needed to summarise key information for each woman. Miles & Huberman (1994) call this data reduction:

> ' ..... the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and
> transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or
> transcriptions ..... writing summaries, coding, teasing out themes .....
> (Miles & Huberman 1994, p10)

The decision to write thumb-nail sketches for each of the women involved in the research, was not of course a separate process from analysis; it was part and parcel of the ongoing process of decision-making and selection of those parts of the data which in my view, gave the best overall picture. I found these one-page sketches an invaluable resource not only at the start when I could get a better overall picture of the range of interviews, but throughout the analysis, frequently referring to them for particular details. It was in the process of writing up these sketches that the incidence of trauma was becoming more clear. My suspicion of the extent of these painful experiences was confirmed and I began to see it as an integral part of the data rather than a peripheral issue. In addition, many women talked of changes in themselves such as becoming more confident, more independent, proving their ability, being different in some way, having more control over their lives and so on. At this stage, I began to think about possible relationships between the trauma which had been presented, the

women's return to education and the changes about which the women were talking. What links were there? Were they direct or indirect? How did the women themselves perceive their experiences? I made notes, notes and more notes - sometimes writing on any old scraps of paper as the ideas occurred to me. The process of analysis was ongoing, even when I was not consciously working on the data, ideas and links would come into my head and frustratingly, disappear just as quickly if I did not write them down immediately.

At this point I recognised the importance of ensuring that the research group covered a variety of social situations and courses. The thumb-nail sketches of the first groups of students I interviewed indicated a reasonable cross-section of social groups in terms of age, marital status, caring responsibilities and so on. However, they were either at university or on courses linked directly or indirectly with higher education; this latter group including access courses and the foundation year, franchised out from the two local universities, of four-year degree courses. I felt it necessary therefore to talk to women who were not on this type of course to see whether there would be similar stories. Subsequently I talked to women who were enrolled on a motor vehicle course and women who were studying a variety of courses at a neighbourhood centre in a designated deprived area. This again is very much a grounded theory approach - data collecting, analysis, reflection, adaptation/modification, data collecting - looking for evidence to contradict the findings (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The incidence of trauma presented was if anything, slightly higher than that from the earlier groups of students.

The next stage in the data analysis was to begin to code the data in a systematic way and I did this by using a system of coloured lines in the margins of the transcripts. I was concerned here to be as open-minded as possible and the process was painstakingly slow. At the same time, I made separate notes under each of the category headings which were emerging of possible verbatim material to be used in the write-up. Many research manuals suggest a cutting and grouping exercise at this stage, but I felt that this was inappropriate for this data set, since there was considerable overlap of categories in much of what the women said, and often context was important, so again I made separate notes of the different categories for each woman.

However, grouping and verifying patterns was much more difficult working with whole transcripts, and I needed to make the task more manageable. Using the same system of colour coding, I organised the data so that I had two schedules - one of women I had interviewed and the barriers they had negotiated and a second of whether they had presented trauma and the links they were making with education.

The next step was of course how to present the data. I had decided to use the women's own words where possible, but the issue was how to group this rich verbatim material

into categories. I spent hours agonising over this and trying many different ways. Miles and Huberman recognise this difficulty:

> ..... *the choice of when to close down, when to go with a definitive coding scheme or definitive analysis, can be painful. That choice may be dictated as often by time and budget constraints as on scientific grounds. When those constraints are relaxed, saturation can become a vanishing horizon, just another field trip away, then another .....*
> *(Miles and Huberman 1994 )*

Schatzman & Strauss (1973) maintain that discussing the data with others is a valuable resource at this stage, and Fisher, Marsh, & Phillips (1986) found this technique useful in their research of children going into care. As I had access to a number of forums in which I could discuss the data, I presented a number of brief working papers for discussion and found the response invaluable in terms of added insights and depth into organisation and structure for presentation. The method of presentation is discussed further in relevant chapters later in the thesis.

Bryman & Burgess (1994) maintain that researchers rarely use grounded theory in its entirety as developed by Glaser & Strauss, and are generally selective in their use suggesting that its impact is two-fold:

> *First, it has ..... alerted qualitative researchers to the desirability of extracting concepts and theories out of the data ..... Second, grounded theory has informed, in general terms, aspects of the analysis of qualitative data ..... and their role in concept creation.*
> *(Bryman & Burgess 1994, p220)*

The openness of a grounded theory approach certainly informed my shift from barriers to trauma as the central focus of this thesis, as it also informed my theoretical shift. What Bryman and Burgess do not mention however, is the emergence, with a grounded theory approach, of tantalising pointers into interesting avenues which one would like to pursue if there was time. This would seem to be an in-built consequence of grounded theory. As Fisher et al put it:

> *An important and profound conclusion we arrived at concerning research methodology was that qualitative research workers need to be blessed with longevity in order to stand a chance of mastering their data.* *(Fisher et al 1986, p29)*

# Chapter 2:  Research design and methodology

*....our experience of the sun's sinking below the horizon is transformed*
*by our knowledge that the world turns.  (Yet from where we are it seems*
*to sink and that must be accounted for.)      (Smith 1974, p11)*

Dorothy Smith epitomises in this quote what for me a feminist perspective
encompasses - the recognition that established ideas and practices in a society can only
be changed by pushing out the boundaries of our knowledge, but at the same time
recognising that our understanding of that society is through our experience of it from
within.  Feminism seeks to broaden the base of knowledge and to raise awareness of
women's inequality from the perspective of women themselves.  It acknowledges that
all participants in the research process have a contribution to make to that process.
This research is set within a feminist framework, aiming to look at women's
experiences as mature students.  It allows them to tell their story, but at the same time
recognises my influence as a woman researcher with a similar background.

## Opting for ethnography

Many of the strengths of the grounded theory approach - open-mindedness and a
willingness to listen is consistent with a feminist framework which has rejected
positivism and emphasised the importance of contextual factors regardless of whether
qualitative or quantitative data collecting methods are used.  I have rejected both a
positivist and a quantitative approach in favour of an ethnographic style of data
collecting, since my research is primarily concerned with women's perceptions of their
experiences as mature students in education.

Traditionally, ethnography has its roots in anthropology and the participant study of
small scale societies.  Its recent popularity however, has emerged as a critique of more
traditional social research methods and their failure to take account of the numerous
social factors which can influence research.  Hammersley (1992, pp 11-12) lists a
number of criticisms which have been levelled at such positivist methods.  These can be
summarised as the fallacious presumption that data can be collected and analysed
without any consideration of the interaction between the participants in the research
and/or the environment. The emphasis within ethnography is on understanding the
social and cultural context of events, where such events influence understanding and
explanations. There is also the recognition that the researcher must accept the
multiplicity and diversity of those understandings in the analysis of data.

Within the specific area of mature women returners to education, there are a great many cultural and social variables which can influence how the women perceive and explain their experiences. These experiences are clearly personal, and this ethnographic research seeks to understand them from the women's perspective, but they also need to be set into a wider cultural framework to understand the whole picture. It is necessary therefore to examine the wider social structure of society.

## The wider picture

At the macro-level, I am thinking principally about the power of gender socialisation and its influences on women's activities, particularly in terms of women's perceived role in relationships, in the home and in the more public world outside the home. This reflects the norms and values of a dominant ideology which I perceive as patriarchal - a system whereby men dominate women. So, while I have used the grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Strauss 1987, Strauss & Corbin 1990) because of its appeal for me in focusing on the perspective of the research subjects, it is necessary to locate those experiences within a broader social framework and I have used the concept of patriachy in analysis. My aim has been to utilise existing theory to make sense of the data in a way which recognises the range of difference in what has generally been treated as a fairly homogeneous group - 'mature women students'. The grounded approach is therefore still dominant - with existing theoretical knowledge used as *a* rather than *the* conceptual framework.

## Feminist epistemology & ontology

Feminist sociology has its recent origins with the women's movement some twenty-five years ago and generally emerged from a growing awareness that mainstream sociology is a male-dominated discipline:

> *The women's movement has given us a sense of our right to have*
> *women's interests represented in sociology, rather than just receiving*
> *as authoritative the interests traditionally represented in a sociology*
> *put together by men.* *(Smith 1974, p7)*

This is not surprising since we inhabit a world dominated by men:

> *..... (Sociology's) methods, conceptual schemes and theories - has been*
> *based on and built up within the male social universe (even where*
> *women have participated in its doing).* *(Smith 1974, p7)*

The development of the women's movement in the 1960s was a platform from which many women within the discipline began to question the relevance of what has become known as malestream sociology to their own experiences (Smith 1974, Oakley 1982, Stanley & Wise 1983, Ramanazoglu 1989, Abbott & Wallace 1990). Apart from students, women as practitioners were virtually invisible within the discipline. The predominantly female students found themselves reading research and theoretical literature from which they were either excluded or located within the private domestic world. Female academics in sociology were in a minority and were having to work within the dominant male theoretical and research paradigm if they wished to be taken seriously.

However, some change has occurred over the last few years - there have been many publications by and about women in our society and many women's studies courses in higher education, but feminist perspectives have still tended to be marginalised in mainstream sociology. For example, the most recent publication of the British Sociology Association's journal 'Network' (January 1995) included a flyer advertising a new seventeen volume series entitled 'Schools of Thought in Sociology' - 'A landmark series which will improve access to the key literature in Sociology'. The series editor is a male and (I quote from the leaflet) The seventeen volumes in this series have been edited by distinguished sociologists including ..... these 'distinguished sociologists are all male - eleven of them!

There is no volume or part of a volume entitled 'Feminist Sociology'. What feminist writing there is, is included under other titles, and thus subsumed under malestream sociology, and this despite the point which Hammersley makes that:

> feminism has made, and continues to make, a major contribution to the
> social sciences.                                   (Hammersley 1992, p202)

It is not surprising that feminist sociologists are critical of the continuing malestream domination of the discipline.

Intrinsic to the feminist rejection of established, institutionalised sociology, there has also been the rejection by many feminists of the traditional positivist data collecting methods as being grounded in male dominated research. For example, Oakley (1981) and Hammersley (1992) suggest that one of the reasons for this may be sociology's attempt to adhere to the methods of 'natural sciences' in order to be recognised as a real science. Thus the established emphasis has been on "value-free" quantitative data collecting, which can be statistically analysed and verified, rather than a more interpretive sociology. This is not to say that qualitative research emerged with feminist thinking. It can be traced back to Greek origins but its more recent roots lie

within European malestream social thinking where it developed as a reaction to positivism last century (von Wright, 1971).

Even where qualitative research methods, and in particular interviews have been used, the emphasis has often been on the distancing of the researcher from the researched - and I use the terms advisedly, since the implication is one of active/passive players in the research process. Historically, most traditional texts on methods of data collecting have emphasised the importance of the interviewer remaining detached from the 'subjects' in an attempt to avoid bias in the collection of the data. (see among others, Selltiz et al, 1965, Gans 1968 {in Burgess, 1982}, Moser & Kalton 1971). Even though there has been a much wider acceptance of the interview as a valuable method of data collecting, there is still some emphasis on positivism. Dooley (1992, p107) places interviews under the heading of *'Obtrusive Verbal Measures'* and Silverman (1993) discusses a number of qualitative studies underpinned by positivism, which is also highlighted by Miller's (1991) approach. The following comments are taken from his guidance notes on the selection and use of personal interviews:

> ..... *the interview may not yield the appropriate data. It is often not*
> *susceptible to codification and comparability ..... If the researcher*
> *must employ open-ended questions he or she should choose a few with*
> *care and with the precise aims of the study in mind .....*
> *The guide that follows lists advantages and disadvantages of the*
> *personal interview. The researcher can mark those advantages that*
> *are important or essential with a plus sign and those that will*
> *negatively affect his or her use of the interview with a minus. This can*
> *provide an adequate base for choosing or rejecting the personal*
> *interview. The researcher should ..... appraise the choice. He or she*
> *should then reconsider documentary analysis, mail questionnaire,*
> *telephone interview .....* (Miller 1991, pp 159-161)

Finally, a widely used Sociology textbook *'New for the 1990s, revised and updated'* still includes under the heading 'The Disadvantages of Interviewing' the sentence *'Interviewees may also be influenced by the presence of the researcher'* (Haralambos & Holborn, 1991).

# A rejection of positivism

The influence of this type of thinking is reflected in the point which Stanley & Wise (1993) make that early feminist sociology operated mainly within a positivist framework, aiming to *'fill the gaps in existing literature' (p31)* using either quantitative methods, or a positivist interpretation of qualitative methods which

assumed that interaction in the research process was a negative factor to be guarded against.

Although criticism of this requirement in interviewing is by no means restricted to latter-day feminist sociologists, (see among many others, Bryman, 1988, Hammersley 1990, Silverman 1993) feminism has argued firstly that this thinking reduces people to objects and dehumanises that very same discipline, the centrality of which is people. Secondly, that there is considerable difference between the rhetoric and the reality of interviewing (Roberts 1981, Oakley 1981, 1991, Ramazanoglu 1989). Ramazanoglu revisits her 1960 MA research of married women shift workers and discusses not only the strain of her supposed emotional detachment from the interviewees and her power in interpreting and selecting material:

> ..... feelings were not supposed to be present in the research, and I was not supposed to exercise power.  (Ramazanoglu 1989, p431)

but also the fact that at no time, working within a dominant male paradigm, did she discuss her problems with her supervisor or write it into her methodology:

> I was well aware of the stress I experienced, and its effect on the quality of the research, but saw these as guilty secrets, and as the products of personal failure, rather than as essential parts of the research.  (Ramazanoglu 1989, p432).

What Ramazanoglu says here indicates a shift in the feminist critique of malestream sociology's exclusion of a women's perspective in social research since the focus here is on looking at the actual research process (see also Stanley & Wise 1979, 1993, Oakley 1991).

Feminism maintains that the positivist argument for distance, objectivity and the elimination of researcher bias is impossible to achieve in any research, regardless of methodology, not least because our perspective will determine what we study, what or whom we include in the research and how we present our data. Ramazanoglu give an excellent example of this in the discussion of her research on female shift workers when she was told to exclude black women from her sample. She did this, justifying her action on statistical grounds, but as she says:

> Objective truth it seemed could only be achieved by leaving some aspect of reality out.  (Ramazanoglu 1989, p431)

The general emphasis within positivism then, has been on bias being a negative aspect of research. Certainly as a woman researcher employing qualitative interpretive methods of data collecting, and particularly with my background as a former mature student, it could be argued that considerable bias has been introduced into the research.

I will not deny that potential allegation. I chose to do this research, in this way because of my background and interests. However, I presume that many academic researchers, at least those who are able to choose their field are in this position so this possible criticism can be levelled at many social science data collecting situations. Sue Jones argues that bias in not inherently bad and can be productively harnessed:

> *The answer has to do with the way in which we understand and use the*
> *concept of bias, not as something to be avoided at all costs but as*
> *something to be used, creatively, contingently and self-consciously.*
> *We use our 'bias' as human beings creatively and contingently to*
> *develop particular relationships with particular people so they can tell*
> *us about their worlds and we can hear them. In doing this we use*
> *ourselves as research instruments to try and empathise with other*
> *human beings. No other research instrument can do this.*
>
> *(Jones 1985, p48)*

Over the last few years then, most feminists have rejected the positivist model, though not necessarily the use of quantitative methods, which have generally been associated with positivism. Silverman points out that methods are research tools, incorporating a variety of data collecting techniques:

> *..... more or less useful, depending on their fit with the theories and*
> *methodologies being used, the hypothesis being tested and/or the*
> *research topic that is selected.        (Silverman 1993, p2).*

He goes on to say that whilst different schools will favour a particular technique, they often incorporate a wider range of techniques in their data collecting. This point is also made by Alison Kelly who argues that there is no such thing as feminist method, which is how we collect the data, but that there is a feminist methodology, which starts from women's experiences. Even if it does not focus on women, it comes from women's experiences (Kelly, 1978). Harding expands on this and argues that there are clear links between epistemology, methodology and method (Harding, 1987). Shulamit Reinharz broadens the discussion and argues that feminist research not only uses a multiplicity of research methods, but also may incorporate a transdisciplinary approach (Reinharz, 1992).

Research *by* women then is a basic tenet of feminism:

> *We reject the idea that men can be feminists because we argue that*
> *what is essential to 'being feminist' is the possession of a 'feminist*
> *consciousness'. And we see feminist consciousness as rooted in the*
> *concrete, practical and everyday experiences of being, and being*
> *treated as, a woman ..... No men know what it is to be treated as a*
> *woman.            (Stanley & Wise 1993, pp 31-32)*

However, I feel somewhat uncomfortable with Stanley & Wise's final point. While it is true that men cannot know what it is to be treated as a woman, this does not mean that they cannot attempt to understand women's perspectives. In addition, taken to its extreme, it is reductionist - a point made in a different context by Edward Said:

> ..... *although there is an irreducible subjective core to human*
> *experience, this experience is also historical and secular, it is*
> *accessible to analysis and interpretation, and - centrally important - it*
> *is not exhausted by totalizing theories, not marked and limited by*
> *doctrinal or national lines, not confined once and for all to analytical*
> *constructs. If one believes with Gramsci that an intellectual vocation*
> *is socially possible as well as desirable, then it is an inadmissible*
> *contradiction at the same time to build analyses of historical*
> *experience around exclusions, exclusions that stipulate, for instance,*
> *that only women can understand feminine experience, only Jews can*
> *understand Jewish suffering, only formerly colonial subjects can*
> *understand colonial experience.* (Said 1993, p35)

Women researchers then do not have total claim to the only authenticity around research on women. What we do have though is a claim to a particular shared perspective.

It is not the method which makes feminist research intrinsically different, but the fact that it takes women and not men as the focus in all aspects of research, aiming to allow women's voices to be heard. The emphasis within feminism is on the validity of women's personal experience:

> *To address women's lives and experiences in their own terms, to create*
> *theory grounded in the actual experience and language of women, is*
> *the central agenda for feminist social science and scholarship.*
> (Du Bois 1983, p108)

Implicit in this quote from Du Bois is an emphasis on interpretive sociology, and although some feminists are happy to use quantitative methods (Stanley & Wise 1993 p35, Jarayatne 1993) whether this is for primary or secondary data, most recent feminist research has tended to favour qualitative methods. As Abbott & Wallace suggest:

> *Feminists have tended to espouse qualitative methods as the better*
> *means for carrying out feminist research ..... they do not turn the*
> *researched into fragmented objects. (Abbott & Wallace 1990, p212)*

It has been argued though that simply being a woman researching women is not in itself sufficient. In a comparison of two contrasting interviews on marital separation by an Anglo researcher with a middle-class Anglo and a working class Puerto Rican woman

(author's terms), Catherine Riessman suggests that lack of cultural understanding led to a misinterpretation of what the Puerto Rican woman was saying :

> *Although both were highly competent narrators, only the Anglo woman*
> *was fully understood by the white, middle-class interviewer. She was*
> *able to collaborate with this narrator and help her tell her story. In the*
> *case of the working-class, Hispanic woman, gender was apparently not*
> *enough to create the shared understandings necessary for a successful*
> *interview....unfamiliar cultural themes in the content of the narrative*
> *itself created barriers to understanding... (Reissman 1987, p173)*

It seems to me what Reissman is saying here is that despite good intentions on both sides, a lack of cultural familiarity on the part of the interviewer created considerable barriers to hearing and understanding what was being said. This led to a much less successful interview than that with the white middle class woman with whom the interviewer had cultural similarities.

However, Song & Parker (1995) maintain that the situation is not so straightforward as this. They argue that not only may cultural identities influence the researcher's interpretation of data, it may also influence what information the interviewees are willing to divulge. Both writers independently researched Chinese young people in Britain and found that their mixed descent of Korean/American and Chinese/English was both advantageous and problematic in interview situations. They found that informants' interpretations of *'commonality'* or *'difference'* with the researcher evoked particular responses and suggest that:

> *Further attention needs to be given to how assumptions made by*
> *interviewees regarding the cultural identity of the researcher shapes*
> *interviewees' accounts. (Song & Parker 1995, p241)*

Although Song & Parker are discussing cultural identities here, parallels can be drawn with my own research in that as an ex-mature student with family and domestic commitments, I appeared to have much in common with the women I was talking to. On the other hand, I had managed successfully to juggle my commitments, to gain my degree and subsequently become a lecturer in higher education. If one defines culture in broad terms, it could be argued that the students' interpretations of *'commonality'* or *'difference'* may well have influenced what they were saying to me. I have no real way of knowing whether this was the case, since this was not to the forefront of my thinking at the interview stage.

However, this reinforces even more the importance of locating both the researcher and the informant within the research process and acknowledging and taking measures to limit any negative effects of the inherent bias.

## The players in the game

My biggest problem here is the use of terminology. What titles should I use for the participants in the interview situation? Researcher/researched implies active and passive roles, as does interviewer/interviewee, and this was certainly not the case in the interviews in this research. On the other hand, co-researcher implies an equal distribution of power, control, access to and use of the material. Although I did tell all the participants that they could ask me not to use the interview material, other than this, they have little other control over the selection and location of the material in the analysis and writing up of the research. 'Participants' sounds a rather formal way of describing the process, although it does imply a two-way communication process, as does the heading on which I finally settled for this section. However, I have tended to use the term 'participant' or to refer to 'the women/students with whom I talked' or actually use the pseudonym chosen for a particular student.

## Whose power?

Generally, feminism has argued that hierarchical relationships between researcher and researched, endemic in positivism, objectify women and need to be broken down - feminists seek *'ways of knowing which avoid subordination'* (Ramazanoglu, 1992). This does not imply equal power in the interview situation, rather I would suggest that each player has a different power base. Researchers have control over the research topic and the analysis and presentation of agreed data. It would be foolish to suggest that their knowledge and training is not seen by the researched as carrying a higher status in our society. Stanley & Wise suggest that:

> ..... *dismantling of power differentials is more apparent than real, at best only partial. If we were 'the researched', we would find a report written only by the researchers a convincing demonstration of this.*
> *(Stanley & Wise 1993, p33)*

On the other hand, the researched have the knowledge which the researchers need - they are the generators of data. They can control what the researchers have access to; they can set the agenda, either overtly or covertly; they can make or break a piece of research.

An explicit requirement in the research situation from a feminist perspective, and from any other perspective as I see it, is the creation of a situation in which the contribution of all participants is seen as important, but primarily that 'the researched' are subjects

and not objects, and there is a win-win situation. Sieber (1992) calls this 'Beneficence' - maximising good outcomes for all research participants.

# Reflexivity

Underpinning the discussion of power is the recognition that all the players in the game influence the input and outcome of an interview situation. Central to much contemporary feminist thinking is that the relationship between participants in interviews should be reciprocal. As Mies argues:

> *The postulate of value free research, of neutrality and indifference*
> *towards the research objects, has to be replaced by conscious*
> *partiality, which is achieved through partial identification with the*
> *research objects. For women who deliberately and actively integrate*
> *their double-consciousness into the research process, this partial*
> *identification will not be difficult. It is the opposite of the so-called*
> *'Spectator-knowledge' [Maslow, 1966: 50] which is achieved by*
> *showing an indifferent, disinterested alienated attitude towards the*
> *'researcher objects'.*         *(Mies 1993, p68)*

Intrinsic in what Mies says is the need to accept the influence of the researcher role in the research process and the interdependency of the players. There is need then to include in the research document a discussion of the influence of the self which is presented by participants in the interview situation. In particular, according to Williams (1993) it is important to practice personal reflexivity:

> *..... that is to be aware of the ways in which self affects both research*
> *processes and outcomes, and to rigorously convey to readers of*
> *research accounts how this happens.*     *(Williams 1993, p578)*

In discussing her research on adolescent girls and education, Vivienne Griffiths defines reflexivity as a continual and ongoing adjustment process both current and retrospectively as she carried out the research. She adjusted and adapted her procedures, questions and ideas in response to the agendas of the girls to whom she talked (Griffiths, 1991 p52). Also, Oakley (1981, 1991) argues that the richness of the material in her research on motherhood was due to the non-hierarchical nature of the relationship between herself and the women she spoke with and her feeling of the necessity to invest her personal identity in the relationship. This means of course responding to both personal questions and questions about the research. Since both she and the women she talked with were interested in the topic of her research, albeit from different angles, this was not a problem for her.

One of the points which Julia Brannen (1991) draws out from her research on mothers returning to their full-time work after maternity leave was that the women's responses were influenced by their own agenda and concerns. She goes on to say that an important contributing factor to participation was ' ..... *a set of understandings concerning the research findings' (p4)* . She also echoes the mutual interest which Oakley found.

My own background as a white mature student originating from a working class background has clearly informed both my research and the presentation of the women's stories. Others would bring different understandings and interpretations to the same data. This is not to say that any one version is 'correct' or 'better' than any other, but they will all be different.

Much of the writing on reflexivity has been concerned with either locating the researcher in the research process, or with the dynamics of the interview situation. Not so much has been written on the reflexive activities of the people being interviewed. However Brannen (1991) and Oakley (1991) both reported on the benefits of reflexivity for the women they interviewed. (It is interesting to note that Brannen still talks of *'the researcher'* and *'the participants'* as if somehow the researcher is not a participant.)

Because of feminism's emphasis on the importance of experience and the desire to 'let women speak for themselves', there has tended to be an emphasis on ethnographic research as beneficial for women. However, this does make several assumptions about women's ability and willingness to participate in interviews and certainly raised a number of questions for my own research.

## Interviews - the 'best' method of data collecting?

One of the first questions I addressed when thinking about the interviews was 'Am I making assumptions about the 'best' methodology?'

Having been a mature student myself with caring and domestic responsibilities, I was well aware of the time constraints under which many students operate and the stress which can be created when arrangements are disrupted. This created a problem for me - I was aware of possible pressures on time for at least some of the students, but at the same time, talking with them was central to the research - I had already decided that interviewing rather than questionnaires was the best method of data collecting. However, it is very easy for well-meaning and enthusiastic investigators to overlook

the interests of research participants, especially when working under time and finance constraints. This is discussed more fully under the section headed 'Ethical Issues'.

A recent paper (Thompson, Brooks & Bennett, 1994) examined the area of women's willingness to participate in interviews and suggests that women are not as willing to be interviewed as is generally assumed. This research was a result of an unexpectedly poor response rate to an invitation for interview for the Women and Primary Health Care Project at Sheffield University (1994). Questionnaires were sent to the women who refused to be interviewed, asking them to outline their reasons. Significantly, lack of interest in the topic was not advanced as one of the reasons for non-participation. Those reasons which were given were divided into three groups by the researchers. Firstly and most importantly was women's available time. Thompson et al point out that this was also an issue with the women who did agree to be interviewed:

> *many of the women chose to be interviewed in the evening after*
> *children had gone to bed or in their lunch hours or days off work, so*
> *many women were accommodating the researchers within their own*
> *quite limited leisure time.                    (Thompson et al, 1994)*

The second area of refusal was concerned with lack of awareness of the research process and its aims - the women were apprehensive about their role and what they would be asked. The final area was concerned with invasion of privacy, particularly where the interviews were to be in the woman's house.

Thompson et al point out that the majority of women who refused to be interviewed were willing to complete a questionnaire. This questions some assumptions within feminism about 'the best' method of data collecting. What must also be considered as a possibility with this particular research though is the nature of the research area - women's primary health care. Women's lack of willingness to participate may well have been due to women's perception of the potentially embarrassing or intimate nature of questions concerning their health and may well have preferred the anonymity of a questionnaire.

Clearly some women, for a range of reasons, are not happy with an interview situation, and the effect of non-response on the research must be considered. However, counterbalancing this must be the point which a number of researchers have made of women reporting the beneficial nature of the interview situation. Brannen's study of dual-earner households reported that the majority of women had enjoyed being interviewed:

> *..... a high proportion of women in the study wrote about the*
> *therapeutic value of the interview .....    (Brannen, 1991 p6)*

One of the aims of Oakley's Social Support and Pregnancy Outcome study (SSPO) was to test the idea that any research needs to consider its impact on the lives of those who participate. The outcome provided positive support for the beneficial effects of an informal interview situation:

> *Most of the women interviewed for the transition to motherhood*
> *project had said how good it was to take part in the research, and to*
> *have had a chance to talk about things that concerned them .....*
> *nearly three quarters said their experiences had been altered by the*
> *research ..... a positive relief to unburden themselves.*
> *(Oakley 1991, p18)*

As with all methods of data collecting then, there are pluses and minuses. I chose the interview situation for clear methodological reasons, but the conflicts cannot be ignored and steps have to be taken to resolve them ethically.

# Ethical issues

Research is a complicated activity in which it is easy for well-meaning and enthusiastic investigators to overlook the interests of research participants. This is to the detriment of both researcher and subjects, raises questions about validity and perhaps calls into question the whole area of social science research.

Ethics of research is not about etiquette, nor is it about putting the interest of the subject before the interests of the researcher, rather it is about creating a mutually beneficial situation - a win-win relationship within which subjects are pleased to participate honestly. Failure to create this type of environment however, can cause havoc for both the subject and the researcher (Sieber, 1992).

A number of Research Methods text-books address the issue of ethics (see for example, Miles & Huberman 1994, Robson 1993, Sieber 1992). A major exposition of this topic is not practical here; it is sufficient to outline the main ethical principles which should guide research - beneficence, respect and justice.

Beneficence is concerned with maximising good outcomes for all the research participants - a win-win situation. Respect is concerned with protecting individual autonomy. Justice is concerned with ensuring fair distribution of costs and benefits among persons and groups. (i e those who bear the risks of research should be those who benefit from it).

These three principles entail ensuring that the participants are willing to participate and are not coerced into the project; that there is respect for privacy, confidentiality and anonymity; that the participants participate with 'informed consent' - that is they have

full knowledge of the reasons for the research and the knowledge that they can withdraw themselves and/or their data from the research at any time. The bottom line in research ethics is to ensure that the people with whom we are talking are treated as subjects and not as objects. To do this, the researcher must engender a sense of rapport, trust and mutual respect - this is achieved not just with formal consent - and of course with an interview situation, there may be no formal written consent - but other things like body language, friendliness, a respectful attitude and genuine empathy for the role of the subject are among the factors which may speak louder than words. It is also vital that privacy and confidentiality is assured and the limitations on both are clearly outlined.

Sieber (1992) argues that researchers may appear to get away with ignoring or not considering the needs of subjects, but they don't. According to Sieber, subjects are likely to respond with lies and subterfuge or fail to participate. It is in the researcher's interests therefore to ensure that a full consideration is given to the subjects' interests, an open and honest approach is adopted, and students are aware that they have the right to withhold or withdraw any information which they do not wish to be used.

Creating a mutually beneficial situation and having a genuine empathy are clearly postulated in feminist research methodology, which is largely what this chapter has been about. My own family, early education and experience in education as an adult student and subsequently as a lecturer gives me an understanding of and an empathy with the student group with whom I wished to talk and although there are a number of difficulties with this as I have discussed, my awareness of and involvement with mature would I felt, create the sort of interview situation in which the women would talk relatively freely. Locating myself in the research process therefore is an important part of the methodology and the next chapter is concerned with my background and experiences insofar as they impact on the research process.

# *Chapter 3: Locating myself in the research process*

## Introduction

My interest in the experiences of mature women returners to learning stems firstly from my own career as a mature student in both further and higher education. Secondly, after graduating, I became a lecturer in further education, being primarily involved with mature students, many of whom talked to me about their studies, their feelings about their ability and a number of practical issues about which they were concerned. For the women students, there were considerations such as child care, finance, travel, workload, time tabling. My own experiences as a mature student appeared to be a valuable and appreciated resource, and I was seen as a role model - I had done it - in my thirties and with a partner, three children to care for and a home to run. I encouraged many mature students to go on to higher education and when I became a part-time university lecturer, I continued with this informal support system - remembering the isolation I had felt during my first year as an adult returner studying at this level.

I became increasingly aware of a number of elements which were linked to the educational career of mature women students. Firstly, there are a number of practical issues with which mature students have to deal when they return to education. Secondly, there is a gender dimension to the these issues and thirdly there are many factors other than ability which may influence one's educational achievement at any stage of one's academic career.

## Influences on my own education

### Early memories

One of the first remembered personal experiences of non-academic influences on my own education was when I 'passed' the 11+ examination. I can clearly remember an aunt asking my mother *'will you let her go?'* and being completely taken aback by this. It had not ever occurred to me that I wouldn't go - the last two years of primary education had been geared to *'passing the 11+'*. The school had emphasised the selective nature of the 11+ and it was seen as an honour to go to the grammar school some ten miles away. Surely it had been decided on the basis of an examination that this was the right education for me, especially since I was the only girl out of the 11

pupils who had passed? I can remember holding my breath and waiting for an answer which was a *'yes, I think so'* then keeping very quiet in case my mother changed her mind!

Another vivid memory concerns the end of my compulsory education. Attending an all-girls' grammar school, where I achieved eight O-levels, it was generally assumed by my peers and the staff that able students would stay on into the sixth form and eventually go into higher education. For most of my friends at school, university or college was an automatic next step but there is no memory of this being a topic of conversation with my parents until I reached sixteen when the topic was raised and it was made very clear to me that I was expected to leave school, get a job and contribute to the family income until such time as I married and set up a home of my own. I was however, allowed to remain at school for a year providing I did a secretarial/accounts course which *'will always come in useful'*. Although I made some attempt at changing my parents' mind, it was tentative and unsuccessful. I had had a fairly strict upbringing and was very much influenced by what they said.

It was only when I began to study sociology as a mature student that I began to put together the different pieces of a jigsaw to form a composite picture of the influences on my life at that time:

## Extended family and the neighbourhood

I was born in the home of my maternal grandparents in a colliery owned house in a mining village, almost in the shadow of the pit shaft. My paternal grandparents lived close by. My mother's father and her three brothers were miners and my father and his father were miners. My father left the pit shortly after the start of the second war to join the army and was killed in action when I was a few months old. My mother and I continued to live with my maternal grandparents for some years. Mum remarried when I was four but we did not move into a separate house, on the edge of the mining village, until after the birth of a half-brother when I was eight. The women in my immediate and my extended family either did not work or worked in manual or domestic occupations; the married ones fitting any work around the needs of the husband and any adult working sons, who generally worked a rota of three shifts over a three week cycle. There was a clear and rigid division of labour - the women did all the domestic chores and childcare, often helping one another out, especially in times of illness. Mealtimes and household jobs were geared around the husband's shift work. The men worked at the pit, were generally responsible for the vegetable gardens, sometimes kept pigeons or ferrets and mostly went to 'The Miner's Welfare' or 'The British Legion' perhaps accompanied on Saturday nights by their wives.

The infant school was just down the road and was very much a neighbourhood school, attended by the majority of the local children. Because of the tied nature of the housing, there was at least one miner in each household in the village and all my friends' fathers *'worked at t' pit'*. So the whole of my early socialisation was very much influenced by one particular setting, and when as an adult student I read the Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter study 'Coal is our Life' (1956) it was much like reading my own history.

# Immediate family influences

Although my step-father had a routine clerical job he was also from a background of manual occupations with a clear gendered division of labour within the home. He had first-hand experience of the poverty created by the economic depression and the unemployment of the mid 1930's in Liverpool where he was born and raised. From this background, any job was important and a good clerical job was better than a factory job and infinitely better than unemployment. My mother's education had been basic and she had worked in domestic and manual occupations until I was born, after which she did not work outside the home. In addition, none of my immediate or extended family, nor my stepfather's family had experienced anything other than education within the compulsory system; they had all left school at the minimum leaving age, some of the older ones being as young as thirteen. Only one other, my mother's sister had gained a scholarship and gone to grammar school. However, she left at the minimum age of 14 and went into domestic service. I cannot remember university ever being discussed in the family until I was sixteen and was told that I would not be going.

## Domestic responsibilities

My mother as well as being an amputee which hampered her mobility, was prone to bouts of illness during the winter, and from the age of 11, I had been running the household from time to time, doing the normal domestic chores which my mother would have done, sometimes being kept home from school. Although I can remember feeling somewhat resentful of this, I never really questioned it - I had been raised in a culture where domestic chores were 'women's work'.

So, a number of factors created a background against which my leaving home to go to university was never on the agenda, and I enrolled on the commercial course which I found extremely boring, leaving after a term to work as a secretary/receptionist.

# Early adulthood

A number of secretarial jobs ensued both before and after my marriage at the age of twenty, none of them holding my interest for more than a few months. On getting married, I expected to do, and did, what was normal in my experience - work until children arrived, then stay at home as a full-time housewife. However, a year after the birth of my first child, I was frustrated at home and returned to work part-time, with child-care provided by family and friends, but two more children limited work opportunities outside the home. Although I always managed to earn money in some way, it was generally on a part-time or casual basis and I can clearly remember a feeling of restlessness.

# Returning to education

A casual discussion with a graduate friend I had made whilst running a play group led to my enrolment for an evening class in sociology at the local college. In hindsight, it is clear that I was looking for something in my life which wasn't there, but I wasn't sure what it was. I certainly had no long-term goals or 'grand plan' at this stage and had no intention of taking any examinations. The lecturer for sociology, Elaine, became a firm friend, and certainly a 'significant other' in my life, giving me encouragement and support, persuading me to take the A-level exam and then enrolling as a full-time student for two more A-levels the following year. There was no provision in the college at that time for mature returners, and I had to fit in with the 16-18 year-old students. The timetable was such that I had to attend every day, with the periods off between lectures, which would have been impossible with three small children to care for, had I not lived close by.

When my lecturer friend suggested I apply to university I was very negative. What would my family do? How would I manage the housework? Would it affect my relationship with my husband? Anyway, surely university was the domain of super-bright academics and I was not one of those. I was finally persuaded to apply by Elaine who completed my application form, showed me the reference she had written, and stood over me whilst I completed the interests section. She suggested I see the student counsellor about the grant situation for mature students. Sheffield was the obvious and only choice of university because of its proximity to my home town - I could travel daily and fit my work around my family.

My visit to the full-time male student counsellor was something of a near disaster. When he asked what I was going to do after university, I couldn't tell him, and he

questioned the wisdom of embarking on 3 years academic study especially because family commitments made it almost impossible to move out of the area for work. He pointed out the possible negative effects on my husband and family, the amount of work it would entail, and was not sure what the grant situation was for mature students. He offered me no positive help or guidance whatsoever and I came out wondering what on earth I was doing and prepared to forget the whole thing, my negative feelings having been completely reinforced and my confidence in my shoes! Fortunately my husband and Elaine gave me a great deal of psychological support and I was interviewed at University of Sheffield in February for a place the following October.

I approached the interview with trepidation, overawed by the whole setting - the building, the concept of university and that I was going to talk to university lecturers, with no idea what to expect. When the three male interviewers from three different departments were introduced, my heart sank - how on earth was I going to answer questions in all three areas? After a few general questions though, the main concern seemed to be whether family commitments would interfere with studies and vice versa - legitimate questions as far as I could see at the time. When offered a place at the end of the interview, I had no idea that this was not normal procedure. My feelings were ambivalent - a mixture of pleasure, pride and apprehension; sentiments which have been echoed time and time again by other women students I have come into contact with during lecturing and research. My insecurity over going to university stayed with me for some considerable time and I can remember applying for routine white collar jobs right up to actually starting on the course. Quite what I would have done if I had been offered any of these I am not sure!

## A mature undergraduate

Because I had insufficient earnings in the previous 3 years, my grant was assessed on my husband's income, and I was entitled to a full student grant and travelling expenses, which I saw as giving me at least some independence of income. This was a very different situation from my two years in Further Education, when I had paid for the first year as a part time student, and had to commit myself to being a full-time student in the second year to get free tuition but no maintenance grant. As we had a car, primarily available for my use, transport was not a problem, which was very fortunate, since public transport from Worksop to Sheffield did not really fit in with my commitments as a student, wife and mother.

I was not prepared for the isolation I felt in my first year at university. At 36, I was twice the age of most of the other students, or so I thought, and although there were

students who appeared to be nearer my own age, no other mature student was doing the same combination of subjects. I had considerable gaps between lectures, and as I was over twenty miles away from home I was not able to go home and work in familiar surroundings. My first essay attracted rather a terse remark from my tutor, a male, which put up an immediate barrier in my mind and I felt unable to discuss any problems with him. Because of the particular structure of the foundation year in social sciences at Sheffield University, students had no real departmental base, or much informal contact with tutors, and I found that this added to my feeling of insecurity. In addition, the majority of the students appeared to be from a background where university was a natural extension of their education; they seemed to be at home in the system and this made me very aware of the lack of the appropriate 'cultural capital' (Scott, 1991) in my own childhood.

To say that I did not enjoy the first term is putting it rather mildly and I returned after Christmas only because I was told by a friend that I would probably have to repay the grant if I left the course, and I had already spent it, primarily on a new lounge carpet! However, I did make some good friends at the beginning of the second term but my feeling of inferiority (despite having 3 good A-levels) persisted well into the second year, when I discovered that this lack of confidence is quite a common phenomenon among females, regardless of age.

I chose to major in Sociology because the time-table suited my family commitments and daily travelling, although by this time I had more than a passing interest in Psychology. Again, this influence on my choice is something about which many other women mature students have talked. Once I was department-based though, I felt much less insecure, and although I did not have a personal tutor, built up a good relationship with one female member of staff with whom I felt I could discuss any problems which arose. Relationships with other staff members were also more casual and friendly than they had been in the first year, which created a much more pleasant and open atmosphere in which to work. I discovered another student with a young family and we became good friends, sorting out school holiday problems between us, since there was no provision in the university for school age children and supporting one another if we had difficulties such as illness at home.


Family support

Throughout all of my time in further education and university, I had 100% support from my husband, who took on many of the roles which had automatically been mine prior to this time, for example giving the children their tea when I was not able to either because I was late from university or working at home; bathing them; reading

the story and putting them to bed. He and the children grew much closer together, and enjoyed this time on their own but I felt that my husband was doing a job which I should have been doing and my guilt feelings never really disappeared.

## Goals

My goals whilst at university were fairly short-term - to get through the course and get my degree and I gave little, if any, thought to a future career. In hindsight, coping with a final year at university and a young family was probably as much as I could handle at one time. I received no career guidance or counselling at the university, and although I remember being vaguely aware of a careers service, never actively pursued it. But again, the concept of 'career' was alien; providing for one's own future was not something which had been seriously considered either by me or the women in my family. I was very much aware though, that whatever I did, I would be limited to the geographical area in which we lived, because of my family and my husband's business. It was a chance meeting rather than planning which began my career as a lecturer in further education. Immediately after my finals I was asked to go back to the local college where I had taken my A-levels. A friend who had enrolled on a new full-time academic course designed for mature students, had told her head of department of my support and encouragement. I was asked into college to talk to other mature students and was subsequently offered some part-time lecturing work in that department to begin immediately after the summer break at the start of the new academic year.

# A growing interest in mature student issues

This lecturing was primarily with mature, mostly female, students, many of whom talked to me about their problems. The talked, both formally in the classroom and informally at breaks, about their background, their early education, their families and current domestic situations. It seemed that women from all backgrounds were meeting a variety of barriers and my experience as a mature student was seen as a valuable and appreciated resource. The students had a role model - I had done it - been to university in my mid-thirties with a husband, three children and a home to take care of, got a degree and was now in a respected profession. Many mature students were encouraged to go on to higher education and on becoming a part-time university lecturer, I continued with this informal support system, remembering the isolation felt during the first year as an adult learner studying at this level.

## Back to higher education

Growing interest in the difficulties experienced by mature returners and my interest in the education of adults generally, culminated in enrolment for a part-time Master's Degree in post-compulsory education. My contact with mature women students in both further and higher education made me realise that my own experiences were not unique, and raised a number of questions which I felt would be interesting to pursue with other mature, and particularly married women returners to education. These questions formed the basis of the research for my Master's dissertation which analysed the educational background, gender socialisation, early work experience and current family situations of 86 mature women students in higher education, linking these to the particular barriers which this group of students face when they return to academic learning. The research was primarily quantitative, using semi-structured questionnaires, with a small number of interviews. The emergent data was revealing and exciting, especially since there was little existing work on mature women returners as a group, and stimulated my current doctoral research in this area.

# *Chapter 4: Starting the primary research*

## The institutions

Although I had changed my approach from largely quantitative with a small number of unstructured interviews to wholly qualitative research, I decided to use the same institutions. These were the two universities and the six colleges of further education in the city and one college outside the city. The two universities in the city have a mature student body I could draw on with relative ease since I already had a working contact with both institutions. The colleges, which were re-organised during the research period under a new umbrella name of The Austen College, were located in a variety of geographical and social areas in the city and provided a range of courses for mature returners which I anticipated would give me a good cross-section of students. I felt that it was important to interview students from a college outside the city since this would draw in students for whom travel and time constraints might be more of an issue than for those students living in or close to the city. In order to provide some anonymity for the students, their names have been changed and all the colleges have been given pseudonyms.

## Students interviewed by establishments and courses

Universities
| | |
|---|---|
| Social Science Degrees | 5 |

Colleges of further education:
Courses:

| | |
|---|---|
| Foundation year of a 4 year Combined Studies Degree | 5 |
| Foundation year of a 4 year Science degree | 5 |
| EEC funded course: Women into Management & Technology | 5 |
| Social Science Access Courses | 15 |
| Science Access | 2 |
| Women's Motor Vehicle Course | 3 |
| NVQ in Motor Mechanics | 1 |
| Diploma in Advanced English (neighbourhood centre) | 3 |
| Part-time evening, Biology & Physics A-level | 1 |
| 'Non-starters' | 4 |

# The student group

For the purposes of this research, I have defined mature as being 21 or over at the start of the course, since this is the age used by the institutions in my sample. Research by Bell, Hamilton & Roderick (1986) however, does reveal that there is a spread of minimum age for mature student classification across the ages of 21, 23 & 25 depending on the institution or organisation. The University of Austen for example, uses 21, whereas local authorities tend to use 25 as the age at which some-one is defined as a mature student for grant purposes. However, it is not age so much as the length of time out of the education system before returning which I feel is important, and using 21 as the defining factor was likely to ensure that the woman had at least three years and probably five or six years out of education before returning.

The students were in no way 'selected' for interview as is discussed later; the only criterion being that they should be over 21. I had given considerable thought to this, and felt that to try and combine the variety of possible courses with the social circumstances of the woman was, I felt, unnecessary, but also impossible. Taking into account factors such as age, partnered status, caring responsibilities and so on with the different types of courses would be problematic, especially for those courses with small numbers. Working within the grounded theory model therefore, I decided to interview, review, then interview again as I have outlined in the biography of the research.

The majority of students with whom I spoke were on full-time courses. Eight students defined themselves as part-time, though definitions of part-time do vary between educational institutions and between those institutions and various state benefit offices. This is connected with responsibility for course fees. Generally speaking, full-time is defined by the colleges as sixteen hours or more of attendance per week, whereas some students were defining this as part-time. This was particularly relevant to the women's motor vehicle course, which was concentrated into three days of attendance.

The ages of the students ranged from 22 to 50 years, with the majority of women being over 30. Twenty eight women were partnered; seven were single and six were divorced or separated. Thirty one women had between one and three children living with them, ranging in ages from 18 months to 23 years. Several women were also responsible for elderly relatives, either living with them or close by. Although I have presented no evidence to show the socio-economic structure of the city, the students with whom I spoke did come from a diverse social demographic background.

All the students I interviewed were white. No black students came forward for interview from the courses I contacted and I did not contact the Black Access Course at Austen College. As an emerging feminist researcher I was still coming to terms with existing methodological concerns and although I was aware of the growing

literature on black women's issues, I did not feel that I had either the training or the expertise to tackle these issues at this stage in my career.

# A pilot study or not?

Having already interviewed mature women students in higher education for my Master's degree, I felt that to some extent, this research would constitute a pilot study. Notwithstanding this, I felt that the first few interviews of this research could be regarded as exploratory, after which the interview schedule could be reviewed and any practical problems could be ironed out at this stage. Because of the ease of access, it was students at the two universities whom I interviewed first. I talked to mature women returners whom I had met in a tutoring capacity at both establishments; all but one of these interviews taking place in the students' home. There was a familiarity here but not a closeness, which I felt could be beneficial in a discussion of the structure of the interview after we had finished talking.

I asked these first students what they felt about the structure of the interviews, whether they had any criticisms or suggestions, what they felt about the tape recording and so on. The students had no criticism of the interview situation or about the questions I had asked and reinforced what I had felt about using a recorder - after the initial awareness, they forgot it was there until it clicked off very loudly at the end of the tape, making both of us jump. They also commented that it was good to have someone who listened and was interested in what they had to say. I made no alterations to the interview schedule which in any case was only a loosely structured list of topics I wanted the students to talk to me about. The notes I made were of a very practical nature - to ensure that I was equipped with an extension cable and/or batteries to enable both of us to sit in comfort where the tape could record both our voices and to take adequate good length tapes either already in or ready to go into the recorder. Interestingly too, despite my intention to view these early interviews as exploratory, a wealth of interesting material emerged which I was unwilling to abandon and which I subsequently incorporated into the thesis.

# Opening the doors

## Accessing the institutions

My first practical concern was making contact with the further education institutions, staff and students. I decided that initial contact with the students should be made soon

after the start of the academic year. Firstly because students' early feelings and impressions about returning to education would be important and perhaps get modified later in the year. I realised that some interviews would take place later in the academic year, but I felt I could use these later interviews as a form of cross-checking. Secondly, there is less pressure on students' time at the start of the academic year than later with the build-up of assignments and examinations. As I was well aware from experience, this is a vital point for those women who have responsibilities for dependents.

At this stage, I was coming to the end of my first year of research and towards the end of the academic year for the colleges. In order to start the interviews quite early in the following academic year, it was important to make contact with key staff members in the different colleges to explain my research and ask for their co-operation. I discovered that the six colleges of further education serving the city were in the process of re-organising into one system with one administrative structure - to be called The Austen College. Not only were staff extremely busy with the reorganisation, their responsibilities were also to change.

My co-supervisor at that time was a governor of the new structure and she suggested that I wrote, quoting her name, to the Principal of the College, who responded very positively, passing my letter to a senior staff member concerned with adult students. This contact was extremely helpful and interested, willing to listen to details of my proposed research, and locating the courses on which I would be most likely to find mature women students. She also gave me the names of staff members with whom I would need to make contact. After some thought, I decided to wait for the start of the new year before I contacted the staff responsible for various courses at the different sites. The reasons for this were two-fold:

Firstly, by this time, it was very close to the end of the academic year. I did try to contact one or two lecturers whose names I had been given, but with no success. People were clearly very busy with the proposed reorganisation, and I decided that it would be better to wait until new staff were in post. In addition, I felt that once initial contacts had been made, these needed to be followed up as soon as possible, and a gap over the summer break would create loss of enthusiasm and momentum.

Secondly, it was at this stage that I was becoming more and more dissatisfied with the idea of quantitative data collecting; inclining more and more to in-depth qualitative research and I needed to give more serious thought to how I would approach the interviews. I felt that a lack of clarity and ability to communicate the essence of my research to the lecturers I needed to make contact with would indicate a lack of

professionalism and would not encourage the sort of support I was going to need from them.

I therefore made my next contacts at the end of September, at the start of the academic year, but allowing time for both staff and students to settle in to their new situations.


<u>Accessing the lecturers</u>

I found that making the initial contact with staff was a slight problem - I preferred to do this by telephone, but once lecturing starts this can be quite difficult, and on one or two occasions it took a little while.

However, once contact had been made, the staff were very helpful, despite their workload, and were willing for me to come into their groups at the beginning or the end of sessions to explain what I was doing and organise interviews.

The difficulty of making contact is well illustrated by an incident on one of the College sites. One of the lecturers had agreed to have lunch with me in the college canteen to discuss my research and how I could involve her group of students. This was the only time we were both free. Towards the end of our conversation she looked up, smiled and spoke to another lecturer who was passing by, then told me who he was. This lecturer is the convenor for access programmes for mature students within The Austen College - a busy person with the reorganisation - and he and I had been leaving messages for each other unsuccessfully for some time, trying to arrange a meeting.

This was a fortuitous meeting, since he invited me to a presentation evening, when certificates were awarded to the previous year's students. He introduced me as an 'ex-mature student made good' and invited me to say a little about my research. Staff, students and their family and friends were present and the friendly atmosphere enabled me to make initial contact with a number of students and staff in an informal way. This was a tremendous ice-breaker and also created common ground I could use when meeting other staff and students.


# The first site

The first site I contacted was on the northern outskirts of Austen and served a mixed population in terms of class backgrounds, but because of the Austen College system, students were not restricted by catchment areas. The lecturer in charge of Access courses, where the majority of mature students are located, willingly agreed to talk to me and I spent an hour with her discussing my work and the various ways in which the college provided for mature students generally, and women in particular. She also

went on to tell me that the Access course is approached very frequently to complete questionnaires for various pieces of research - something which the students found quite time-consuming. This made me even more aware that I was dependent upon the goodwill of both the staff and the students to carry out my research and that I needed to keep any disruption to a minimum. However, this lecturer agreed to allow me to talk to the students and we decided that I needed to approach three different courses to get a cross-section of the mature women who were in the college.

## Accessing the students

To save time and the cost of travel, I would contact and talk to three groups on the same day and arrange for the interviews to take place at a later date. Because I needed to do paid work to supplement my grant, finding mutually convenient times for interviews was not as straightforward as it might have been. However, this did not pose a serious problem, but was quite time consuming and I felt that time was slipping away quite rapidly.

## The first group

I approached the first group - 'Women into Industrial Management & Technology' with some trepidation - thinking carefully about what I wanted to say and how I needed to say it.

I needed to explain to the students what research I was doing and why I was doing it, but without leading them into responses they thought I was anticipating. I was aware from previous literature on the topic and also my own experiences as a mature student and a lecturer, that mature women who return to education are likely to face a number of barriers and I wanted to avoid pre-supposing the students' situations. My natural inclination is to be open and honest with students about my own position, but I wanted what they told me to be their story, not a reflection of my own - an ethical dilemma here.

I also needed to reassure them that anything they told me was confidential, but at the same time I did not want to give them the impression that I would be probing into things they didn't necessarily want to tell me - another ethical dilemma.

## Under the microscope

I realised quite early whilst I was talking to this first group that they were not only listening to what I was saying but they were weighing me up too - taking note of what

I was wearing, my hair, make-up and jewellery, listening to my accent and speech patterns. I became very conscious of rings, my watch and bracelet - items which I never really think about and rarely remove and I found myself wondering what impression the students had gained from them and also what, if anything, I should do about them in similar situations in the future. This first contact would clearly set the tone of the interviews and I wanted to neither alienate nor patronise the students.

## The timing and location of the interviews

During the discussion of timing for interviews, I became aware of a potentially conflicting situation between the students, the staff and myself. The students were willing to be interviewed, but generally wanted interviews during college time - otherwise this took away even more of their time for domestic duties. The general timing of courses at the institutions is quite important and where they cater mostly for mature students are geared around school and nursery times. Many students had children which they needed to take out of the creche at lunch time, thus eliminating the lunch periods as possible interview time.

Most students wanted to rush off at 3 pm when the course finished, to collect children and/or fulfil domestic commitments or for some, to go to part-time work. This left only lecture time for interviewing. As with students the world over, they had 'favourite' and 'disliked' lessons, and were happy to be interviewed during the latter! From my point of view too, college interviews were better on a number of counts:

- the students were together in one place which meant I did not have to go from home to home;

- The students may not be very willing for me to go to their homes for a variety of reasons;

- but most importantly for me, and based on the small number of interviews I had already done, I felt that the privacy which we could organise within college would most likely not be available at home. I felt that this privacy and distancing from the domestic scene would be important for students to feel comfortable in telling me about any domestic and relationship issues which may have affected/be affected by their decision to return to education.

## Competing priorities

However, this was in conflict with the lecturer's perspective of the situation. The lecturer for the particular session I was in - a maths session - who was also the course tutor responsible for all access students, was not happy with the idea of lecture time

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being used for interviews. I realised that if she agreed to schedule interviews during lecture periods, she was sanctioning the disruption of other lecturers' time - something she could not do as course co-ordinator.

From my past experience as a lecturer, I could empathise with her, but also, as a mature student, I could understand the women's point of view! In addition, although I did not verbalise this, I felt that some of the students, on reflection, may regret having agreed to talk to me, and I wanted to give them the opportunity to withdraw if they so desired. This lack of willingness to participate may be for a range of reasons, as Thompson et al (1994) point out. However, with the openness of a discussion in a tutorial, it is possible to be influenced by enthusiasm (or lack of it!) from one or two group members and also flattered by the fact that some-one is interested in talking to you. In addition, there is a certain power imbalance in the situation. Although I am a student, as they are, I have higher degree status and the fact that the tutor had invited me into the classroom indicates that she is supporting the research, both of which may put psychological pressure on the women to participate. Weber calls this the power of office. I also wondered to what extent the feminist notion of 'sisterhood' would hold good - would mature students see me as 'one of them' and as such feel that they should support me? I certainly hoped so. Edwards (1993) discusses this problem, though in a different context.

My experience as a lecturer has also taught me that students may well say one thing and mean/do something different. For example, there have been many affirmations of intention over work deadlines and attendance at particular tutorials which have never come to realisation! So I felt it necessary to take whatever measures I could to ensure willing participation and provide 'escape routes' for students who might change their mind. Reluctant interviewees may either not turn up or if they do, may not be as open and honest in their responses as willing participants. Either way, it will affect the data collected.

In the end, the general consensus was that the best procedure would be for students to tell the tutor if they did not want to take part in the study and she would arrange interviews around times that suited the students, the course requirements and myself.

At this point one of the students asked me how long the interviews took, and I replied with a smile that that depended upon the student really, but mostly it was between 30 minutes and an hour. The lecturer's response was immediate - the students could not manage that amount of time - their schedule was very tight and fitted between 9.30 and 3.15 to fit in with family commitments!

Another example of the power of office - this lecturer was tutor for all access course students, and her support and co-operation was important. She also had links through

the college system with other colleges, and that could affect my reception on other sites.

I decided that I had little choice but to go along with her wishes and her offer to schedule the interviews and see how the first few interviews went. I thanked her and the students for their time, found the refectory and had a quiet drink, reflecting on the morning's events and beginning to realise that there may well be considerable difference between the rhetoric and the reality of qualitative research.

A few days later, my schedule of interviews arrived, organised at half-hourly intervals over two full days. I was delighted that so many students had agreed to participate, but somewhat apprehensive at the fact that they had been scheduled so closely together. The difficulties I experienced with this are discussed later.

## The second group

My next group was a mixture of full and part-time students, male and female from a variety of courses. The female part-time lecturer had been told that I was coming along to her group and she left me to explain what I was doing and what I wanted. The difficulty here was that I did not want to alienate the men in the group in case this put pressure on the women. The last thing I wanted was to create strain within the group which may affect working relationships, performances, cause drop-out and so on. It took some diplomacy to answer questions from the men like 'why only women?', 'why is it the women who get all the attention?' and 'don't they think men have problems too?' By and large, they seemed to accept my answers, at least in public, but one never knows what the private reaction is.

Because this was quite a small group of around eight or ten, two or three interviewees was sufficient. One of the female students suggested 'names in a hat' which we did. I fixed up interviews with two of the three students. With the third, it was impossible to find a mutually convenient time, so I settled for two, feeling that at this stage and with this size group, a substitute was not really necessary.

## Some reflections

I thanked the students and the lecturer for giving me some of their time and left, going to find a quiet place where I could have a drink, a sandwich, reflect on the events of the previous hour and think about my approach to the next group which I would be meeting in about 1½ hours.

I realised that I was both an insider and an outsider. An insider from both a lecturing and a student angle - I could relate to both the tutor and the women in the groups. But I was an outsider in that I was entering an institution as a visitor, relying on people to give some of their time for my research, interest in which they may not necessarily share. I tried to put myself into the tutor and the student role and ask me as the researcher questions such as 'what's in it for us?' and 'who'll benefit?' I also mulled over my responses to questions from the male students and the fact that I had not fully thought through issues around talking to a mixed group. I considered my responses to the questions I had been asked by the men and tried to anticipate other questions which may be raised.

## The third group

The last group, tutored again by the mature student tutor, was mixed, male and female. I was faced with the same type of questions from the male students, but this time a little more prepared, having fielded one or two in the earlier group.

One of the women students asked me whether I was only interested in students with difficulties. To my response of 'why do you ask?' she replied that she would quite like to talk to me but didn't have any difficulties this year because she had managed to organise childcare for the youngest and finished in time to get home before the other kids come in from school. She also managed to fit in the housework, shopping and cooking in the evenings and at the weekends. This student went on to say that going to university could be a problem because of travel and timetabling difficulties.

My response was along the lines of please volunteer to take part, I am interested in all women's experiences as mature students, positive and negative. I again outlined the other general areas I was interested in such as childhood education, occupation and reasons for returning to formal education. This student's remarks though were quite thought-provoking. The response from this group again seemed quite positive and we discussed the practicalities of sorting out times. There was a general consensus that we should adopt the same procedure to organise the interviews as with the first group. I thanked them for their time, and left.

## More reflections

I sat in the car for quite a time, reflecting on the way the day had gone and wondering how many of the students would agree to talk to me.

In particular I thought about my approach to the groups and the impression I had given - did I need to change it? I certainly needed to think seriously about what I had said

and the way I had said it. I had tried to avoid terms like 'barriers', 'difficulties', 'problems', and just talk about the general areas in which I was interested - the women's reasons for returning to education, what domestic arrangements if any had to be made, how the course was financed and so on, simply to avoid the problem of women thinking I was only looking for negative factors.

The question raised by the student in the last group was important and quite thought provoking. It made me realise that women may not necessarily perceive some issues as barriers. This student accepted that childcare, domestic chores and cooking were her responsibility and she fitted everything in, so there was no problem.

The existing literature had used the term barriers and I had adopted this somewhat unquestioningly in my thinking, even though I had not verbalised it to the students. This raised two issues for me - firstly, to what extent could I say that a barrier existed for a woman if she did not perceive it, and secondly, was I in danger of doing what I was trying to avoid, i.e. objectifying the women - putting my own, rather than their, categorisation on their experiences? So, it may not necessarily be barriers per se which are the issue, but the women's perception of them and the way they were dealt with. This is discussed in chapter five.

Driving home, I also reflected on the power of the dominant gender ideology!


## Perceptions of research

An issue which only occurred to me later when discussing with some colleagues the point which one student raised about lack of difficulties was that this could have been influenced by what common perceptions of research are.

Most of the research which is discussed in the public arena, particularly by the popular press is concerned with issues which are regarded as a problem for society. Coverage of topics such as crime, poverty and single parents has tended to take a wholly negative view, so there is little wonder that people will generally think that research is about problems rather than positive experiences. It could well be that it was perceptions of research which had influenced the student's question, rather than anything I had said. Nevertheless, I still needed to be think carefully about what I was saying or implying and perhaps put more emphasis on positive aspects of their return to education.

## The interviews at Wollstonecraft

I arrived for the first session of interviewing with a mixed feeling of excitement and trepidation. I had set out from home far too early in case I was delayed and arrived at the site well in advance of the appointed time. However, this did give me the opportunity to sit quietly and work through my plan for the day. The first room I was given was very small, but importantly very quiet and in a place where there was little likelihood of disturbance.

I planned to tape-record the interviews, if the student agreed, for several reasons:

- It had been my experience that after the initial awareness, students tend to relax more quickly and forget that the recorder is there. This had been reinforced by the response of the women I had interviewed for my Master's degree and also by the first group of students whom I had interviewed.

- It is far less intrusive than some-one constantly making notes, or suddenly beginning to write at certain points in the interview.

- It is much easier to watch body language and make eye contact if one is not constantly scribbling, thus one's attention can focus on the student totally.

- The element of selectivity, which of necessity accompanies note-making means that vital information may be missed. Much of the literature on participant observation discusses this issue.

- Nuances, inflexions and hesitations are much more difficult to record, and may be vital to the analysis. (Jones, 1985).

All but one student was quite happy with this situation, and her interview was noted. This comparison made me very aware of the breadth and depth of the material which can be collected by tape-recording, much of which may be missed when trying to take notes at the same time as talking to the other participant.

I began the interview by thanking the students for giving me their time, explaining the general procedure and asking whether the students had any general questions. I told the students that I would be very likely to use verbatim material from the interviews, but their names would be changed to give them some anonymity. I also told them that at any time they could refuse to answer a question, stop the interview, or request at the end that I did not use the material. At the end of the interview, I thanked them for their time, asked if there was anything more they wished to ask and gave a contact number at the university if they wished to get in touch with me.

These interviews again gave me considerable food for thought. The issues which emerged can be divided into three: issues concerned with the length and frequency of

the interviews, factors relating to the interviews themselves, and related to both of these, personal issues arising for me.

# Emerging issues

## Length and frequency of interviews

The first practical problem I experienced was, as I suspected, the tightness of the schedule organised for me by the course tutor. The interviews had been arranged at 30 minute intervals. Not only did the first one take 45 minutes, but the gentle knock on the door after thirty minutes was distracting for both of us. This tight schedule left me no time to make anything other than quick notes in-between seeing students. But in addition to this, many students continued to talk to me after what they regarded as 'the official interview' was over, i.e. after the tape recorder was switched off. Much of this 'casual talk' was vital data which I needed to make notes of before I met the next student. I was faced with the decision of curtailing the interviews so that students were not kept waiting, or allowing the interviews to run their course and lose some students. I decided on the latter, but in fact the matter resolved itself by two students not arriving and one other needing to make an alternative arrangement.

One of the interview sessions had been organised in the canteen 'at a quiet time'. I discovered that this was still quite a busy period, but also voices carried in the large open area. Luckily a helpful receptionist managed to organise a small quiet room for me to use.

## Factors emerging from the actual interviews

Firstly, I realised that the sooner I could get the students to relax and be confident in my responses, the more easily they would talk about themselves. This I felt had implications for future introductory talks with other groups.

Secondly, my initial impression from the interviews was that few students had returned to education with specific long-term goals, and it occurred to me that I needed to talk to students on a variety of courses, to check whether this was specific to these particular courses or general for women returners.

Thirdly, the responses to some questions appeared to vary according to when in the interview they were asked, but this was difficult to ascertain, since it could simply have been different responses from different students. A most important example of this was when I asked students why they came back to education. When asked in the early

stages of the interview, the responses hinged around not being able to get a job because of child-care difficulties/getting better qualifications whilst the children were small/being able to get a better job. Later in the interviews, the responses tended to be along the lines of 'doing something for me, just for me'. I resolved to reschedule the questions so that this question could be asked twice, both early and late in the interview, although I felt that this would be difficult, given the loose structure of the interviews. This topic is discussed again later.

Fourthly, all of the factors I had suspected would emerge, did emerge in these early interviews, for example, childcare, finance, travel, relationship and confidence issues. But in addition to this, women were talking to me about major personal and painful issues in their past. This information was totally unsolicited and due largely to the relaxed and open nature of the interview situation. As I have discussed in the biography, the emergence of this data resulted in a shift in the central focus of this thesis. The stories which the women were relating were often extremely painful and I was faced with the problem of keeping my verbal responses and body language sufficiently receptive to give the student the confidence to talk, but at the same having to control myself sufficiently to avoid accidentally giving inappropriate responses and affecting the interview.

## Personal issues

I had not anticipated the effect of the interviews on myself. By the end of the first day's interviewing I was exhausted, for a range of reasons, but largely connected with the concentration needed for listening and hearing.

Jane Ribbens' suggests that one of the most important qualities for researchers is the ability to listen (Ribbens 1989, p586). I would take this a step further and suggest that it is not only listening which is important, but hearing what is being said, which may not always be what is being verbalised. It is necessary therefore to pay attention to body language, intonations, nuances, pauses, inflexions etc.

I found that watching body language, listening to hesitations and trying to get an overall impression of the student whilst at the same time appearing relaxed and informal and receptive to their stories was quite demanding. Although my interview schedule was loosely ordered, I tended to allow the women to move the interview along in their own direction and quite often points were mentioned in conjunction with other factors about which they were talking. I had to concentrate really hard to remember whether particular issues had been covered or not, at the same time as listening to what they were saying now and picking up on any serendipity. I could also

locate myself clearly in much of what the women were telling me and it was almost like I was going through the whole experience of being a mature student at the start of my educational career again, only this time with knowledge and awareness which I had not had before. I had to work hard therefore to ensure that what I was getting was the women's story and not a reflection of my own.

I found the students' stories of painful past experiences very stressful and this was accompanied by a mixture of conflicting emotions: anger and distress at the women's experiences, but also excitement that they were actually telling me about them. I found that my biggest problem here was keeping control over non-verbal communication - particularly facial expression - so that I was not appearing to be judgmental. At the same time though my expression needed to be sufficiently open and receptive to encourage the women to keep talking to me.

However, even where painful experiences were not presented, I needed time and space to think through issues raised in one interview, put them out of my thinking and recover both physically and mentally before I met the next student. So I needed to allow myself recovery time - more than I would ever have suspected. In hindsight, I realised that I was experiencing considerable stress, heightened by my own insecurity. I was embarking on the major part of my fieldwork for an award which I felt was still a bit like reaching for the stars and I needed to 'get it right' or I'd never get there.

So after some considerable reflection on this set of interviews I came to a number of decisions. I decided firstly that wherever possible I would arrange my own appointments for the interviews, allowing myself more note-making and recovery time. If this was not possible, I needed to ensure sufficient time between interviews even if this meant seeing fewer students. I also needed to do fewer interviews in each session (but I felt the problem here might be that students would talk to one another about what had been discussed and I would get a 'halo' effect).

I needed to ensure that I explained more carefully to the staff at the different sites the importance of privacy and quiet. This approach would have to be very diplomatic, since both staff and students were giving me some of their valuable time, and I did not want to appear to be putting parameters around this.

## The remaining sites

In the meantime I had also made contact with lecturers on other sites of The Austen College, and arranged to talk to them and to their groups. The policy of the College is that each site concentrates on a particular speciality although offering other courses. So, for example, two sites offered courses for women in the non-traditional subjects of

construction and motor mechanics. The College also had outreach courses in neighbourhood centres in different parts of the city. I felt that students from these courses should be included in my group of interviews, since they would give me a picture of whether women's experiences varied at different levels of entry into education. I had already made preliminary contact with staff members and I arranged to go and talk to both tutors and students.

## Pankhurst

The two main groups I spoke to here were those enrolled on the Women's Studies course and the Women's Motor Vehicle course, the latter being a two year course, leading to a National Vocational Qualification. The first year is EEC funded and this pays for course fees and gives the women a small allowance to buy tools and books. The lecturer for the first year is a woman, (she is the only woman tutor in the department) but in the second year the students are in a mixed group with all male tutors. I talked at length with this tutor about the course structure, but mostly about the social interaction within the department between tutors and students and male and female students. She also introduced me to the one surviving female second year student. I visited the group to talk about my work and all the students said they were willing to talk to me. The lecturer, aware of what my research was about, had suggested several women who would be "interesting for me to talk to", but wary of bias, I suggested the 'names in a hat' procedure and arranged to talk to three students the following week. I ensured that sufficient time was allowed between each interview. Location and quiet was not a particular problem here (at least in theory!) since I had made contact with the Students' Union Women's Officer who was very interested in my research and she made one of the union rooms available for me. (In practice, when I started the interviews, repair work was going on in close proximity and I was competing with a pneumatic drill from time to time!). The biggest problem I had here though was that when I arrived to do the interviews, I discovered that the lecturer was ill and the class had been cancelled, and no-one knew to let me know. I had just travelled 20 miles in vain, but it was a lesson learned and I resolved to arrange appointments later in the morning, which would enable me to confirm the arrangements before I left home.

My interview with the second year student on the Women's Motor Vehicle course took place in the canteen at lunch time, since she was now a part-time student, working when she was not in college, and this was the only time she was able to see me. Although the surrounding obviously affected the interview, it seemed to have more effect on the quality of the tape than what this student actually told me.

The lecturer responsible for the Women's Studies course on this site also had a class in a neighbourhood defined as 'deprived' according to European standards, and so attracting support from the European Social Fund. Students had free tuition in a neighbourhood centre and were studying a variety of subjects, including different levels of English, which was the topic my contact was responsible for.

## Besant

I visited this group next, at the invitation of the lecturer and when I went along to talk to the group, I was met with a barrage of questions, including 'how do I get to do what you're doing?' and 'If we talk to you, how will it benefit women like us?' During the course of this informal talk, I was made very aware of the tremendous informal support given to this group by the tutor, which reinforced my feeling of the importance of 'significant others' in some women's journeys in education. I arranged to talk to three of the students from this group and booked a room with the centre for the following week. Of course, the 'best laid plans of mice and women ..... ' and when I arrived the following week, I discovered that the room was not available and the students and I talked in my car, which was parked outside. This at least ensured no interruptions, and did not appear to have any effect on the willingness of the student to talk to me. The only drawback was that it was the last day of November and extremely cold and of course I did wonder what I would have done if I had been using public transport!

I found from these interviews that the extra time I had allowed between interviews was significantly beneficial, in that more time was allowed for the student; I did not feel under pressure to draw the interview to a close and I had 'recovery time' between seeing the students, to allow me to think and make notes. This proved vital with this particular group of interviews.

## Dupré

During this period I also visited another neighbourhood centre on the outskirts of the city and talked to a group of students most of whom were taking a secretarial course. but by the time I had completed this first phase of interviews, Christmas was only three weeks away, and mindful of how busy this time of year can be for women with domestic responsibilities, I decided to continue the interviews after the Christmas break and made the necessary appointments. This would also give me time to consider other issues which had arisen and decide whether I needed to modify my approach again. However, when I arrived for the interviews, after a lengthy drive, there was no class and no evidence of the students. This may well have been because of the inclement

weather - it was January, cold and snowing. I left a note for the lecturer and followed this up with a letter and two telephone messages, but I had no response. By this time I had contacted other sites and was arranging other interviews and decided that I could pick up these interviews later if I felt it necessary.

## Cavell, Peters, Hepworth and Garrett-Anderson

After the Christmas break, I made contact with lecturers in the remaining 4 colleges, and again was met with interest and support, with staff going out of their way to provide information and facilitate meetings with students. It was at two of these colleges that I hit serious timetabling clashes and organised the interviews in slightly different locations - some in the college, some in the university and some in the students' home. This last location confirmed my suspicions of the effect this would have on the interview: although students seemed to be more physically at ease in their own surroundings, the interruptions from children, dogs and the telephone affected the interview. On two occasions, partners arrived home and voices and body language changed. With two of the women for example, voices dropped almost to a whisper and there were constant glances at the partly open door.

Another serious hitch at this point was industrial action by lecturers in the region. They had voted to stage a number of one and two day strikes which unfortunately clashed with the days on which I could arrange interviewing. Although we were eventually able to resolve this to some extent, some interviews had to be cancelled - proximity to the final assessment meaning that students had difficulty finding time to talk to me outside of their studies.

The other considerable problem I had was something of a double-edged sword in that I was aware of unexpected issues which were emerging from the interviews and whilst this was exciting, I was afraid of directing the interview in order to confirm the first tentative findings. Awareness of this however, made me doubly careful to guard against it, especially since this data had emerged unsolicited.

# Non-starters

At this stage, I felt it would be interesting to talk to women who had been offered a place at university, had accepted the offer, but not subsequently taken up the place. This could have been done in two ways: either talking to women who had not started at the beginning of the current academic year now very close to its end, or wait until the start of the new academic year. I decided on the latter, feeling that too long had

elapsed from the start of the academic year and all manner of side issues and rationalisations may have been introduced to the explanations for not taking up a place. In any case, I had more than enough material to be working on. I focused upon students at the University of Austen and contacted staff in the relevant department who were more than willing to help. There were initial problems of waiting for the information to become available, but eventually I had a list of thirteen students to whom letters were sent, with a form consenting to be interviewed. I received six positive replies and chose to interview the four who were within the Austen area. All these interviews took place in the students' homes with all the difficulties I have already discussed!

I decided against talking to women who had dropped out of courses in further education, feeling that there are all sorts of reasons why people start courses at this level and subsequently drop out, whereas for women who have actually been offered and have accepted a place at university - in other words have surmounted many of the barriers which women face - not taking up that place may have more significance. Initial analysis of the tapes however suggested that their experiences varied very little from the main body of the sample and of the four, one was taking up her place the following year, another had turned down one place but accepted another in a different department (this information not having found its way to the university's computer!), and the remaining two are actually on a foundation course of a 4-year science degree, under the jurisdiction and supervision of the university, but franchised out to local colleges.

## Starting the analysis

On conclusion of interviews and in consideration of the whole data collecting process, a number of personal and practical issues have emerged.

One of my first thoughts at the end of the interviews was whether I had enough data. I had been analysing constantly from the first batch of interviews and knew that the students had given me a wealth of interesting data, so this was a totally unrealistic fear, though nevertheless very real. At the same time, I was desperately tired. I had grossly underestimated the draining nature of such interviews and felt that I would not give of my best in further interviews at this stage. Fortunately my supervisor suggested that I stop interviewing, at least for now and pointed out that I could always organise a few more interviews at a later stage if necessary.

A serious decision for me was how to handle the data - a problem with which I had to deal whilst I was still half-way through the fieldwork. Colleagues had taken different

approaches - some of them working only from tapes, some working from transcripts and some working with both. Of the latter, some had transcribed their own and some had others transcribe them. Whilst there are advantages and disadvantages to both, the problem for me was in the time it would take to transcribe the tapes myself against the cost of paying some-one else to do it. I decided on the latter, for a number of reasons: I was in the middle of the fieldwork, the students would soon be facing examinations - a period when I felt it would be unfair to ask for their time and I wanted to complete the bulk of the interviews before the college holidays. In addition, I needed to supplement my grant by earning money, which restricted the availability of time for transcribing.

The next decision was whether to have all the interviews transcribed, or a selection, building up a picture until I was satisfied that further transcription could add no more to the data I had. I decided on the former, still feeling that it was more beneficial to work with both tapes and transcripts. The exceptions to this were the interviews with the 'non-starters' whose stories were so similar to the main interviews, that it was not necessary since I could select any information I wished to use from the tapes.

Paying for the transcripts made me realise the cost of conducting this type of research. The heaviest cost was for the transcripts, but there was also the cost of tapes, batteries and travel. Had I not been able to supplement my income by lecturing, the cost would have proved prohibitive.

There were many very rewarding experiences with this data collecting, but there were also some very frustrating ones. One of the main organisational difficulties was trying to juggle the students' timetable, the lecturers' interests and my own commitments and sometimes finding mutually convenient times was quite difficult. If the student then failed to appear, which fortunately was rare, this was quite frustrating, especially if I had travelled some distance. The most potentially problematic situation for me was the lecturers' strike, since these were scheduled for the days which were most convenient for me for interviewing. Fortunately it was resolved within a few weeks so ultimately, there was inconvenience but no serious difficulties.

A constant worry for me was the extent of my personal involvement - were my past experiences driving the interviews? I was taking every precaution I could to ensure that this did not happen, and to some extent was vindicated with the emergence of totally unsolicited and unexpected data. My next thought of course is whether I would I have got the same response, particularly when women revealed painful details of their past, if I had been a man? Feminist theory suggests that I would not, and certainly recent work by Padfield & Proctor (1996) and Song & Parker (1995)

provides evidence that gender has a major influence on what interviewees are willing to discuss.

However, the most serious concern for me was whether I might have created/ contributed to barriers or problems which were not perceived by the students to be there initially. This ethical consideration concerned with gaining my information and perhaps in the process leaving women with issues they have to resolve concerns me greatly. For example, in enabling women to talk about personal issues, was I then leaving them with the aftermath of having to deal with this? For example, Sheila talked about the possibility of working away from her home area when she qualified as a social worker. She told me that she had never considered this until I asked her what her future plans were. During my talk with Colette, she began to unpack her thoughts on leaving her husband and children - something which she had not discussed before. Bryony's relationship with her husband was clearly strained - a factor she was reticent about at first, but which came through more and more strongly as the interview went on. I thought many times that I was facilitating the opening of a 'Pandora's box' and felt considerable responsibility for this. Of course, the likelihood is that the issues were there before, and all I was doing was providing an opportunity for the women to verbalise them. Nevertheless, I felt it necessary to give the students my 'phone number and on occasions to suggest voluntary agencies where help may be available if they needed it.

Despite these issues and my fatigue, I was generally pleased with the way in which the interviews had gone; more than happy with the support and interest of both staff and students and delighted with the material I had been given. These findings are presented in the following two chapters.

# Section II: Findings

# *Chapter 5:  Barriers or constraints? - a paradigmatic shift*

There is a considerable literature which indicates that some adults do experience barriers to learning, be it full-time or part-time, vocational or non-vocational, academic or practical, for a wide variety of reasons (see for example McGivney 1995, 1993, Edwards 1993, Oglesby 1991, 1989, Adults Learning, special editions in January 1990 and December 1989, Charnley et al 1985, ACACE 1982). Bryant (1995) describes the situation thus:

> *For many adult students the return to further or higher education*
> *represents an obstacle course of Grand National proportions. Self-*
> *confidence has to be developed, writing skills polished up or acquired,*
> *academic language demystified and personal and family relations re-*
> *ordered.                                          (Bryant 1995, p270)*

My interest in the difficulties which women face when they return to education has been ongoing for many years. My own experiences as a mature student and a lecturer in further and higher education indicated that the barriers were there and the research for my Master's degree had re-affirmed this.

The initial analysis of this research data indicated that the difficulties were definitely experienced *by almost all the students* and could be grouped under the five broad headings I discussed in chapter one: psychological, practical, institutional, economic and social/personal barriers. For example, students talked about problems of finance, time tabling, travelling, choice of course, the care of dependents, domestic chores and relationships. I felt therefore that although I had shifted the focus of the thesis, it was necessary to write at least a section on barriers, since many of these issues, to varying degrees, circumscribed the lives of the students with whom I talked.

However, I had great difficulty beginning to write this section and could not at first understand why. The evidence was there, backed up by my own experience and by others' research, so why was I having difficulty writing this up? After several false starts and considerable thinking about it, the light slowly dawned. My original ideas were still influencing my thinking. I was still trying to work within an 'a priori' positivist structure of validation and categorisation, and subconsciously fitting the data into a neat theoretical framework of patriarchy and power. I was reluctant to totally let go of this convenient and safe way of working, but at the same time I was clearly not intellectually comfortable with it. I was still trying to impose my view - a 'top-down' perspective rather than listening to the women's own stories - a 'bottom-up' perspective grounded in the data. I was in a state of transition - adopting a methodology which

recognised the value of the women's input much more and shedding (albeit slowly) a more structured methodology. The recognition of this dynamic process was both illuminating and frightening. Hard on the heels of recognising the source of my 'barrier to writing' was the awareness that I had no clear-cut explanatory framework for the issues which the initial analysis indicated women do have to deal with in their role as mature students.

# Back to the drawing board

I went back to the transcripts of the interviews and began to re-address the whole notion of barriers - a concept with which I had been working for many years. The problems and issues were certainly evident in the data, but the women did not conceptualise what was going on in terms of barriers. Rather, they were perceived as difficulties to consider and deal with as part of their lives as mature students, accepted as part and parcel of their return to education. Importantly, and central to the discussion, is that whatever problems the women had to deal with, they did not constitute an insurmountable barrier to education for this particular group of students. The women I talked to had returned to education, and at all levels were interacting with their environment to get what they wanted within a positive personal framework. One must bear in mind of course that the women with whom I talked were a self-selected sample of successes, and for many women the story may be very different.

However, this does not mean that there are not constraints on what some students could do, and some women did tell me that their circumstances influenced and sometimes determined their choice of subjects, courses, and institutions. But even here, within the recognition of limitations on their lives, for the majority of women there was a positive note of 'I can do this' rather than 'I can't do that'.

Nor does it mean that the women have never experienced barriers to their education. Indeed, many of the women with whom I spoke told me of major obstacles to their educational achievement in the past. Many of these are discussed in the next chapter. This chapter will examine some of the current issues which mature women students talked to me about, but from their perspective, rather than mine and will not only discuss some of the problems they have dealt with, but also how they have resolved them.

Clear patterns have emerged with these issues and their resolution. Students' experiences differed for example, in relation to their age, partnered status and domestic and caring responsibilities, although these are not discrete areas - there is considerable

overlap. However, finance in some way appeared to be a common problem and the majority of women mentioned money as one of the issues about which they were concerned.

# Finance

Money appears to be a fairly universal problem. Bryant's research at Ruskin College revealed that over two-thirds of the students experienced financial difficulties and women with child-care responsibilities were disproportionately represented in this proportion. He continues his horse-racing analogy:

> *For all but the affluent, there is a further obstacle - the Beechers Brook of the course - which is presented by financial and economic survival. What should be an adventure in self-discovery can easily become a careworn journey, beset by worries about money and debt.*
> *(Bryant 1995, p270)*

In McGivney's research, finance was the second most frequently cited problem, after the lack of child-care, for women wishing to enter education or training (McGivney, 1993).

The extent to which money was a problem varied according to the social circumstances and the age of the student. This was dealt with in a variety of ways:

## Choice of course

Many students had opted for full-time courses because they were free, whereas part-time courses had to be paid for. Bryony, who felt she was a little out of her depth at the start of her full-time science access course verbalised this:

> *Bryony: I'd have been better to have done GCSE's but at that time, last year, it was £72 each, so .....*

Some women had actually opted for a particular course because it had a grant. For example, Heather's full-time course attracted EEC funding because it provided non-traditional training for women. It was free, paid a small allowance and provided free crèche facilities:

> *Heather: The main thing, like, I've got three young children and ..... a second income's always 'andy so we (she and other students) were looking for something that paid an allowance as well as .....you know ..... coming back into college .....*

Future financial issues were a major consideration in Patsy's return to education. She is single, aged 26, living at home with her parents and is studying two A-levels over two years as a part-time evening student because she cannot afford to give up her full-time work. Patsy is really unsure how she will manage next year if she is offered a place at university and is saving hard so that she will not be dependent upon her elderly parents.

> *Patsy: I've worked it out that if I don't spend very much money on clothes ..... and you do get extra for being older as well, so I think I'll just about make ends meet. But you think you're going to and then you don't do you?*

JP: Will your parents help you out?

> *Patsy: Erm, my Dad, he retired two years ago, so really no 'cos I think they've worked out that when I've gone they'll have less coming in than going out without my money. So that's no.*

## Full-time study, part-time work

Some full-time students worked part-time to provide or supplement their income. Most of the students who did this were at the younger end of the age group, but not exclusively so, although money did appear to be one of the biggest concerns of these younger students.

Sam and Ursula were at the younger end of the age scale of women and both previously had full-time jobs which they found unfulfilling. Sam gave up her job to come back into education; Ursula was made redundant and decided to aim for a degree. Both partly resolved their financial difficulties by selecting a course in further education which gave them a mandatory grant. This was not the only reason for choosing this course, which was a science foundation course - the first year of a four-year course franchised out from one of the local universities, but both students told me that the funding was an attraction since they could not afford to give up their full-time jobs and have no income. However, they still supplemented their income by working evenings.

Sam lives with her partner who works full-time and is prepared to support her financially. She has her grant and works part-time:

> *I live with my boyfriend at the moment, so we've sorted it out between us. My grant ..... I just put into - we have a joint account just to cover all the bills - and I've got a part time job that I use as my spending money. I work at (supermarket) on the tills.*

Ursula lives in her own house with a mortgage:

*Ursula: (My family) ..... help me an awful lot (financially). So I'm
very lucky, very lucky in that respect.
I've got a job as well. I'm a nurse ..... I tried to do about a three shifts
a week. I tried to do one or two afternoons in the week - 'cos we don't,
we're not in college on a Thursday afternoon and we're not in college
on a Friday afternoon. So I tried to do a late shift there, and then do
like an early at the weekend or a late at the weekend or whatever. But
now, like, coming up to exams I can't do it and leave any time for
studying. But there again, I need the money. This is the worst thing
about this, for me, anyway, paying the mortgage. I've had to get a
lodger in the house and my whole life has changed ..... and I shall have
to get somebody else as well next year. I just can't cope.*

Neither of these students have major domestic or caring responsibilities. However,
both Dilys and Bryony have partners and children to care for and homes for which they
take major responsibility, but both work part-time to supplement their income. Bryony
teaches fitness at a local college and pays for her books and petrol to travel to college
out of this. She feels she cannot take the money out of the family budget since her
husband is not supportive of her studying. Dilys works in a supermarket in the
evenings, as well as studying on a full-time and a part-time course.

## State benefits

Some women were in a position to claim state benefit which eased their financial
position. Olga for example was made redundant and claims unemployment benefit.
Although she has a supportive second partner, she is fiercely independent. She is a
student on a full-time access course which is free but attracts no allowance, but she has
peripheral costs such as travel, books and stationery, as do all the students. She told
me that she actually delayed her enrolment for financial reasons:

*Olga: I'd always wanted to get into nursing and it's never, ever been
feasible before, because I've always needed to be out earning. And
suddenly it was possible, when the boys were grown up and we can just
about manage on one income.
It was a four year plan. I mean, even in terms of having to manipulate
the fact that after I'd been unemployed for six months I could get on
'Training for Work' and do a course that way, which meant that I didn't
have to give up a couple of hours every two weeks to sign on and I
didn't have to keep having referral interviews, and obviously getting an
extra ten pounds as well, so I've been a little bit manipulative. I knew
it was a four year thing that I was looking at and to me this is just the
end of the first year of four.*

Thea was not made redundant, but gave up a job to return to education. Her course is
not funded and I asked her how she supported herself:

> *Thea: ..... well, I actually claim unemployment benefit, which, you know, I have to. That's the only way I can survive. That's the only way I can do it. It was the only reason that was stopping me before - 'cos I didn't know how I'd manage.*

A number of students, a large proportion of whom were divorced, claimed income support, which is different from unemployment benefit received as a statutory right in that it is means-tested. Grace is divorced, currently studying part-time at a neighbourhood centre where the courses are free. She did not talk of money being a problem, but we did talk of what would happen if she applied to university:

> *Grace: ..... money, that's another thing. Would I be able to manage on a grant? I don't know how much it is, I haven't a clue. I don't know if I'd lose money ..... I haven't gone into it. I have to sign on even though it's still income support.*

'Signing on' means she has still ostensibly to be available for work, which she clearly would not be if she were on a full-time degree course. On the whole, although money was an issue, is was not reported as a major problem by these students and it may well be that they were accustomed to living on a low income.


## Partnered status

However, money and education becomes more complicated when the course has no grant and the woman is married/ partnered and not working outside the home.

Generally speaking, women in this position are not entitled to state benefit in their own right, and have to rely on a supportive husband, either for direct financial support or to co-operate in completing various financial statement forms. If they are on a full-time course, the course is free, but there are things like books, stationery, photocopying and travel to pay for. If the students are at university, then the grant is mandatory, but assessed on the husband's/ partner's income.

Rhona is 49 and held down a very responsible job until the birth of her son 11 years ago. She is financially dependent upon her husband, who has a very well-paid job. She is currently part-time on an access course and has been offered a place at Austen University from October.

> *Rhona: John's perfectly happy about me going and perfectly happy to support me but I feel very uncomfortable that he has to.*

She was supposed to pay her fees at college as a part-time student, she asked the course tutor:

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*'..... if I refuse to pay my fees what are you going to do ..... ?' and Dorothy said 'Well, I don't know, I just don't know what we'd do ..... ' and I said 'But what happens to people like me who've got a husband who won't pay, what happens then? I've paid a stamp for 22 years ..... full National Insurance cover, I've paid all the taxes and for the first time in my life I'm asking you to educate me and you're telling me I've got to pay. That's not fair ..... ' So she said 'No it's not, we'll put you into a special category' and she put me into some category or other and I didn't have to pay my fees. But I would have found it difficult to find that £1,500, or whatever my fees would have been, I would have found that hard and we've one salary coming in.*

I asked what was going to happen when she went to university:

*Right, well, my fees are paid but I won't get a grant ..... because first of all John doesn't want to fill in all the forms, right. He said 'It's you who's going to University not me ..... I'm just not prepared to give all this information for the grant which you may get which may be a pittance depending on what I earn'. Not that I don't know what John earns, I suppose I probably did but I don't know what it really is. I agree with him ..... you know, why should he have to do all that? So I said 'What happens when, if, I have to buy a book at £60-70 which I may well have to do?' and he said 'Well we'll just have to find it'.*

This student is dependent upon the goodwill of her husband to support her - if this support is withdrawn she couldn't go to university, as she said:

*No way, well I couldn't go. I mean I'd ..... what do you do then in that situation? I don't know what you'd do, I suppose you'd have to get benefit or ..... well you wouldn't get it would you?*

In a very different financial situation is Jenny, a student in her late thirties, whose husband claims state benefit. She has been a student for three years, doing whatever courses are available at a neighbourhood centre which receives funding from the European Social Fund. Courses and materials are free.

*Jenny: I'm a non-person, I don't exist anywhere except as an extension of my husband. I've no money of my own, I'm not on any computer for any benefit 'cos it goes in my husband's name ..... I don't exist. He exists and I'm just a liability to 'im ..... he gets £20 a week for having me.*
*I come here (to the neighbourhood centre) 'cos its just down the road and everything's free, but if I want anything I have to ask 'im for it. I can't go to (college) 'cos of the fares and 'im not being very well ..... there's all sorts I'd love to do but can't afford to do because of ' benefit trap ..... I can't go to work 'cos if I earn anything, they take it off 'im....*

Although Jenny does not mention the word 'barrier', and her financial situation is not a barrier to her return to education, she does recognise the severe constraints which are put on her choice of subjects and institution. However, Jenny works within those constraints to avail herself of whatever education she can but she acknowledges that her aspirations to become a teacher may never be realised. One can speculate here on the links between the patriarchal structure of the welfare state and women's oppression - a discussion which is taken up again and includes Jenny's story, in subsequent chapters.

In all of these stories, students were dealing with their financial problems in particular ways, to enable them to pursue education, so finance was not a barrier, although it might be a major problem for some. Funded programmes can of course be seen as enabling, since they appear to allow the students at least some independence. Money was not the only issue which had to be considered though. Many of the women with whom I spoke had caring and domestic responsibilities which had to be taken into account in their role as mature students.

## Caring and domestic responsibilities

The presence of domestic responsibilities is a major consideration for many if not most mature women students.

Edwards (1993) talks of the 'two greedy institutions' of home and education and the constant juggling which partnered women with families have to do to satisfy the needs of both. McGivney (1993) indicates that domestic responsibilities and the care of children and elderly dependents are a major barrier to women's return to education and training. Coats (1989) implies that many more women would return to education if adequate provision was made for dependents. Woodley et al's (1987) study of mature students found that 49% of their sample felt that family demands on their study time caused some problem. There were marked differences in the age groups - of the under 30's, one third had a partner but no children and less than one in five had children, whereas of the over 30's by far the most common situation was to have both partner and children. 46% of male students and 53% of female students in Woodley's sample felt that their studying was restricted by family demands on their time and energy which was the second most frequently mentioned problem after 'organising study time' (Woodley et al, 1987).

This reflected my own data, with the majority of students being married or partnered and with between 1 and 3 children living with them, the majority being under 16. Several women were also responsible for elderly relatives, either living with them or

close by. The students who did not mention caring and domestic responsibilities as factors to be considered tended to be either younger, unpartnered with no children, or divorced. Only one partnered woman from all the interviews said that she had anything like an equal relationship with her partner. Joy is in the upper half of the age range, partnered and has no children:

> *Joy:    I'm very lucky I don't have any (commitments at home). I live*
> *with somebody and have done for many many years and I don't have*
> *any children, so I'm very lucky compared with everybody else. At least*
> *I don't have any child-care problems or ageing parent commitments,*
> *just sort my own life out.......*
> *We share the housework, it's not an issue, it just happens.*
> *We've been together for 15 years so we've sort of spent a long time*
> *working it out and we've lived in one room together and its not like we*
> *have a traditional approach really.*
> *I realise that I'm probably not very representative because I'm older*
> *and I don't have children and there aren't many of me about.*

Joy makes two interesting points here. Firstly she considers that her circumstances are quite unusual for some-one of her age, which reflects the influence of what she sees as 'normal' in the society around her. Secondly, she highlights the point that others on the course do have considerable domestic commitments which affect their role as mature students.

However, most students do not actually perceive child care and domestic chores as barriers unless they become a major problem: they are usually seen as 'part of my lot' to organise. Generally speaking women do not question that they have to work round their domestic commitments, whatever they might be, choosing institutions, courses and timetables to fit in, rather than vice versa, although they do talk about the conflicts created by demands on their time, especially at certain times of the year like Christmas when there are extra domestic chores at the same time as assignments have to be handed in. As Edwards (1993) suggests - 'two greedy institutions' indeed.


Childcare

Most students with small children chose institutions and courses which would accommodate their child-care responsibilities. Most campuses within the Austen College system provide crèche facilities for under-school-age children, some of which are free, some of which have to be paid for, depending upon either the course or the institution. In addition, the courses on which most of the students were enrolled have a time-table which starts later and finishes earlier than school times, thus catering for the needs of women with small children, although sometimes extra arrangements have to be made.

Nola has two small children and chose both the institution and the part-time course to accommodate her child-care responsibilities, but she also needs to have an arrangement with her neighbour. Her older daughter is at school and her younger goes to a mixture of crèche at the college and playgroup. What she says is fairly typical of other students in similar situations:

> *Nola: I have two daughters, one who is seven and one who is three and a half ..... I picked the college because I knew they had the crèche and it was handy, you know, it's only ten minutes drive away, and also I thought, well if Amy gets into the crèche it sort of balances out me paying for the course, if she gets these free crèche facilities, because otherwise if I'd had to pay for child care for Amy there is no way I would have been able to do the course. So, it worked out quite well, all day Tuesday and all day Wednesday.*
> *My biggest problem is child-care. Also, when I go to university I am not going to be able to afford to send my daughter to the child care facilities there, because they are so expensive, so I will have to rely on all my friends. You know, I am alright at Garrett-Anderson because Amy has got the crèche facility, and I'm alright with Jeannine at school because I pick up my friend's children and she does it for me on a Wednesday. But when I go to university, that is going to be the first issue, you know, trying to fit it all in around Amy until she goes to school.*

Like a number of students, Nola has organised her educational career around her domestic commitments at a local level, but envisages difficulties which she will have to overcome when she goes on to higher education, which may well involve more travelling and where course time-tabling is not necessarily structured to the needs of mature students with domestic responsibilities. Frances on the other hand, sees her choice as much more restricted to her immediate neighbourhood:

> *Frances: It's nearer to come here, you know, when I've took Mark to school, better than actually having to travel - 'cos I haven't got a car or anything and if I went to college ..... well, I do everything ..... he (her partner) don't do nothing, except go fishing, so I take Mark, then I come here.*

Wanda who is divorced and has no local extended family support network is at university. Although her children are older, she still worries about them and told me that the lateness of the lectures in one discipline had influenced her choice of courses:

> *Wanda: (In the first year) I would have done psychology, but I ended up doing social history instead and although I had to come in five days, I could leave after the children and arrived at the latest about quarter past four which of course is the time they arrive .....*

*My daughter is 15 and my son is 12. (This year) I have to leave before them and return after them. I don't get back until after 7, then every other day I leave after them and I come back before them or roughly at the same time generally. Because I now have Monday off, I cook meals on a Monday so they can stick meals in the microwave instead of them having to wait. I don't like it very much but my daughter is very sensible I mean she baby-sits for other people, she's very mature ..... (but) I wouldn't want them playing around with the cooker*

## Elderly dependents

Some students also take responsibility for an elderly dependent. One estimate suggests that more women look after other dependants than look after pre-school children - a consideration which must be given serious thought both in time-tabling and funding if the educational needs of these women are to be met (Coats 1989).

Faith has a small boy and a mother for whom she is responsible:

*Faith: Well, I've got a child and a husband - but it's me mum really, she's the hardest 'cos she's, sort of ill, really, and she's more of a commitment. Alex is two and a half, he goes to the college crèche, its brilliant. When I finish college I have to pick me mum up or go round ..... she relies on me to get out of the house. She's quite demanding quite honestly, 'cos I'm the only daughter, my brothers have all moved away, so it all falls on me really. It's going to be difficult next year when I go to university .....*

Deidre is 48, and on a full-time funded course, at a local college not too far away from where she lives. It is also worth mentioning that she had a serious operation for a brain tumour a couple of years before the interview. Her 26 year old son is just about to move into his own flat, but she also has an elderly mother to care for:

*Deidre: I've got a mother I keep an eye on, but she doesn't live with me ..... She's 76, she suffers with angina and she had a fall last year and broke her arm and its still not knitted properly. My son's very supportive, he's all for it, my mother isn't, but my son is ..... I think with her, you know, she misses me, she thinks I should be with her constantly, I've got to be her life for her, you know? She said this'd be too much for me, I could do without the stress ..... then when that didn't work, we tried losing our temper ..... then we tried the tears ..... you know, we haven't had the illness yet, I'm waiting for that ..... If I go to university, it'd have to be Austen, I couldn't move out of Austen ..... but I'm used to it, I had me grandma till she was 94, we're a long-lived family .....*

These are fairly representative examples of women's responsibility for the caring role in the private world of the household which also extends to the housework. Most women with partners told me that they were supportive, but from what they said, this support covered a range of definitions.

# Partner support

Some partners gave practical help but some gave psychological support only and no practical help. There was no hard and fast rule; what happened varied with different circumstances. What was clear though was that in all cases except one, women took the prime responsibility for domestic responsibilities, with their partners 'helping' to a greater or lesser extent. Few of the women complained directly about this lack of help, rather, they expressed gratitude when partners did 'help'.

Heather, who has three children is on a full-time course. Her partner is happy for her to do the course, but does little to help:

> *He agreed I should do something I enjoyed doing, so yeah, he backed*
> *me up ..... but doesn't do anything practically to help. He don't do*
> *anything in t' house, he wouldn't know where to start, he's terrible, but*
> *I suppose I've made him like it, I've carried on where 'is mother left off*
> *.....*
> *Me mam used to tell 'im to put t'kettle on if I were busy wi' kids, but he*
> *used to say 'That's what I pay 'er for ..... '*
> *'Bloody pay her?' me mam used to say, 'you don't bloody pay 'er for*
> *nothing' but he meant it really - he didn't think that were 'is job.*
> *an' I get so tired an' I get ratty with the kids .....*

Rhona's partner provides psychological support but this support didn't particularly extend to practical help, and she still takes the responsibility for all the domestic chores:

> *Rhona: He's been very, very supportive, all the time I've been up there*
> *..... he's also done a great deal to build up my confidence, teach me*
> *how capable I am. I know he's very proud of me, he doesn't hesitate to*
> *say that. He happily gives me money but he shouldn't have to ..... I*
> *mean it's going to be no plus to him having me at university for three*
> *years. It's been no plus to him having me at college you know, at this*
> *time his tea would have been on the table, a bath would have been run,*
> *there would have been no ironing left to be done, you know he didn't*
> *see any of that before I started college.*

What Rhona says reflects the fact that many women had modified what they did in the home, but still saw the domestic scene as their responsibility.

Netta is on a full-time course and has a partner and two small children. Her partner's contribution is to take charge of the children whilst she does the housework:

> *When I was at home, I used to get everything done, I was a bit*
> *houseproud. Now I cut corners ..... like cleaning the bathroom is just a*
> *matter of making the taps shiny, it makes a big improvement. He's (her*
> *husband) good at taking the kids out for a few hours while I get things*
> *done and he'll play with them .....*

Not only is the partner's practical support important, understanding, interest and psychological support also appear to be important. Woodley's study asked respondents to nominate sources of encouragement/discouragement regarding current study. 52% of those who replied to this question nominated their spouse/partner, which conversely implies that 48% did not find their spouse/partner the greatest source of encouragement, with around 8% nominating their spouse/partner and 8% nominating their children as the most discouraging. On the whole, women students found their partners less encouraging and their children and significant others more encouraging than male students did, although the researchers do acknowledge that some gender-conditioning may be at work with women more prepared than men to admit to the influence of people other than their partner (Woodley et al, 1987).

Liz returned to education after a serious back injury meant that she had to give up her nursing post. She told me that her husband is supportive in many ways:

> *Liz:    He's been very encouraging ..... he wants me to be happy.*
> *There's lots of things he's done for me. When I've got stuck like with*
> *the computer, you know, and he's quite good on computers and being*
> *able to sort me out and, suggest things. He's read my essays and been*
> *critical I suppose, so he's helped an awful lot.*
> *..... that first few weeks when I was trying to do everything still, you*
> *know, I was still trying to be, er, perfect mum and clean t'house and all*
> *this, and I didn't seem to want to let anything go - that was a bit*
> *difficult - but that went fairly quickly.*
> *I probably know where the grotty bits are or what's not been done but*
> *you can't, somebody walking in wouldn't tell and I think I've carried on*
> *like that really. I think it's a bit of joke with us really, you know, we*
> *said as long as there was a crusty loaf and everybody had got clean*
> *undies then that was it, you know?*
> *He doesn't create if he doesn't get a cooked meal and two veg. every*
> *night, and he's helped more in the house. There's a lot of things that*
> *he does for me, like he hoovers because I have a lot of problems*
> *bending, so he does all the hoovering and he does all the windows and*
> *things like that. He's always helped with things like that, he's very*
> *good around the house. I mean, he doesn't do the ironing and the*
> *washing and this sort of thing but it's just jobs that would take a lot of*
> *doing, like the windows, he will pick up and do.*

Liz's partner appears to be very supportive, but a number of students told me that their partners had very ambivalent attitudes towards their studies. Gloria told me that her husband was supportive, both psychologically and practically although she does appear to qualify this and went on to tell me about her husband's ambivalence in an abstract way:

> *Gloria: The kids think it's wonderful and Jim does as well. I have to say that all three of them have been very supportive, you know? It's a huge change for them because I've always been at home and so I have to, sort of, respect their difficulties sometimes as they have to respect mine. So no there aren't any problems. Practical things like who's cooking tea, it's all sort of shared out. I'm not in on Monday and Tuesday until half past five, six o'clock so obviously whoever's in first - well the kids aren't old enough - but Jim, he will start cooking tea. So, but if I'm in, then obviously I'll start cooking tea because I'm in first. We both do the shopping, and we all do the ironing. I'm training the kids to iron.*

> *I think the kids think, "Oh good, you know, my mum's at college" With Jim, I think that it, men tend to feel a little bit overshadowed by women. Because although we've got a good relationship ..... he was out being the, sort of, provider and now all of a sudden I'm off doing something that I want to do. And I actually think sometimes that it can be difficult for men in that they have to go to work, they have to earn the money. Whereas women, although they are stuck at home quite often, with the kids, and have full responsibility of the kids, they quite often are seen to be swanning around doing what they want, because there is that element of freedom. Whereas if they've got full time work, and have got to provide, there is no freedom there. I think that's what men resent about women, you know, sort of coming into education.*

McGivney's (1993) research revealed that a large proportion of women met some resistance from their partners:

> *Male partners often play a 'gate-keeping' role in facilitating or constraining a woman's participation in education and training ..... The project yielded considerable evidence of male hostility to their partner's participation in education or training ..... there appears to be a strong link between marital strife and women's attempts to do things for themselves which are not connected with the family role.*
> *(McGivney 1993, p4)*

Bryony's story about her husband, who runs his own business, is one such example:

> *Bryony: He's not totally against what I'm doing - no, I'm being kind here - I think he is actually.*
> *He can't see the point in what I'm doing; he thinks it's just a waste of time. He can't understand why I just don't want to go and get any job.*

*He didn't really want me to come to college ..... so I go home, cook the*
*meals, doing the ironing at the same time, as you do .....*
*Then, my son's at home, me and him usually do the washing up, then I*
*do my homework at night. I get very tired - he says it's my own fault,*
*I'm punishing myself, there's no reason for it, so I don't say I'm tired, I*
*just get on with it. He sees it as me being totally selfish, just thinking*
*about myself when I should be supporting him .....*

As well as her full-time course, Bryony actually helps her husband in his business by
doing the accounts and wages and works one night a week for her personal money.
She also looks after her 83 year old mother:

*..... on Fridays, 'cos that's the only time I've got, I do her housework*
*and fetch her pension, but I only do bits of shopping .....*

(And her husband tells her she's selfish!!)

The tiredness and the inference of juggling the demands of home and college related by
both Bryony and Heather were reflected in the stories of many other women, mostly
those with partners, domestic and/or caring responsibilities. McGivney maintains that:

*..... the practical constraints that limit women's choices and ability to*
*participate in education, training and public life arise from culturally*
*transmitted expectations and attitudes ..... Girls quickly assimilate what*
*is expected of them in order to gain society's acceptance and approval.*
*(McGivney 1993, p37)*

As Hughes et al (1989) argue, there are clear gender differences in terms of
responsibilities with:

*The persistence of ideologies around women's mainly domestic and*
*servicing roles in the home .....*          *(Hughes et al 1989).*

In other words, despite legal commitment to equal opportunities, women are still seen
in our society as having the prime responsibility for housework and childrearing, and
also for other dependants such as elderly parents and sick or disabled relatives, whether
they are hers or her partner's. This ideology influences not only men of course, but
women too, in their participation in certain activities and in their perception of
themselves, particularly when they have been out of the public world for any length of
time. McGivney (1993) argues that these cultural influences affect women's self-
esteem and confidence which may be a deterrent to a return to education and training.
Clearly all the women in my sample had returned to education, but the issue of
confidence is nevertheless an important one and is discussed in more detail in the next
chapter.

# Summary

A large proportion of mature women students cope with a wide range of difficulties when they return to education. These issues differ according to age and domestic responsibilities. The major problem for younger students with few, if any domestic and caring responsibilities appears to be finance, although this is by no means confined to this age group. Older students also related financial problems, but where they were partnered by a supportive partner, this was not a serious issue. This group though contained a large number of women with partners and caring responsibilities and for them the major problem was the conflicting demands being made on their time by domestic and college responsibilities. These responsibilities also influenced the choice of subjects, courses and institutions, with most, though not all, women choosing institutions within relatively easy commuting distance of their home. Those who chose to go further afield either had their own transport or few domestic responsibilities and were unlikely to have children. On the whole, the students did not resent this limitation on their choice, rather they saw it as a factor to take into consideration in their pursuit of education and tailored their aims accordingly. One or two students though, did express resentment of the limitations on their choice, but because of the traumatic nature of their experiences, these are included in the following chapter, where the stories of a number of other women mentioned in this section are also told more fully.

# *Chapter 6:    Education, what's in it for mature women?*

## Introduction

Given the problems and difficulties which some women have when they return to education, why do they do it?  Given the time-juggling and conflicting demands which many of them experience, why do they stay?  The majority of women in our society do not return to education once they have left, so in that sense, these women could be regarded as deviant and some did recognise that most of their friends outside the course they were on had not returned to formal studying since they finished mainstream schooling.  So what is in education for this particular group of students?  From the findings of the research, it seems that some mature women gain considerably more than just paper qualifications from their return to learning.

This chapter, which is the main empirical chapter of the thesis, has been divided into three parts.  Part I examines the women's reasons for returning to learning, then discusses the emergence of trauma in women's lives and my difficulty with both defining and analysing it.  Part II begins the presentation of the women's stories, divided into two broad categories.  The first includes women who have experienced sudden or unexpected major life events and the second is concerned with restrictive stultifying relationships.  Part III is entitled "Mega trauma" because of the nature and ongoing effects of the women's experiences.  This section, and the chapter, concludes with Della's story which is told separately from the other stories, not only because of its intensely painful nature and the clear links she make between trauma and education, but also because of the accidental way in which I stumbled across it and the influence it had on my decision to re-focus the central theme of the research.

## Part I: Differing explanations

## Reasons for returning

One of the questions I asked quite early on, almost as an icebreaker was 'why did you come back into education?'  The students gave many reasons such as wanting to contribute to the family income,  better qualifications and a more stimulating job.  Many students talked about a realisation of under achievement in their compulsory schooling and wanting more from their lives than they were getting.

## Rejection of school ethos

Many students talked about a realisation of having 'wasted' their opportunities in mainstream education, though for different reasons:

**Denise** for example, who is 42 and a divorced mother of three is in her second year of a social science access course. She felt cheated by having 'failed' the 11+ and gone to a secondary modern school:

> *I felt very cheated by that. I hadn't got the qualifications or any sort of education. I went to a secondary modern school in Cambridge and when I look back on it, I was far brighter than the kids around me and I was bored. I rebelled. I didn't work at school and I put my energy into creating disturbances. In the guide company, I was mixing with all these grammar school girls and holding my own confidently. I think that fed my anger and my feeling of disappointment and rebellion that the system was crap .....*

**Faith,** who is 32, married with a child, is a student enrolled on a social science access course at a local college, after which she is hoping to go to university. She left school at the minimum leaving age, rejecting academic education and trained to be a model, subsequently working as an air hostess:

> *Faith: I did quite well at school, I got six O levels and then my Dad wanted me to go to college. My dad always said education is the keyword. And I thought, 'Oh no, I'll be a model'. So I just ignored it completely and went off and did all the glamorous things I'd always wanted to do.*
> *I actually tried to go college just as I was doing my modelling, and I think that was more because I thought I'd be a student and a model 'cos it sounded good - not because I actually really wanted to go back to college. And I actually remember sitting in a Sociology class when I was about eighteen and I just thought, 'This is such a load of bollocks. I can't believe how pathetic this class is.' Now I'm doing exactly the same thing now that I was then, but I find it so interesting. I think it was just that then I wasn't interested and I didn't have a thirst for learning and education. But I do realise now and I just think it's so important. It's changed me completely.*

**Ursula** is 32, single with no dependents. She is enrolled on the first year of a science foundation course which is franchised out from one of the local universities. She appeared to have had better educational opportunities in her youth than the average

child, but her obvious dislike of the school was threaded through the whole interview. She links her lack of achievement and fulfilment with her early school experiences.

> *Ursula: I just messed about at school. And I didn't work hard enough.*
> *I went to a dreadful school which I hated. It was an all girls school*
> *and I couldn't stand it.*
> *I started at eleven 'cos you have to take an entrance exam - it was one*
> *of these Girls Public Day School Trust schools. So you had to take this*
> *entrance exam and I took the entrance exam and went there because*
> *my elder sister went there as well. I was just in the wrong environment.*
> *It was all very disciplined, it was all very, kind of, 'Miss Jean Brodie'*
> *style and I just hated it.*
> *I did O levels and stayed on to do my A levels but I failed them because*
> *I messed about and didn't do anything. I just hated the school and I*
> *wanted to get out. My approach to things was totally different. I just*
> *wanted to get a job. So I applied to do nursing. My dad was a doctor*
> *as well, so it was, kind of a medicine type thing.*
> *I think my basic school education was a lot of the problem of why I*
> *didn't go to university when I was younger. I think that's had quite a*
> *lasting effect on my education.*
>
> *I just think it's a false environment to bring children up in. You either*
> *get totally insular or you become a rebel and I rebelled. I wasn't on*
> *drugs or anything ..... I suppose I rebelled against the system in a lot of*
> *ways, yes. I can't tell you how much I hated it. I mean, I just didn't do*
> *any work because I didn't like it and - it was dreadful. I think that was*
> *it, you know. I think it does have a lot to do with why you don't go (to*
> *university).*
> *Go and have a look at this school and you'll see! Go in there and talk*
> *to them and the people and see what they say.*

Not all students made such clear links between their early educational experiences and their return to learning. For many women, there was a growing realisation that their potential was unfulfilled.

## Comparison with significant others

For Denise, Nola and Rhona for example, there had been a growing questioning of their defined ability in relation to others:

> *Denise: When my children were little, I got involved with a voluntary*
> *organisation and I mixed with educated women and I realised that*
> *there was no difference between their intelligence and my intelligence.*
> *I realised I could do more than what my education had led me to*
> *believe I could do .....*

**Nola,** who is 36, married with two children is enrolled on a social science access course at a local college. She very quickly became bored with each job she had, and then resentful of both pay and status differences between her and the professionals with whom she worked:

> *Nola: I just got so bored, it was always, 'I need more than this. I am better than this. I can do better than this.' Then when I got to the solicitors' office and I thought 'I can do this'. I have always had in the back of my mind, if I had the chance, I would like to do a law degree. I've always seen these other people and thought 'I could do that'. Especially in London, my boss used to give me all his jobs and go 'Nola, could you do this, could you do that', and I used to think 'Why are you getting paid all this money, and I am sitting here checking deeds and things for you?'*

**Rhona** is 49, and enrolled on a full-time humanities access course. She is married and up to the birth of her son, who is now 10, had done secretarial work and became a Personal Assistant which involved much travel and responsibility. She told me she began to think about her own education when she realised that she was confusing intelligence with education:

> *Rhona: When I worked with all these graduates, I thought this is brilliant you know, they're so fantastic, they're so educated and they're so clever and I used to think that for a long time. I respected them more because I think I respect people who are intelligent, like my friend Diane. But she's just well educated and that set me thinking about 10 years ago, she's just well educated, and she's no more intelligent than me ......*

When the students did return to education, their direction ranged from 'water testing' - a tentative exploration of what was being offered - to a clear objective in terms of specific courses.

## Water testing

Denise is one of those students who return to education was very tentative. She knew she wanted to return to learning, but was unsure of courses:

> *Denise: I was just looking round all the time for something that was right for me. So I went on a couple of taster days ..... I think I came back wondering am I bright, am I deceiving myself, you know? Is this a possibility?. I didn't have a plan as such .....*

Denise contrasts clearly with Annabel who is in her second year of NVQ in Motor Mechanics.

## Better qualifications

**Annabel** is 30, single with no children. She is studying part-time in her second year to gain her NVQ in Motor Mechanics:

> *Annabel: I need the qualification really ..... I did think I'd learn something as well. Now I'm just here for the qualification. I wanted the practical and the learning, so I have more confidence to go out for jobs.*

Like Annabel, many women, at least initially in the interview, linked their return to education with better qualifications and ultimately what they felt would be a better job. This was regardless of whether the women had recently been in the job market or had been out of it for some time.

## A more stimulating job

For instance, in order to study again, some women had actually given up a job which they found unfulfilling. Faith and Sam are two examples of this.

**Faith** is 32, married with one child aged 2½. She gave up her well-paid job as an air stewardess with British Airways in order to return to study on a social science access course:

> *Faith: I used to be an air stewardess ..... for five years for British Airways - long haul. A brilliant job, well paid, went everywhere in the world but, you know, not very mind stimulating. I think you get to a stage in your life ..... I didn't want to be a sixty year old stewardess because, you know, you can work up until you're about sixty, for British Airways, but I'd always wanted to educate myself but never really thought about it, and I don't know, it was like a turning point in my life really.*
> *The job I was doing wasn't stimulating my mind and I think, when you get a bit older your child makes you realise, you know, what can you offer your child? And I thought, 'I'm either going to have to work like on a counter, like in Woolworth's, to give him money - because I couldn't foresee me doing that job for a long time you see. And I thought, well no because I want to do a better job and the only way to get a better job is to educate myself really. So - I want to be a psychologist!*

**Sam** is 26 and living with her partner in a stable relationship. She gave up her job as a medical secretary to study on the foundation year of a four-year science degree:

*Sam: I'd worked as a medical secretary for 6 years and I was getting
a bit frustrated with my job, lots of changes happening within the
Health Service and in the department I worked in and I was getting just
more and more fed up doing the same thing and not being sort of
appreciated for what you do, and not thought of as having the brain
power ..... I really enjoyed the job for about the first four years but
then I sort of became unsettled and thought well, I can cope with a bit
more than this, looking round at women I was working with who were
sort of 40 and still having to run round after all these people and I
was thinking oh don't want to be doing that, I want to have a bit more
say, have a bit more out of my job when I get to their age.*

Both Faith and Sam were well trained for the job which they were doing and had skills which were transferable into similar occupations. However, both felt that once acquired, this skill took little mental effort to apply and they were looking to education to lead to an occupation which taxed their mental capacities more.

This need for mental stimulation was also mentioned by a number of other students, for example Ursula, Joy and Olga, who had lost their jobs through redundancy and rather than look for other similar jobs, saw this as an opportunity to further their education.

Ursula left her hated school and trained as a nurse, but could only get night work when she finished her training, so she left after 8 months. She returned to college and trained as a medical secretary, but hated the sexist and superior attitude of the doctors and again left. Her last occupation was with a travel/time-share company, from which she was made redundant, but again she mentioned the sexist and superior attitudes of male staff towards secretaries. I asked her what she disliked about being a medical secretary:

*Ursula: Oh people treat you horrible. Shocking. They treat you like
that as a nurse as well. You're a paid slave. People think that just
because you're a nurse, you can make them cups of tea and wait on
them ..... Terrible. And then you get all this between doctors and
nurses - the doctors treat you very badly ..... they treat you like an
inferior.*

J:       Do you think that's because you're a woman?

*I think it's because you're a woman and because you're a nurse or a
secretary. Definitely. If you had more males in nursing and in
secretarial you wouldn't get treated that way. If they were the people
that were the breadwinners, they wouldn't treat you that way.*

She had also found this attitude in her last job:

*Men have a funny attitude towards secretaries I find. I think perhaps
they use it to make themselves look better in a way. 'cos a boss and a*

*secretary relationship's a bit like a husband and wife sort of thing.*
*And they treat you very much in the same vein, don't they? But they do*
*have a very subservient attitude and I hated it. I couldn't stand it. I*
*hated somebody treating me like some glossy little doll. So that's why*
*I got out of that one - basically. I wouldn't do it again.*

Ursula's focus on the negative aspect of her secretarial jobs seemed to be the motivating factor in her return to education when she experienced redundancy, unlike the next two students who focused on the positive opportunities which education would bring.

## Fulfilment of a long-held ambition

Joy and Olga were less specific than this with their reasons for returning to education and emphasised the positive aspects of education rather than the negative aspects of their last job, telling me that returning to learning was a long-held ambition.

**Joy's** redundancy gave her the opportunity to do something which has been at the back of her mind for some time. She is 38 and studying on the foundation year of a four-year combined studies course which has been franchised out to a local college from one of the nearby universities. She has held a variety of secretarial/ administrative posts all her working life, moving to this area from the south for her partner's education. She supported him financially through his three-year university course and he is now very supportive of her decision to take the opportunity to do a degree course:

*Joy: Well its been something that I would do one day for years and*
*years and years and I was made redundant at the end of May and I had*
*a couple of friends who had done the access course and I came for an*
*interview and I discovered that it might be possible to get a grant and*
*it just all fell into place. It was just like something made sense saying*
*this is the way, so that's why it all came together at the right time, I*
*think if I'd not have been made redundant it would still be something*
*that I was thinking I would do later, something to be forced into really*
*..... I had done a whole range of admin. jobs that had been interesting*
*but I realised that I was never going to get any further than I had doing*
*the work that I had been doing. I wanted the interest. I could see that*
*it enriches your life in all sorts of ways and I wanted that.*

**Olga** is 40 and has done a variety of jobs. She has a clear career aim to become a nurse, has enrolled on the science access course at a local college and been offered a place on the nursing degree at a local university. She sees her redundancy as an opportunity which came at the right time for her, since her three children are no longer dependent upon her

*Olga: I was made redundant. I actually worked in adult education for seven years and then, for various reasons, I came out of adult education and went into the building trade, in sales and then as a buyer, and I was made redundant a year last February. I'd always wanted to get into nursing and it's never, ever been feasible before, because I've always needed to be out earning. And suddenly it was possible, when the boys were grown up and we can just about manage on one income ..... I talked to various people who said, well, you know, why don't you go for a degree? I've got a place on a degree course starting here in September.*

As Olga points out, an important factor for her was that her children were no longer dependent and she was in a reasonable financial position, but for those women with caring responsibilities, especially small children, the situation was different.

## Helping with family finances

The students in this situation told me that it was virtually impossible to get a job which either fitted in with school hours or paid enough to enable them to purchase child-care. Many linked their return to education with the family budget. They mentioned that better qualifications would give them a better paid job and they would be better able to contribute to the family income when the children were older.

**Colette** is 31, married with two children aged 4 and 6. She is enrolled on an EEC funded course, Women into Management and Technology at a local college:

*Colette: I think basically it was so that I could get a job, you know once I got the kids off my hands ..... Really it does boil down to your money situation as well doesn't it I mean the life we live today is very money oriented and you do struggle on one wage with two small children; you want to do things you can't.*

**Gloria,** who is 38, married with two children aged 11 and 9, is a student on the foundation year of a four-year degree in science. Gloria's economic reason had a slightly different angle:

*Gloria: If I can get a decent job at the end of this then Jim can go off and fly Kilimanjaro or something like that - which is what he wants to do. So I will be the provider then....*

## Therapy

For some women, there was a therapeutic component in their return to education. This was mentioned directly by some students. For example, both Heather and Liz mentioned this aspect of their return to education.

**Heather** is 39, married with three young children and is enrolled on the same full-time course as Colette. She told me that the course acted as therapy for her after the recent and unexpected death of both her parents:

> *I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't got this to look*
> *forward to and to occupy me ..... I'm really grateful that I'd got it, that*
> *I were on the course and that I come on it and I just sunk myself into it.*

**Liz's** experience were more directly personal - she has a severe back problem. Her story is told in the next section, but it is worth noting here what she says about the therapeutic nature of her return to learning:

> *I used to think, in a few years you're going to be in a wheelchair, or*
> *something like that. I used to dwell on it an awful lot whereas I don't*
> *now. It hasn't gone away. That problem hasn't gone away but I can*
> *see other things, I can see beyond it.*

# A shift in explanations

By chance, as I have outlined in chapter four, I began one interview in a different way from the others. I asked the question 'why have you come back into education?' later rather than at the beginning of the interview and got another answer: 'I'm doing it for myself really'. So was this a different response because it was a different person, or was it because I had asked the question at a different point? I decided to ask the same question twice - first near the start and then later in the interview and found that most women made links with employment initially, but then told me later that they were doing it for themselves.

## Confidence and status

Nola told me initially that she was aiming for a degree because she did not want to go back into the same clerical work but lower down the scale, which she felt was inevitable, having been out of the job market for a few years. However, she went on, later in the interview to talk about confidence, and the esteem which she felt a degree would give her:

> *Nola: I left school early, and I have not got any qualifications, and I*
> *think you lose an awful lot of confidence as well, especially with not*
> *working. This is a challenge for me. This is a hurdle I have got to get*
> *over. It's like amateur dramatics, you know, because that's a challenge*
> *for me - I had to push myself to say "You have got to do it, you have*
> *just got to walk on stage there and say your lines. I pushed myself and*
> *I did it. That's what this is as well, I just view it as a challenge. I*

*mean, it all boosts your confidence and it all makes you feel much better.*

*There's another thing why I thought I would like to get a degree, because I always feel that for those people that haven't gone on to higher education, they always have this 'chip on their shoulder' sort of attitude. I just feel that if I do go and I do get a degree, it's like a lot of my friends in Edinburgh, I mean they are solicitors, and I look at them, and we sit and we chat, and I think 'you're no more intelligent than me but because you have got this degree and because of the job that you are doing, people assume that you are.'*

Implicit in what Nola says is her need to prove her ability, which is a sentiment verbalised by many of students, either directly, as a reason for returning, or indirectly, in the expression of both relief and pleasure that their ability was being proved on the course.

## Proof of ability

Ursula, Denise and Grace are just three of the students who made clear links with wanting to prove their ability.

Ursula's return to education was directly linked with her desire for a more fulfilling job, but she also wants to prove to herself that she has the ability - not to do the academic work which she was quite confident about, but whether she had the stickability:

*Ursula: I wanted to do it for myself as well really. I mean, it wasn't just for a career, to get a better job. I didn't think, 'Oh well I want to earn loads of money so I'll go and get a degree.' I did it a lot for myself really. Just to show myself that I could do it 'cos I knew I could. I knew that academically I've got the capability to do it, I just, sort of questioned whether I'd got the motivation and the commitment really ...*

Denise enrolled on an access course as a tentative testing of her ability:

*I think I came back thinking 'am I bright or am I deceiving myself?' I've always wanted a degree ..... it's no good having these aspirations if I can't do the work. I knew I could talk articulately; I knew that I could write articulately, but I didn't know whether I could remember facts ..... an access course was a gentle way into education. After the first half year I suppose, I realised that I could do this very easily and it was wonderful to realise that.*

**Grace** is 46 and has been divorced for ten years. For this student, proving her ability is also linked with proving to her ex-husband that she could survive. Her return to

education started with basic typing courses, aiming to get a marketable skill, but it seems that her horizons are broadening. Although she talks about getting a job, she has only seriously applied for two, both part-time, at the centre she attends for her classes. She clearly gets much satisfaction from knowing she has some academic ability, and again, confidence is mentioned:

> *Grace: I'm divorced and I knew eventually I'd have to get a job and I first started doing a typing course ..... I didn't know there were all these different courses then ..... Now I know that I've got ability to do things, I'm not an idiot ..... I'm not a dumb blonde ..... nobody can take off me what I've learnt. Jill (the course tutor) mentioned about university and I thought, 'well, there's another thing to think about'.*

> *I've found out I can do things that I didn't know I could do before. I think I've got more confidence now than what I've ever had really. My ex-husband said, 'Oh you'll never survive on your own'. I thought, 'well I'll show him'.*

Like Grace, many students then made clear links between their past lives, experiences and their return to education. They saw it as an opportunity to change at least a part of their life, whatever their circumstances and to establish a new identity.


## A public as well as a private identity

In particular, many women with partners and domestic responsibilities saw it as giving them a public identity separate from the private identity located in their caring and housekeeper role. Moira, Olive and Edna expressed some of the sentiments which were reflected in most of the interviews with this group of students:

**Moira**, who is 47 and married with two adult sons is enrolled on a social science access course. She gave up her paid employment when she became pregnant and has not worked seriously for twenty years:

> *Moira: I suddenly thought, 'Well, I know I'm capable of more than hoovering and cleaning up day after day after day, but I don't know what I'm capable of, so I'll go and try. Just see what is in there, or if there is anything there!' 'Cos you want to just spark it up again if there is anything there. I felt as if there was a little bit of something in there that I wanted to fulfil, but I wasn't sure what it was. I couldn't put my finger on it and say, 'that's what I need', but I knew there was something I needed.*


**Olive** is 31 and married with three children. She is enrolled on the first year of a four year combined studies degree course, franchised out from a local university. Olive,

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whose interview was noted, not recorded, told me that she was *'screamingly bored'* and wanted something other than children to talk about and to. She felt that in the home, she had lost her identity *'I'm Mike's wife, Joe's mum, never me!'* She went on to say that she tried not to let college work interfere with her time with the children but that her work was important and *'Joe told me last week that I was a nicer person since I'd been at college'* - she felt she was a person *'in my own right'.*

Edna is 51, and her husband has had a stroke. She is enrolled on the women's motor vehicle course and told me that her main reason for joining the course was to learn about engines, but this was not the only benefit she gained:

> *Edna: I were learning to drive and I wanted to know how the car worked, it's as simple as that! No, actually it's eased the situation at home because I was getting tied up and a bit depressed I suppose - being in the house all the time. Since my husband had this stroke things just started to build up, you know? I came purposely to learn about the engines and that - but it has eased the situation at home as well. I love getting out of the house. I've met new friends you know, and I'm learning a bit. I like coming and I think, with me coming to college, it gives him that break when the children are at school, for a bit of time on his own. So it gives him that break as well. We're not on top of each other all the time.*
> *Well I mean, for thirty odd years I've been a housewife and mother and I've never been out of the house ..... I enjoy coming out. I mean, I can just come here, do it and go straight back. But I've been out, and I'm enjoying what I'm doing.*

Clearly, with Edna, as with many other women, there are a number of benefits from education. She is gaining knowledge of motor vehicles but in addition she is gaining a 'here and now' benefit from education. It is giving her an identity outside the home, and enjoyment in what she is doing. Many other students talked about this, for example:

Vida is a 35 year old 2nd year university student, married with three children:

> *This university thing is something for me. It didn't belong to Jeremy and it didn't belong to the kids, it's mine ..... often I would go in early and have a coffee and read my book before I was going to a lecture but as I walk through that door its like a physical feeling that I had left everything else behind and this was my world .....*

# Contradictory or complementary explanations?

So why would the students apparently alter the reasons they gave me for returning to education? On the whole, I think there is no contradiction, rather there is an expansion of reasons. Economic reasons and personal reasons are not necessarily mutually exclusive since our status in this society is largely influenced by the type of job we do, but it seems to me that some women initially advanced what could be perceived as a socially acceptable reason for returning to education. In our culture, women are constantly being told, both directly and indirectly to put others' needs before their own. Women are still seen as the primary (and often unpaid) carers - of the young, their partners and the elderly (see amongst many others, Warde & Hetherington 1993, Charles 1993, Nash 1990, Brannen & Moss, 1988) and this is reflected in most institutions of our society and particularly in the benefits system (see for example, Lewis 1993, Maclean & Groves 1991, Williams 1989, Rose 1985, Wilson 1983). It can also clearly be seen in the types of jobs women do - the majority who work outside the home are employed in the caring or service industries (Tables 4.8 & 4.9, Social Trends 1995). The fact that most married women with dependent children, who work outside the home are employed part-time is a reflection of their domestic and caring responsibilities (Table 4.5, Social Trends, 1995). Even though advertising has changed considerably, women are still represented as taking prime responsibility for family care and domestic chores. For example, in both magazines and television, food and washing powder advertisements have a female in the central role of responsibility, where the implication is that whatever else a woman may do, she is still responsible for the everyday, ongoing caring and household chores. Very few men are shown in this position and where they are, they are often shown as inept. This is of course a representation which both reflects and creates a reality - that at least part of women's identity is located in the domestic and caring role. This seems true even when women are in paid employment and hence we have the 'superwoman syndrome' - participate in the public sphere by all means, but the private sphere is still your responsibility (for a good exposition of this, see Newell 1993).

It is perhaps not surprising then that for those women with domestic and caring responsibilities, 'doing it for myself' was construed by the students as a somewhat selfish reason and the economic reasons which were advanced were more socially acceptable reasons to give to a relative stranger. However, once the women felt more relaxed in the discussion and an element of trust had been created, they felt more able to give me other, not necessarily mutually exclusive, reasons for their return to education. There is also of course the possibility that in thinking and talking to me about the many issues in their lives, the students became more aware of and were able to verbalise more personal reasons for their return. Robson (1993) maintains that

listening, hearing and empathy create a situation in which people feel safe and comfortable, and are able to be reflective and talk freely:

> *People often derive considerable satisfaction from talking about what they are doing to a disinterested but sympathetic ear. Taking part in a study can often lead to respondents reflecting on their experience in a way they find helpful.*　　　　　　　　　*(Robson 1993, p297)*

# Emerging issues and unexpected findings

It also seems that within the relaxed and non-judgmental structure of the interview, women were willing to address some of the issues which they may not have discussed in a more formal setting, or only recently have begun to think about. One student for example, discussed the possibility of working away from home when she graduated and the negative effects this might have on her marriage. She went on to say that she had not discussed this with her husband, but did not rule out a complete breakdown of her relationship. Another student talked about the possibility of leaving her husband and children, but because of the particular nature of this interview, Colette's story is included in the next chapter.

These students are two of over half of the students who told me of painful life experiences which could be significantly linked with their education, both past and present. This is not what I anticipated would come out of the interview and these stories were certainly unsolicited. Rather it was the loose structure of the interviews and the establishment of an empathy and rapport between the students and myself which allowed these experiences to emerge at different points, as part of the women's story. Sometimes the students made direct, clear and immediate connections between these experiences and their return to education, but in other instances, the associations were indirect and almost casual. This appears to be linked with the nature of the experiences, which ranged across the women's lives in terms of what and when they occurred. Some experiences were rooted in childhood and had major ongoing influences on women's lives, other experiences were more recent and had had different but no less significant effects for the students. For example, women were telling me about things such as mental, physical and sexual abuse; family alcoholism; the death of a child and other family members; teenage pregnancy and divorce.

I was surprised at the way these clearly painful experiences tumbled out with no prompting. I was also both shocked and appalled at the frequency of these stories, which were presented by around half of the women with whom I spoke. Discussion of

the data with colleagues in a variety of professional settings provides anecdotal support for the findings, although there is no published research that I know of in this area. Even so, I would not have expected around half of the students to present these kinds of experiences, but it did raise the question for me of whether there is this frequency in the population generally, or whether women with this type of experience are attracted to education for a particular reason. I have also asked myself the question of whether I have somehow got a special group. One of the ways of answering these questions is to do further and much broader research than that based on colleges and universities in a particular geographical area. What is certain though is that a high proportion of this particular group of mature women students presented, unexpectedly and unsolicited, painful life experiences and made clear links between these experiences and their return to education. The remainder of this chapter focuses on these experiences. Finding a generic term for them however, took a good deal of thought.

## The problem of definition

Initially, I used the word trauma to describe these experiences, since they appear to have had a considerable negative effect on the women, but felt very uncomfortable with the word, since for me it implied almost a 'one-off' occurrence, which in some stories is true, but in others, women have and are coping with ongoing painful experiences. I have spent more than a year trying to think of an alternative word or phrase to describe what the women told me. I have been offered phrases such as 'post-traumatic syndrome' and 'significantly meaningful events', neither of which adequately portray the women's stories.

Wrestling with this issue more recently, I thought about my original reasons for using 'trauma' to describe the women's experiences. My initial use of the word had been linked with the concept of barriers to education - that these experiences destroyed confidence which was a huge barrier for women to get over. I had moved away from this idea and had begun to think of these experiences as perhaps being a motivation for women's return to education, since clear links between the 'traumas' and education were emerging. However, I was still very much defining their experiences within my preconceived framework of barriers. I needed to understand how the women perceived their experiences and what links they were making with education. It seems that I have an almost constant struggle between trying to hold on to some security with the ideas I brought to the research arena and the excitement but uncertainty of negotiating uncharted territory within the grounded theory approach I am taking. My original concept of barriers gave me at least a working structure compared with the insecurity of putting these ideas on one side to broaden my framework. Again I re-

focused my thinking and concentrated on the content of the women's stories. The problem has been to find terminology to adequately reflect the range of ordeals about which the women were telling me. I considered again my use of the word trauma. A good dictionary suggests shock, ordeal or crisis as synonymous with trauma, and some recent reading in psychology defined trauma as the creation of psychological damage which can have lasting effects on lives and may engender a feeling of helplessness, creating an emotional wound. This much wider concept of the word does represent the broad range of the women's stories, so I now seem to have come full circle, but rather than using the word trauma I will use the phrase 'traumatic experiences' to describe what the women told me, since for a number of women these experiences have been ongoing throughout their lives.

## Traumatic experiences - the women's stories

During the initial analysis of the data, I found it very hard to get away from the impact of the stories. Each story was unique, had clearly been painful and had a major impact on the women's lives. I was pulled into the content of the stories, as a woman, as some-one who had also been through some of what they were telling me and also as a past mature student whose return to education was for many reasons other than education itself. I was both angry and hurt for the women and it was difficult to see beyond this to any patterns or groupings in the data. Empathy, I have discovered, is a double-edged sword, both enabling and disabling. I read and re-read the stories and made summaries and notes until the anger and pain began to subside and I began to see some patterns emerging. I made many different attempts at grouping such as using the age of the student; the age at which the experiences occurred; the experiences themselves; the intensity of the experience; the partnered and domestic status of the woman. Although all were important, it was clear from the data that discrete categories were going to be difficult for much of the material. I have finally settled on two broad groupings. The first group is concerned with the impact of major life events or changes, which may have affected the student either directly or indirectly. The second group is concerned with restrictive stultifying experiences - traumatic episodes with lasting and damaging psychological effects. This group is divided into sub-groups: the first group tells the stories of women who talked of painful experiences in their childhood; the second group is concerned with the effects of unplanned pregnancies and to the third group I have given the title 'mega-trauma' because of the nature and ongoing effects of the women's painful experiences. Categorisation in this manner is clearly not the only way of organising the material and a re-working of the data may well produce different structures. What is important to remember though is

that the structure I have used has been drawn out from what the women have said; how they perceive and describe their experiences and the links they make between these experiences and education.

In fact, the students made many links with education. They talked either directly or indirectly about issues of power and control, independence, ability, self-image, self-perception, confidence and fulfilment. Many of these aspects have been touched on already, and indeed confidence and fulfilment are threaded through all the stories, regardless of whether the women spoke of traumatic experiences or not. For me though, the pivotal concept is that of identity, closely interlinked with power and control. It must be pointed out though that few of the students used the actual term 'identity'; this is simply a convenient conceptual basket which I have used to encompass the changes in themselves which the women were describing. It would be useful therefore at this stage, to give a brief outline of what I mean by identity in this context.

## Identity

Identity could be defined as the characteristics by which individuals and groups recognise themselves and are recognised by others. It is a sense of who we are and where we belong in society, and can include among many others, factors such as our sex and gender, race and ethnicity, class, physical and mental attributes, and where we live, both in a neighbourhood sense and in a broader sense, in terms of our nationality. Clearly, there is no single characteristic which makes up our identity, but a multiplicity of elements which may be divided broadly into biological and social influences.

Biological influences can include, for example, our hair, eye and skin colour, our height, our age and our reproductive structure. Biologically, we are defined as men and women, and in our society, as in most others, these differences are embedded in the culturally expected behaviour of the two groups. The students I talked to have a biological identity as women, but their roles as daughter, mother and wife are affected by the cultural norms of this society and are thus part of their social identity. As I have already discussed, the links between the biological and social definitions can be clearly seen when we look at women's caring responsibilities. This social aspect of our identity is influenced from an early age by role models within the family; the attitude of family friends, the neighbourhood and wider society; through the education system, the world of work and so on. In a society where the dominant ideology is patriarchal, and gender differences are deeply embedded, our identities are hugely influenced by what is seen as 'normal' behaviour for both women and men. This is discussed in more detail in chapter seven, within the framework of Walby's six structures of patriarchy, incorporating the women's stories in illustration. Whatever view we take about the

relationship between the influence of others and our own control over the way our identity is defined, there is no doubt that the society in which we live, at all levels, has a great deal of influence over the way we are seen and see ourselves.

For many of the women I talked to, and especially those who told me of painful experiences in their past, there were strong links between some questioning of and resistance to the way in which their identity had been defined; a desire to redefine at least part of it and their return to education.

## Identity and education

The links between identity and education were made in a variety of ways. As some interview extracts have already indicated, it was proof of ability for some students , sometimes associated with a better job, sometimes simply associated with the status which education was perceived as bringing with it. For example, those who were partnered with domestic responsibilities often made links between education and their domestic identity. This sometimes took the form of outright resentment and resistance to it; in other instances it was a desire to be seen as somebody as well as a housewife, wife or mother. For other students, education was linked with a more acceptable self-image or an attempt to shed stigma. The students who mentioned stigma were really talking about the way they saw themselves rather than the way others see them. For example, Alison talked about her feelings of shame at being a teenage unmarried mother - feelings which persist fifteen years after the birth of her daughter. She spoke of a poor self-image and a need to prove to people *'that I had got some worth'*. Gerry talked about the stigma of the sexual abuse she experienced in her childhood, despite the fact that none of her family or friends knows about it. She went on to speak of proving to others that she has some ability and is a worthwhile person. Both these women, along with the majority of students, mentioned that education was *'something for myself'* which implies some form of self-fulfilment and a desire to change something about their lives. For some students there was also intrinsic satisfaction - the pleasure of actually being in education, regardless of the outcome.

For most of the women, education was linked with independence. Regardless of the social or economic position of the student, or her course, this was associated with resistance to the power and control that others have or have had over her identity, in the public and private spheres of her life. Thus, whether this was directly or indirectly verbalised, education can be associated with the desire by many of the women to take charge of at least a part of the content or direction of their own lives. For some of the students, this was a small part of the whole, working within their existing circumstances. For others, it was a major life change, either potential or actual.

The concepts I have mentioned are of course not mutually exclusive, and many of the students mentioned many of the points I have raised. Some students made clear and explicit links with education; other students made less direct but equally clear associations through description rather than analysis. For all students though, education appears to be powerful and a vehicle for their own reasons.

# Part II: Presenting the stories

The two broad categories I have used to organise the women's stories are concerned with general similarities in the nature of the trauma, although the experiences may have been different. Broadly speaking, the first group of students includes women who have experienced major life events which have either been sudden or unexpected, or created dramatic life changes. In the second group the experiences, within restrictive, stultifying relationships, are much more concerned with power and control, either of a personal or a social nature.

I have given a brief outline of the woman's story, with brief background details when she is first mentioned. I have then drawn out the links with education using verbatim material wherever possible. Where it seems logical, I have grouped women in terms of either their experiences, the links they make with education or both. Where this is not possible, the stories stand alone. It must be said though that there is no tidy way to group these students and some stories overlap the different categories. This of course illustrates one of the differences between a positivist and a grounded theory approach.

## The impact of major life events or changes.

A number of students told me of events which had been unexpected and/or had created a major change in their lives. These events may have affected students either directly - for example divorce or serious injury, or indirectly - for example, the death of close family members. I have chosen not to include redundancy in this section although some students did experience it. This is because none of the students with whom I spoke reported it as being particularly traumatic for them, although for Leila, it was one of a number of problems she faced, and her story is included in the later group. However, there is a clear parallel between redundancy and the kinds of life events I have included in this section, in that they both appeared to make the woman re-assess her life and what she wanted from it. Leila, Olga and Joy used their loss of employment as an opportunity to do something different with their lives, whereas for Heather it was the death of her parents which made her consider her position.

Heather

Heather is 39, married with three young children. She had a basic gendered education, leaving school at 15 with no official qualifications to work initially in routine office work, then in retailing. She is enrolled on a full-time EEC funded course, Women into Management & Technology, at a local college.

Heather's parents were both retired from full-time work when her children were born, and took a regular and active interest in their upbringing, with her father visiting every day to help with the children whilst Heather worked part-time in a local factory. Her father became ill with a brain tumour in September 1991 and died late on Christmas Eve the same year. She talked of the dilemma of having to choose between staying with her father at the hospital, knowing that his death was imminent, and going home to be with her children at Christmas. She told me that her mother persuaded her to return home and she still carries guilt feelings about not being with her father when he died:

> *Heather: he died in St. Lukes, and we were all up there from dinner*
> *time. And my mum sent me home, 'cos she said, 'You know your dad,*
> *he'd want you to be with kids, and there's nowt you can do anyway.*
> *You can come again tomorrow.' And I think deep down I knew that I*
> *weren't going to see him again, but I were torn. Because I know my*
> *dad would have wanted me to be at home with t'kids because my kids*
> *were like a big part of my dad's life. I mean, he used to idolise them,*
> *particularly t' big one, and so I were torn. But I went home, I went*
> *home. I've got a lot of regrets about that because I weren't with him*
> *when he died.*
> *And I were really horrible to my mum, because I blamed her. Now two*
> *years on I know it weren't her fault, it were nobody's fault what were*
> *the matter with him, but you just lash out .....*

Heather's guilt feeling were compounded when her mother became ill with a brain tumour three weeks after the death of her father and was hospitalised, dying in the following December. She felt much responsibility for her mother's condition since she agreed to the unsuccessful operation:

> *..... then three weeks after, my mum collapsed with the same thing and*
> *we had to decide whether my mum had t'operation or not ..... she*
> *ended up a cabbage and she was in hospital for ten months. Although*
> *you do what you think's right at the time ..... you can't help thinking*
> *'I've done this to her. She's like this because I've said yes for her to*
> *have t'operation'. She just, she didn't know anybody, she didn't speak,*
> *she couldn't, she couldn't swallow, she were on a ventilator, she ..... it*
> *were just awful, her being like that.*

It is not only the loss of both parents, but also the circumstances in which they died, which was difficult for Heather:

> *So really, for fifteen months, from September 1991 through to*
> *December 1992, we visited t'hospital every day - with the exception of*
> *about three weeks between my dad dying and my mum collapsing. It's*
> *been hard, and particularly for me ..... by the time I had my kids my*
> *parents had retired, so my life and my kids lives sort of revolved round*
> *my parents. They were always there for me you know? If ever I needed*
> *them for anything. So it's been hard, it's been terrible in fact, bearing*
> *in mind we'd only lost my dad three weeks before - and we'd nursed my*
> *dad through dying ..... he were just dying slowly, and when you've got*
> *to sit back and there's nothing you can do, it's hard.*

Heather's painful experiences made her take stock of her life. She indicates two clear links with education.

> *I just couldn't cope with what was happening to my dad and I was*
> *taken ill myself. And I think I just sort of sat back and took a good*
> *look at myself and I thought, 'Well there's got to be more for me than*
> *this, this job'.*

She makes two clear links between her story and education. One is the long-term goal of self-fulfilment through a more satisfying job:

> *At that time I were thirty seven, and I thought, 'well, my kids are at*
> *school, and I've got, like, five days a week - from nine o'clock while*
> *three o'clock - to do something for myself.' So I thought well, I've got*
> *another twenty odd years really, that I can work, and why not try and*
> *do something that I enjoy doing. If I've got a chance of getting a better*
> *job, and doing something that I enjoy doing, then it's got to be a lot*
> *better for me, and for the rest of them in long run. I started January*
> *1993, so me mum had just died, just before I started .....*

For Heather, the other link with education is therapeutic:

> *I really don't know what I'd have done if I hadn't got this to look*
> *forward to and to occupy me. I just sort of sunk myself into it. I've got*
> *this big hole in my life and I'm also trying to protect ' kids 'cos I know*
> *they're hurting and when your kids are hurting you hurt, and its even*
> *worse because you can't do owt about it ..... maybe I didn't grieve*
> *enough ..... Sometimes I feel I'm going crackers - in my head'.*

Her recent trauma tended to colour Heather's interpretation of most of what we discussed and I could not seem to find a way round this, which is not surprising really since her parents appear to have been a major supporting element in her life. Her painful experiences have clearly been influential in assessing the way she sees herself

and what she wants from her life.   A brain tumour had a similar influence on the next student, but in her case it was her own operation.

## Deidre

**Deidre** is 48, divorced with one son who lives at home periodically. She had an elementary, gendered, gender-segregated education and left school at 15 to work in retailing. She has not worked since her marriage at 21. Like Heather, she is enrolled on the EC funded Women into Management and Technology course at a local college. Significant factors in Deidre's decision to return to education appear to be her divorce in 1986 and an operation for a brain tumour in 1988:

> *Deidre:   I'm divorced and consequently I was unemployed and there was no money coming in.  When I left school I had no qualifications whatsoever.  I haven't got any skills for anything and jobwise I can't do much anyway, you know? I get maintenance from my ex-husband, if you can call it that, 10p a year.  I'm afraid I told him where to put it. Also in 1988 I had an operation for a brain tumour - and people tend to treat me with kid gloves.  You know?  'Since she's had this operation there must be something wrong with her, you know, it's affected her brain and she can't learn properly.'  So I'm really doing it for myself.*

Deidre makes three links with education.  The one she emphasises is the testing of her ability:

> *Deidre:   Well, for long enough now I've wanted to come back into education.  I've been unemployed for quite a long time now and I wanted to really know if I could actually do anything academic-wise. That was my main one.*
>
> *I think I'd like to take a subject up that would involve maths and physics.  Maths I'm not doing too well in, so I do extra maths, but the physics I'm getting about 60%, so I'm not doing too bad there.   I can't decide whether I want to go into further, higher education, or just go for employment.  It really depends on how well I do on this course.   I wanted to know how well I'd done up to Christmas before I applied. From what I can gather, I'm not doing too bad really.*

Deidre seems to be testing her ability very tentatively, not wanting to take the next step before she is sure that she can do it.  Testing her ability is also tied up with confidence, and although Deidre's confidence is growing, her hold on it is somewhat tenuous:

> *The confidence is my problem, the lack of it.*
> *There's lots of areas I could improve on, but I'm a bit more confident than when I first started on this course.  I mean, if I'd wanted to ask somebody anything in a shop or anywhere I used to creep in and this little voice used to come out - now I'll just walk in and ask.  You know,*

*if we get set an assignment and we've got to collect things I will go in*
*and it doesn't bother me as much now.*

Finally, the way Deidre sees herself is also changing. Both her confidence and her self image appear to have been negatively affected by her marriage:

*Well, sometimes in married life you'll get your partner that he's always*
*telling you that you're the idiot of the family and you can't do this and*
*you can't do that - and after about nineteen years you eventually*
*believe it - you know?*
*And you think, 'Well happen I can't do this and I can't do that', you*
*know?*
*So it's only really since I've separated from him and also I've had the*
*operation that I've thought, 'Well why can't I do this and why can't I*
*do that?' and I'm beginning to see myself differently.*

This student was very quiet and I found it very difficult to get her to talk in a relaxed way. After the tape was switched off, she said that I'd probably got much more interesting things from some of the other women who had husbands and small children to care for and homes to run. Her reticence was not, I felt, due to unwillingness, rather a lack of confidence which led her to assume that she didn't really have anything important to say. However, there are clear indications that Deidre is getting much more from her course than a paper qualification.

Unlike Deidre, the next student has only recently left the job market, but the two students are similar in that Liz is also beginning to see herself differently.

## Liz

Liz is aged 35, married with a young daughter. She had a basic education and left with few qualifications. She took a secretarial course and worked as a secretary for three years before becoming a nurse. She is enrolled on the second year of a full-time social science access course at a local college and has a conditional offer at one of the universities in the area to study history. She qualified as a nurse in 1981 but had a serious spinal operation in 1986 and had to give up nursing, much against her desire, last year. She told me that it was very likely that she would be wheelchair bound in a few years' time. I asked her why she chose to come back into education:

*Liz: ..... forced upon me in a way. I qualified as a nurse in 1981, and*
*then in 1986 I had an operation to remove one of my lumbar discs -*
*and at that time I chose to go back to nursing - which really wasn't the*
*cleverest thing to do. Then, at the beginning of last year I started to*
*have trouble again with my back and I had to go to bed for a week, and*
*it frightened me, I think. I knew I'd got to come out of nursing*
*eventually, so I thought about coming back to school but I think it isn't*

*until something like becoming ill and having to go to bed, and
realising that this is the time that it's got to stop. And plus, my GP
said 'you know, you're not doing yourself any favours, eventually you'll
get worse if you don't stop now'. That's what really made me think it
was time to come back to school.*

J       So why education?

*Liz: For a long while I was thinking what I was going to do. If this
hadn't happened with my back I would have stayed in nursing because
it's what I really wanted to do from leaving school. I felt like I'd been
retired too soon ..... I thought I'd got to use this nursing knowledge for
something ..... but I came on this course, I thought I might find
something else (and) it develops your personal life as well.*

When I asked Liz what she meant by this last remark, she told me that she felt she had
changed considerably whilst she had been on the course. She makes three key links
with education: independence, confidence and identity.

Her independence is not of the economic variety, since she told me that if her husband
wasn't supportive, she would not be able to do the course. She is now financially
dependent upon him, for the first time since their marriage and she will not get a grant
at university because of the level of his income. She told me that this was not a
problem but she doesn't like it, although at this stage she doesn't see how she can do
anything about it. She has however become independent in other ways:

*I've met an awful lot more friends here that I'm far more friendly with.
Before, his friends were my friends and the parties and the things, it
was all based around his work. So coming here, breaking away, I've
made an awful lot more friends of my own and got a bit of a social life
going I think.*

Her confidence has also grown:

*I don't put up with things like I used to. I think I probably stand up for
myself a bit better now than I ever did before ..... and, it's like having
the confidence to stand up and talk ..... at the beginning I would have
said no because I'm just not that sort of person, but it doesn't worry
me now.*

Liz's identity was clearly tied up with being a nurse - a job which she obviously enjoyed
and reluctantly gave up. The possibility of being a wheelchair user seemed to play a
large part in her thinking, but since she has started the access course, she is able to see
beyond this:

*I used to worry an awful lot, especially about my back problem, it used
to worry me a great deal, looking on the black side I suppose ..... You
get to this stage and you think well there is something else I can do,*

*and it doesn't end there. I've just been probably looking on the black
side.*

I asked her why she has chosen the course she planned to take at a local university.
Her response links identity and self-fulfilment:

> *I want to do it because I want to do it. Because it's for me really. I'll
> worry about what I'm going to do with it when I've got it. If that makes
> sense?*

Liz's major concern seems to have been the loss of her identity both as a nurse and an
able-bodied person. She is addressing both these issues through her return to
education, but she also talks of benefit through some social independence and an
increased confidence.

## Summary

These three students then, Heather, Deidre and Liz met different major events in their
lives which created a watershed and precipitated an examination of who and what they
were. Of course, many of us have similar experiences as we get older, and may make
some re-assessment of ourselves, but not all of us decide to come back into education.
Why they chose education as opposed to other vehicles for changing their lives is not
within the parameters of this research, but what is important are the links which the
women make between their lives and their return to learning. For all three women, the
links with education are in terms of identity, through a better job, a testing of ability, or
a fear of disability. Deidre and Liz particularly talked of an increase in their confidence.
For all of them, education has been therapeutic, though not necessarily in the same
way; it was something to occupy and stretch their mental capacity, albeit for different
reasons.

Neither Heather nor Liz presented personal relationships as an issue which had led to
their return to education. Deidre though, did imply that her marriage had been
restrictive - her husband did not want her to work outside the home and continually
told her that she was not very bright. This type of experience links her with the
following students on whose lives controlling and repressive personal relationships, as
well as social influences, have had a major effect.

# Restrictive, stultifying experiences

The women in this group, which is divided into the three sub-sections of 'experiences rooted in childhood', 'unplanned pregnancies' and 'mega-trauma', presented what might be defined as traumatic experiences in the psychological definition - the creation of psychological damage which can have lasting effects. These experiences often took the form of interpersonal oppression and control, many of which have had severe, lasting and often ongoing effects on the life and identity of the student. So it is not just the trauma which is important, but the impact of the traumatic experiences too. Sometimes the experience has had a direct personal impact on the identity of the woman, as with Dilys, who presented her early family life as a painful experience, or Gerry, who was subject to sexual abuse. Sometimes though, the effect has been indirect, where the trauma has not necessarily been because of the experience itself, but because of the stigma attached to it by society. For example, several of the women were pregnant unmarried teenagers. Two of them, Alison and Bryony, mentioned specifically the impact of the social disapprobation of their pregnancy, not only on their lives, but also on their identity.

# i) Experiences rooted in childhood

Most of the traumatic experiences which the women reported have some roots in what happened in their childhood years and many of them reported a restrictive and controlling parent. For Gloria, Alison and Leila it was a father; for Dilys though, the problem was her mother. Experiences were by no means restricted to life within a family and Vida, Aurora and Alison talked of wider social influences on their lives. Some of the students had later painful experiences too and Aurora, Leila and Alison particularly go on to talk about these. This sections starts with Vida's story. She is one of those who told me of unpleasant early experiences, especially in her education, which had an effect on her life.

## Vida

**Vida is** 37, married, with three children. She is in the second year of a social science dual honours degree at a local university.

Her early education was very fragmented. Largely due to her father's occupation in the forces, she attended 10 schools, including a boarding school for two years. She verbalised a dislike of boarding school but recognised that it provided some stability in

her education. Most of her secondary education was in the UK, where she and her sister and brother experienced some cultural racism because her mother was German. She told me that she was less affected by this than her siblings were, but she contradicts this somewhat:

> *Vida: My mother took my brother to the primary school and the stupid teacher said 'we've got a little German boy here'. Well he never lived it down. He was a nazi and all the rest of it, but you know what kids are like - really cruel, so I'm sure that must affect us. We always got that over here but you get used to it .....*

She dealt with the racism and constant moving by making herself popular in two ways, firstly by being good at sport:

> *I would find out where the sports room was, I knew I was good at it, but yes it was a conscious effort ..... We went back over to Germany and it was great being back with people like yourself. I always felt more comfortable in the army schools because they were people like you and there is a difference and they understood .....*

and secondly by being one of the crowd:

> *We went to Leeds and we were there for 18 months so I was about 13 or 14 while I was there and I went off the rails a bit ..... I don't know whether I would have done that anyway or what but .....*

Vida's experiences in this school were not like her previous ones and she was concerned that she might be seen as 'different' from the others:

> *I can remember leaning out of this window at school and talking about VD and me just knowing I didn't know what VD was and I'm thinking 'God don't let them ask me a question' because I didn't know and I would have been so embarrassed and the other thing was that the first day at that school there was a lot of this lads pulling the girls clothes off - that kind of thing. It wasn't attempted rape or anything like that but I can remember being extremely upset about it and I can remember this girl called Francesca saying 'don't worry about it, it always happens it's always one of our turns, they all sort of mess about - see what bra you're wearing and all this kind of thing'. So it was different to boarding school and very different to any of the schools I'd been to.*

Vida's group membership led her into early sexual adventures. When this came to light, she feels she was treated very badly as a female, with her personal identity violated by adults who had control over her:

> *There was one lad had a party. His parents had gone to Majorca. Big party, loads of cider - people ended up in bed with each other. There were kids younger than me and one girl, her parents called her bluff*

*and accused her. She gave the whole game away for everybody and the police called round the house. That was awful, they took my passport away - kept coming back - had to write a statement. Really horrible, there was a policewoman there as well, but it was a really horrible experience and the girls were really dragged through it and had to go for a virginity test. I can remember the bloke who did the internal with my mother there who was absolutely in tears and all the rest of it because I'd failed it. The whole school knew about it. There was this ink we couldn't get off the passport and it was quite horrible. All the lads were gathered down the police station and sort of warned keep it tucked in until they were 16 but the girls were really dragged through it.*

*It was over the holiday time and I can remember going back and being really embarrassed and just knowing that the teachers knew because the school had been informed. It didn't actually hit the papers or go to court in the end but we were threatened with all of that but it was a big thing, not so much for me but for my parents.*

She speculates on whether *'going off the rails'* was simply to be one of a crowd and reflected her need for a group identity:

*Whether that would have happened anyway because maybe I'm just that kind of person or whether it was all linked up to moving schools and all this settling and wanting to be accepted doing what every one else is doing because it was that kind of school because they were all very worldly wise and I wasn't and I sort of jumped off a cliff to join them. I think really so.*

At this point she talks of her father's violence and although she appears to play it down, she speculates on her resistance to his control:

*I was just so upset because my dad was always bit handy with undoing his belt and giving us a good ..... I've had bruises across my backside and my legs. If lads came they had to wait by the gate, they weren't allowed up to the door - very strict on that count so perhaps that had some encouragement in me doing that ..... I continued to be off the rails a little bit or be a little bit wild but then I sat for my O levels and I got five, then started A levels and decided that I wanted to be a nurse. I can remember when I told my dad across the table I was packing it in and he just slapped me across my face once and then he said you're staying and I said I'm not. I stuck to my guns.*

Clearly, Vida's early school and home life were fragmented and her experiences painful. It is interesting that she constantly tried to explain her behaviour as she was talking to me. She qualified as a nurse, and after her marriage and three children, continued to work on a part-time basis. However, she was becoming increasingly frustrated and disillusioned with nursing because of the lack of promised training opportunities. She

also talked about the competing demands which had been made on her by her roles in the public world of work and in the private world of her roles as wife, mother and housewife:

> *Vida: They were very much into nurse education and they promised me that I could go on some courses, but this just wasn't coming .....*
> *I thought 'sod it you (nursing) are not the miracle I want'. I've given a lot of my life to nursing and midwifery and worked hard.*
> *..... partly, the nursing -you're giving something of yourself all the time. If it's not to your patients it's to your children, it's to your husband. They're all competing for what you can give them .....*
> *I'm going to do something for me now.*

Looking for some mental stimulation, Vida returned to education, initially part-time, then full-time on an access course. She progressed from the access course to a local university, and this last sentence mirrors what is threaded through her story from this point on. There are clear statements that her return to education, at all levels, is for herself, and there is some intrinsic satisfaction in the actual learning process:

> *I wanted to do something that stimulated me. I felt like I'd had my head in a nappy bucket for years, nursing had gone off the boil and I wanted to do something that I found interesting you know and maybe I'd do better at a degree if I just did single honours but I quite enjoy the dual. It might mean getting not so good a degree but I'll enjoy the combination of the both and I think you have to look at what you're enjoying as well.*

> *This university thing is something for me ..... it was mine ..... this was giving me something.*

Vida's university education is helping her to prove her ability - not only to her husband and his family, but also to herself. She links this need with her earlier experiences at school:

> *I wanted to prove to myself I could get to University because my husband had been and all his brothers and sisters had been. He went to Austen where he did Law and I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. I can remember once 'daddy cleverer than mummy because he goes to work' that kind of thing and I thought 'sod that he isn't'.*

> *I wanted to prove to myself and other people that I could do it and I believed that I could. Once I got those offers it was like acknowledgement, then I wanted to prove them right. There's definitely*

*a driving force somewhere, I don't know what it is. A lot of it might*
*stem back to all this school trauma thing that I went through..*

Vida expressed a need for independence and a separate identity from that located in her marital role:

> *The other thing was that I knew once I started that although I would*
> *discuss things with Jeremy - things we studied or whatever, I wanted*
> *this just to be for me. I didn't want him to know my friends down there*
> *either, which he found pretty strange but I know that women, and it*
> *happened with me, you end up giving up a lot of your friends and*
> *taking on your husband's friends.*

Overt resistance to her partner's and others' control emerged and this began to cause considerable conflict with her husband:

> *I think I started fighting for what I wanted a bit more. I started not*
> *wanting Jeremy. I wanted to go out on my own with my friends and I*
> *had to fight for one night out a week. Once I had one I wanted two*
> *nights out. For the first term I didn't go out that often, it was enough*
> *settling in, but then when you're chatting with your friends and they're*
> *talking about when they've been out in the evenings, I wanted a bit of*
> *social life as well. As far as I was concerned that rounded off the*
> *whole University thing. So fights and arguments about going out was*
> *just awful and once or twice Jeremy insisted on coming with me which*
> *really annoyed me and we had some right stand-ups. Then I got*
> *involved with somebody that I ought not to have done.*

Vida's husband found out about the affair and began to put financial and emotional pressure on her. She attained some independence by moving out of the marital home during the exam period, but this was not satisfactory and seemed to increase her problems:

> *I decided I was going to move out because I just couldn't cope with the*
> *hassle and it wasn't doing the kids any good either - they started to see*
> *us arguing and that's one thing I really didn't want them to do. It*
> *started affecting my work and I moved out to study. I needed that time*
> *without the hassles from Jeremy to get some clear-headed study done.*
> *Of course I moved out and it didn't happen like that because I would*
> *come back at the weekend and it was just so strained and awful and it*
> *was snowballing, all this pressure so I wasn't doing any of the studying*
> *I should be doing. Of course I could go out when I wanted to, so I*
> *went out with my friends and actually did quite a lot of drinking and*
> *getting drunk, really went off the rails .....*

The situation with her husband deteriorated and as he attempted more control, she became increasingly resistant to it, particularly when her father became involved:

*I insisted on staying out for the full six weeks and then things started getting horrible. Then he got a solicitor without telling me. He got car keys cut - he was going to get the car back and stop the money. He knows I'm not that bothered about material and money things but that's what really got to me in the end because that was one way he was quite powerful he earns a lot of money and he's a good provider and when I more or less said you don't mean anything to me that didn't go down so well. So I went to see a solicitor, then I had a major row with my dad. My dad was saying things to Jeremy like you were far too soft with her, you should never have let her go to university, you should never have let her have a car.*

Vida returned home, but her heightened perception of her husband's attempts to control her led to a further deterioration in their relationship:

*After the end of the six weeks I came back - I knew that the children were here and I had to be in the house with the children legally. It's been difficult and it's not right yet. I failed one exam so I had that hanging over me all over the summer. Jeremy wanted me to take a year out but I refused that and said there was no way that I am going to stop university. If I had taken a year out I would never have come back again and I would have felt that Jeremy was having some sort of control over me and that was the last thing I needed anyway.*

Vida became increasingly resentful of her husband's control and the way her identity had been defined thus far, though she does acknowledge that she was happy to go along with this:

*I resented it and that was partly why I went of the rails a bit ..... this control thing which I did start feeling or suddenly realised. It was partly of my making because I slotted into a situation that I didn't realise was happening and it obviously served my purpose, Jeremy's purpose, all the rest of it, at the time. I don't want to paint him out to be the worst person ever and he's very considerate in a lot of ways and yet when I looked back on certain things, he made decisions about things. His decision would be the one that was taken in the end and I started resenting it and the influence when we went out was always of his friends.*

She challenged her husband's definition of the situation and rejected her domestic (though not her mothering) identity:

*He says we've always had an equal relationship and I've always been able to voice what I want and I said 'no I haven't because obviously that's what I'm doing now and its not going down very well' I want my own friends, my own little corner but it doesn't suit any more so sod it no, I'm sorry I've got an essay to write, I'm not ironing shirts - you're as capable of ironing as I am. I'm doing a full time course now which in my opinion is equivalent to your full time work, it might not be*

*bringing any money but then again you're earning enough for both of us and I helped you earn that in the first place'. I got to being very articulate in my arguments and he didn't like that. He's very good on paper but I'm better than he is verbally once we get going.*

Vida denies her husband's assertion that she has changed:

*He said 'you've changed'. I said 'I don't think I have changed, I think it's been there all the time. It's been sort of suppressed and now I've found myself in an environment where I can express myself and that's spilled over to home and you don't like it ..... well, if you don't like it, you can just lump it'.*

Returning to education, and going to university in particular, appears to have created a watershed in Vida's life – a time which is affecting her whole sense of herself. Her existing situation appears to be traumatic. There is considerable turmoil in her life, in terms of her relationships and her identity, but she is determined not to give up her education, nor her newly found independence. She makes clear links between her past, her education and her current difficult situation. She argues that it is not a new Vida, rather an existing aspect of her identity which she knew was there, but is only now emerging. As she says:

*I think gradually it has been a metamorphosis of me.*

**Dilys and Gloria** both talked of considerable negative parental influence on their early education.

## Dilys

**Dilys** is 34, married with two children aged 12 and 9. She is studying at a local college on the second year of both a full-time secretarial course which is three full days a week and a part-time social studies and humanities course which is one day a week. She also works four evenings a week.

I asked Dilys why she had not continued her education at sixteen:

*Dilys: Because my parents didn't want me to get well educated, I know that sounds awful, but it's true. I was in the top form at school, that's why I couldn't learn to type because they wouldn't let you with your academic skills, and I got three O-Levels, now my older sister got expelled from school, she was in a low grade, she hated school, she was always fighting and always at home, and so when I went to school, because I was in the top form, my friends were sort of - to my family - a little bit snobbish, so I couldn't take friends home and all this, and I never, ever got encouraged to go to school .....*

Although she talks of her parents lacking interest in her education, she lays the blame primarily with her mother:

> *My mam used to make me have time off school to clean the house. So my friends - one came up to my house and another one came too and they said, 'We wondered why you weren't here', it was an exam or a mock exam or something and I was hanging washing up in the kitchen, it was raining, and I was nearly crying. I said, 'my mum wouldn't let me come to school, I've had to do the washing', and they couldn't believe it but to me it was, that was all I knew, you know. And I were cooking the tea and all this, that's how it was, I just didn't get any support at all.*

When Dilys was offered a place at a local college of further education, she was unable to take it because of family pressure:

> *I got in at college, because when I was at school, I hadn't had any guidance and I didn't know where I wanted to be, and Mr Shaw the deputy head advised me to go on a catering course at this college and I got on it and when they gave me the details, you'd got to pay something like £70 for a set of knives and I told my mum and my mum said, 'No chance, we're not buying them, get out of there and get a job'. And it was a two year course, and so I told the school and Mr Shaw couldn't believe it, he said, 'Oh Dilys, it's a wasted opportunity', and I said, 'Well my mam said I've got to get a job and she won't buy the knives, and that's it, she wants me to get earning and get paying board', and that's how it was, and so I got out there, got a job as a trainee manager at Fine Fair and my mum just wanted that wage coming in, you know.*

> *She was working, and my dad was working, so looking back, she didn't need the money, and my uncle lived with us. I didn't get on with my uncle, so I didn't have a very good home life anyway.*

Dilys told me that she never really questioned her home situation at the time, rather, she thought the problem lay with herself:

> *There was four of us and I was different to the others. I always liked reading, I liked books ..... but I always thought it was me that was weird. Because I grew up in that environment, you do. You don't know do you, you don't know until you're older, so I used to pretend that I didn't care about school and when my mum made me have time off, I thought, 'Well that's alright,' because I wanted her to think I was like my sister, 'cos she got on with my sister and everything, but it didn't do me any good because even now we don't get on. I'm still classed as a bit of a snob and - but I'm not, I don't talk like a snob as you can hear me, but it's just that I'm different. I know what I want and I love to learn.*

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Despite their lack of support for Dilys's early education, her parents' attitude is apparently still important to her. Even now, her mother has a negative attitude towards her education, although she is changing and her father does ask her about her courses:

> *Well when I first told my mam I was going back to college, her reaction was 'what are you doing that for?' and she's never asked me about it or anything, but just of lately she's started to ask. She used to go out of the room when me dad used to ask me about it, 'cos me dad's always asked me, and he'd say, 'how're you going on at college?' and me mum'd say, 'Are you putting t'kettle on?' and she didn't want to know. So I wouldn't talk about it, you know, I felt well she obviously doesn't want to know ..... but now, she will ask me.*

Although this student was very keen to talk to me and volunteered without any hesitation, she came late to the interview, her body language was defensive and she talked in a rapid non-stop fashion. I got the impression that there had been many more problems at home than she was willing to talk about. When I asked the question 'is it just things about your education that were a problem at home, or were there other things?' she responded only cursorily:

> *There were other things as well, yeah, there were lots of other things, but education was one. At the time, it was insignificant and nobody thought anything about it I suppose really, I resent that they didn't support me and I know I shouldn't, but I do and I think it's sad that they didn't but I've got to just come to terms with the fact that we'll never really have a close, loving relationship, me and my mum and dad, you know, but you always wish that you could don't you?*

I asked her whether she blamed herself for that. Her response indicates a poor self-image, and although this is changing, there are still problem areas for her:

> *Oh I did, I always have done. I used to say, 'well it's got to be me, they can't be wrong because when my mum -, if my mum argues with anybody, if she falls out with anybody, everybody's got to follow suit, and if she's argued with me and fell out, they'd all got to fall out with me, and when we fell out for fourteen months, it was only an argument between me and my ma, but my sisters didn't talk to me, nor my father, for fourteen months, they all disowned me ..... it's just been a battle.....*

Dilys's return to education has been the culmination of many years of waiting:

> *I've always wanted to go back into education but it's always been evening classes and we've never had the money ..... When I was nineteen I went to work at Redcar. I didn't get on with my parents and I was just sick of being at home. I met my future husband, came back, married him and had a little boy straight away. ..... so I've waited all*

*these years to go back, but I've dreamed about it more-or-less ever*
*since I had my little boy, and realised that was it, once I'd had my little*
*boy, I thought, 'God, this is it, there's no more opportunity, I can't just*
*go out there and do it, I've got him to think about now all the time', and*
*it hit like a ton of bricks, and ever since then I've always thought, you*
*know, one day I will .....*

Dilys makes an interesting point here about her realisation of the enormity of her
restrictions and responsibilities with the birth of her son. She was very aware at this
time in her life that her caring responsibilities would curtail her ambitions, at least for
the foreseeable future, but she did not resent this responsibility. This reflects the
acceptance by the majority of the women of their responsibilities for their children,
even though they may reject an identity totally located within the home. I will discuss
this further in the next chapter. Dilys goes on to talk about her determination to
encourage her children towards the education she felt she never had:

*..... but if I don't, my kids will. I've really encouraged them, I don't*
*push them, I don't believe in pushing anybody .....*

This student has made a number of what she considers to be very personal gains from
education - one is her increase in confidence, which she linked with a more acceptable
self-image:

*When I came on the first day I was nervous as hell and I thought, 'God,*
*what am I doing this for?' I was so scared, and I kept thinking, 'you're*
*going to show yourself up, they're going to ask you all these things,*
*they're going to talk about all these words that you don't know what*
*they're talking about, and they're going to be all these posh people .....'*
*but when I got talking to them, I felt like they're only like me ..... It's*
*made a big difference in me, it's given me a lot more confidence, it's*
*shown me what opportunities there are out there.*

*Well I see myself as much more confident, much happier about myself,*
*I've had such a troubled childhood that it really bothered me. When*
*we were first married, me and Bob, we had a lot more problems than*
*we have now, and I was so unhappy about myself, but coming back*
*here, talking to people, I mean, ......we're all women, we're all about*
*my age and we talk about everything and it really does you good. And*
*it's nice, it's just nice to be gaining qualifications and bettering*
*yourself and I just feel a lot happier about myself.*
*I'm proud of myself, to be honest, I'm very proud of myself .....*

*It's made me value me a lot I think, my friends, my time, my work, my*
*job, you know. It's made me see myself a lot differently, and I'm a lot*
*happier about myself. A lot more relaxed, and I feel as if I've got a lot*
*more to give to my kids, you know.*

Another gain is her second chance at opportunities she felt were denied in her youth:

> *For me, it was reliving a childhood that I feel I lost. I mean, I don't want to make it sound like sob-story, but it is, it really has been for me and my support has been Bob, and he's been the parent that I didn't have. He's really helped me, he's really encouraged me. So I feel lucky that I've got this opportunity. I've had it and it's been lovely.*

Finally, at least some independence from the influence of her family:

> *Doing this for me is a way of breaking away (from her extended family). I can be even more independent from them ..... and having that support from Bob means he's coming with me, you know. It been the making of me, it really has.*

Clearly, the qualifications which Dilys is gaining are important to her, but she is gaining far more than that from education. She has not been successful this year in her application to the two local universities but she sees this as a temporary setback in a learning career she has long waited for. It seems to me that the major benefits have been firstly in her more positive self-image which has enabled her gradual independence from the negative influence of her family. Secondly, she has gained a great deal of confidence, and thirdly, she is accomplishing a long-held desire to fulfil her potential and prove her ability.


## Gloria

**Gloria** has also been determined to return to education. She is 38, married with two children aged 11 and 9. She is a student on the foundation year of a four-year degree in science. The course is franchised out to a local college from one of the two universities in the area and attracts a mandatory grant. Gloria's father was the main influence on her mainstream education in two ways. Firstly, his job took the family around the country:

> *Gloria: We moved around an awful lot, I went to eleven different schools and up to the age of eighteen I moved twenty two times. It was my father's job. He was in the forces to start off with and then he became area manager of a building society. Every time you settled down into something we were whisked off somewhere else. When I was doing my O levels, say for example in geography, I did a year of geography in Grimsby and then we moved to Derby and they'd started the other way round - so I started geography in Derby what I'd just done in Grimsby. Or I'd start doing subjects like human biology in Grimbsy and then we moved to Derby and that area, they'd never heard of it and then we moved up to Austen. It wears you down 'cos you're*

> *just sort of fighting against it. In the end I just thought, 'Right, well I
> might as well wait. An opportunity will surely present itself'.*

but secondly, it was also her father's attitude which affected her. I asked Gloria
whether her parents had been interested in her education. Her response reflects firstly
the apparent dominance of her father in the family:

> *No. Not particularly. My mum was too busy pandering to the whims
> of my dad and my dad was too busy doing what he wanted to do, to
> benefit himself.*
> *Which sounds all very bitter and twisted but it's not like that, it's just
> being realistic. No, he was more interested in his own needs - like a lot
> of men are at that age I think .....*

and secondly her perception of his attitude generally towards women:

> *My dad ..... he's a mysogynist. He was contemptuous of women and
> expected women to be barefoot, pregnant and at the kitchen sink most
> of the time. Any hint of education or intelligence was just squashed.
> You know - you can't have women with brains, they're not there for
> that. He's actually admitted he doesn't like women being educated. I
> sat and had a bottle of whiskey with him once and he said one of the
> reasons why we moved around as much as we did was because he
> didn't want me and Sarah, particularly, to be educated.*
> *That's an effort for me, that's a horrible thing to have to take. I know
> people have to put up with a lot worse, but talking about an education,
> educationally it's rotten isn't it?*

Like Dilys, Gloria felt that she had been deprived of her educational opportunities at
the conventional age and had always wanted to return to formal learning. Coupled
with this was the realisation that her children were becoming independent and this
made her examine her own situation. In addition, she did not wish to return to the
psychiatric nursing she had done prior to the birth of her children, because she had
become disillusioned with the nursing profession. She recognised this period as a
crucial time in her life:

> *I missed out on an education when I was younger really. Then when
> the kids were getting older I was thinking, 'Well I want to do
> something'. I don't want to be sort of left at home thinking that my kids
> have gone off doing what they want to do, my husband's doing what he
> wants to do. I'm not going to be sat at home thinking well what am I
> going to do. It's a time when you think 'Well, what am I going to do
> with the rest of my life?' They're big thoughts aren't they? And you
> have to make such big decisions. So I thought, right this is the ideal
> time to get myself started doing something that I want to do. I wanted
> to go to college and the opportunity presented itself. So that was it
> really.*

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Gloria is looking for an identity outside the domestic sphere. I asked why she had chosen the science foundation course. She has an ambivalent attitude towards her subjects, but lays the blame for this firmly at the door of sexist education in her youth:

> *I've always had problems with maths, always had problems with it. I was frightened to death of it and yet I liked it. I liked physics but I was useless at it. Chemistry? I was a bit better at chemistry and I was very good at biology. And I thought I really like these subjects, but being a female and the age I was when I was younger at school women weren't encouraged to do science - unless you were absolutely brilliant - you were encouraged to go into domestic science as it was called then ..... and then leave school and have babies or whatever ..... it's being female. So that interest has always been squashed and I just thought, right I can go and do it now if I want to.*

Gloria told me that her main motivation was interest, but there is a clear need to reject the power that her father has had in defining her identity:

> *Mostly the motivation, believe it or not, is because I want to do it because I'm interested. But what makes me do it is probably, you know, 'I'm going to show him (her father)' We have heated battles - or we have had. Even now if I 'phone him up and tell him, what I'm doing, he says he's, sort of, pleased but I know that it's irritating him to death.*

Gloria's father seems to have been a powerful negative force in her past. She challenges not only her father's power, but also what she sees as the power of men generally, to have control over women's identity:

> *The biggest thing for me is male attitudes and I know where that comes from - but I see it all around me as well.*
> *What right do they have, you know, to think they're better than us? And it says a lot about masculinity, the way that they feel that they can achieve it is by undermining those who they consider to be weaker than themselves doesn't it?*
>
> *That's why, for me, their definition of masculinity is questionable isn't it? And they never stop to question it because what makes them feel macho and masculine is by undermining those who they consider to be weaker than themselves - which is women and, unfortunately, children as well. Even at 38 it still makes me mad.*

The whole interview was underpinned with a general distaste for sexism and a cynical recognition of its effect in all areas of her life, both past and present:

> *I think one of the worst things I've come across is when people find out that I've come to college and it's 'what are you playing at now?' You know, this kind of attitude and 'don't you think you should be at home*

*looking after your children?' - this kind of thing, which really makes
me angry.*

*Just talking to people in a pub or even family sometimes - these really
nice people that you love and they come out with things like that and
you think, 'Well, because I want to do something with myself', 'Don't
you think you should be at home looking after the children? What
about the kids? Who's looking after the kids?' - this kind of thing. But
then, if you go into further education, or higher education, then you're
stepping into a male dominated area. Some people resent it don't
they? And I think that happens more to women than it does to men.
When you try and prove your ability and seem to achieve - they don't
like it. Sometimes people make you feel you're apologising for what
you're doing.*

Proving her ability has been quite important for Gloria:

*I've proved to myself that I can achieve academically. And that's
always been a big thing for me because it's always been squashed, as I
said before. It's not been against all odds because I think people are in
far worse situations than I am, but for me personally, it's proved a lot.*

Achievement per se is important for this student, but she also wants to achieve a
degree which will give her a better job. She wanted to teach, but felt that this was not
a realistic option:

*What's the point of me going in for a B Ed when eventually it's going to
become obsolete when they bring this mum's army in?
There's no point in me, at forty three - that's when I'll finish - having a
degree that is going to be neither use nor ornament - it's just like a
waste of all the time I've spent. Well it's not a waste, 'cos it means
you've done something, it's an achievement but I won't be able to do a
great deal with it. And it's important that I can do something with it at
forty three. So I'm going to do Biomedical Sciences.*

Gloria, like Dilys, is fulfilling a long-held desire to achieve her potential and to prove
her ability. She is another student who seems to have reached a watershed in her life,
where her children are becoming independent and she is looking for an identity outside
the home. She is also resisting her father's definition of her identity and what she sees
as sexist attitudes generally. Her return to education, and particularly her choice of
course, is helping her to meet these needs and also to define and thus to have some
power and control over her identity.

## Alison

**Alison** also had a father who was manipulative and controlling during her childhood and teen years. She is currently a full-time student on a social science access course at a local college, with offers of places in higher education. Aged 34, she is married and living with her partner and three children aged 14, 9 and 5

Alison was the only girl of six children and her relationship with her father had been difficult. She described fairly frequent violence in the house, between her parents and between her father and her brothers. Money was always short because of her father's gambling habit (although she did not realise this was the problem until much later):

> *Alison: ..... from being fourteen when I first did my paper round, I ended up at loggerheads with my dad because his family tradition was that when you started work you came home and you put the money on the table, the parents took what they wanted and gave back what bit they thought you were entitled to. After doing my first week's paper round he asked for me to give him all the money, and I had an argument with him, saying, 'No, I've worked for it, I'm keeping it'. After that it was six months out of every year we just never spoke to each other. Although I loved him very much we just disagreed on so much. From being about fourteen to twenty one our relationship was appalling. Really bad.*

She goes on to describe her father's manipulation of her life:

> *My ambition on leaving school was to go into the police force but that managed to get completely messed up with the help of my dad ..... I was going out with a gypsy ..... he phoned up the Chief Inspector and told him I was a dishonest deceitful daughter - and not to touch me with a barge pole.*
> *So I went into a two-bit job for two years - just as a telephonist/ receptionist - which my dad got me ..... very much a manipulator.*

After moving away from home and into a flat in the same area as her parents, she then went to work in a seaside resort, but each time her father put pressure on her to return:

> *..... my dad was phoning me up telling me that my mother was ill - all a pack of lies - but enough to put the pressure on me to pack up and come home ..... then ..... telling me how ill he was with his heart attacks - and they were all fakes.*
> *I just kept thinking he was doing it for my interests - he cared about me and wanted me home where I was safe but when I was at home he was terrible. If I went out at night, he'd be waiting at the top of the street - ready to drag out whoever was in the car, taxi or whatever I came home in ..... He really was impossible. He made it impossible for any of us to stay around him - his violent mood swings were terrible.*

The following year whilst working in London, she became very ill with pneumonia and returned home. Although she was taking contraceptives, the doctor did not warn her that their effectiveness was reduced by antibiotics and she became pregnant. She discovered that her 'boyfriend' - the father of the child - was actually engaged to someone else. When she told her own father, his response was very negative:

> *I'd told my mum and she was fine about it, no problems there, and he went up the wall. And for the whole of the eight months he never spoke to me, not two words, at all. It was just terrible 'cos he just shut me out completely the whole time .....*

Up to being eight months pregnant, Alison slept on the settee in the two-bedroomed house, with a brother and her parents occupying the two bedrooms. The only time her father did communicate with her was when she physically intervened in family violence:

> *when anyone came in drunk or arguing or something like that and I would get up and get in between them, and he would just simply say, 'If anything happens to that baby I'll swing for you'.*

Her father's behaviour gave Alison a very clear negative message - she wasn't important, but the baby was. Her poor self-image, which she talks about later, was further reinforced after the baby was born:

> *But having said that, when she was born - the minute she was born - he was there ..... he idolised her ..... at night when she was crying he'd be the first one in with a bottle.*

Alison met her husband the following year. They married the year after and she had two more children. She told me that her husband has been very supportive:

> *He could see right through my dad, and, he wouldn't let anybody manipulate me, so on that he was very good for me. And he's also done a great deal to build up my confidence, teach me how capable I am. He's just taught me so much, you know, it's like a different world. And in many ways, the influence he has on me is what I wish my father would have had at sixteen .....*

Alison and her husband have done voluntary work with young people for about 10 years. When I asked her why she had gone back into education she told me:

> *I'd like to go into teaching and I'd like to become a special needs teacher because during the course of the youth work, I was staggered by how many children couldn't read at the age of fourteen, fifteen and I just felt that I could make a difference. I'm sure I can make a difference and that's why I want to go back.*

She told me that this job is an extension of the voluntary work and went on to say that her one regret about being on the course is her lack of time for neighbours and friends and their problems:

> *My door was always open and I would have a constant stream of*
> *visitors - usually people with problems. Somebody perhaps just*
> *wanting someone to talk to - of all ages - and I think they're the losers*
> *this year. Nobody can find me any more, I'm just never here. And*
> *there are times when I'm questioning myself, saying 'Well have I done*
> *the right thing here?' because it was something I enjoyed doing. I*
> *honestly don't know.*

She does however recognise that having a constant ear for others' problems is reflective of a need in herself to establish a positive identity. Alison's father died recently and she has been having counselling to help her sort out her conflicting feelings:

> *When I was talking to this lady counsellor about my dad, one thing*
> *she'd said was the fact that I felt I'd got to be liked by everybody. And*
> *I think that's very true.*
> *You feel everyone's got to like you and you're constantly doing things I*
> *think, because you're not happy with who you are. I think it's got a lot*
> *to do with proving yourself and feeling the need to prove yourself. And*
> *although it came naturally to me, when you look behind it and find out*
> *why it's usually because of your insecurities.*

Her voluntary work and her husband's support have given Alison a boost to her confidence, but she is still looking for the confidence which comes from proving to herself that she has academic ability:

> *Personally, I'll say one thing the course has done is I feel it's given me*
> *a great deal more confidence in my abilities. It's made me realise so*
> *much - I had such a low opinion - I'd got a very low opinion of what I*
> *was capable of doing. I'd been led to believe that it was going to be*
> *really hard and I'd never make it, and the family would suffer .....*

Alison also expressed a need for a different identity from that which is located in her domestic role:

> *I know there's a point where the family's got to come first, but I also*
> *feel that if you're mentally frustrated you're no good to anybody. And,*
> *I just feel I was beginning to get very bored at home not knowing what*
> *to do next. I'm not the type of person that enjoys cleaning up all the*
> *time. I just needed to do something else and this has stretched me a*
> *great deal and I've just learned so much about so many things I was*
> *just really glad.*

The major benefit which this student has gained from education though is linked with self-worth and identity. She expressed the conflict she feels between her past and present lives:

*My husband was a finance director. When he was in his last job at Chesterfield the people there were typical, I would say, finance directors' wives that thought they were really something, and I'd never felt like that. I've never felt good enough to be a finance director's wife! I always felt beneath everybody and yet, at the same time, because I live in a poor background area like Pitsmoor, because Christian's a finance director and has a good job and a good car, people still look up at me. I felt torn between the two and not felt that I knew where I belonged.*

Within college, she feels she is able to define her own identity and is not constrained by the labels she feels have been attached. She talks of more independence and control over her life:

*While I've been on the course, because I've been mixing with people from all different backgrounds, I've felt very comfortable. I can relate to people again at an equal level. They've not looked up at me and seen me as a finance director's wife, they've just seen me.*
*I don't feel I've been labelled - whereas before I felt I was labelled. You know? I was either Mrs ..... the finance director's wife, or Alison, the unmarried mother. Because I'm still in the same area that all this has happened to me - because my parents just live two bus stops away - I've always felt I've had this label attached to me and I wanted to get away from it. I feel I've been able to do that this last year. I don't feel I've got any labels hanging over me at the moment. I feel a lot more independent.*

Alison went on to talk about her feelings when she became pregnant, and the negative influence it had on her identity. She told me her return to education was definitely something for herself:

*I was so disappointed with myself becoming an unmarried mother - it was one thing I would never, ever wish on a child. You can tell a lie and your lies will not get caught out, but you get pregnant and it grows in front on you for eight, nine months and it's getting bigger and heavier all the time. And you feel weighed down by that, and that burden, I found, very hard to get rid of even when I got married. I'm sure it's affected me, you know, the way I've felt about myself. I've had this really, really poor self image .....*
*Definitely something personal. I wanted to prove to people that I could do it. I wanted to prove that I had got stickability. That I had got some worth. It's given me something positive.*

Alison's relationship with her father and her pregnancy have had a major impact on her life and the way she sees herself. Her return to education is serving many purposes. Firstly, she has more control over defining her own identity. Secondly, she talks of independence, and by this I think she means freedom from the labels which have been attached, rather than economic freedom. Thirdly, she is proving her ability, both to herself and to others. Finally, the course itself is helping to build a positive self-image and is also the first step to paid employment in a job which she feels will give her some worth, both in her own and in others' eyes.

I asked this student what had been the main issue for her this year:

> *The main issue? For myself, I think getting rid of little skeletons in the cupboard ..... the course has helped. I wouldn't have done it without being on the course.*

This comment I think puts into a nutshell the psychological benefit for Alison of her return to education.

## Leila

**Leila** is 40 years old, partnered and is a full-time student on the foundation year of a four-year science course at a local college, franchised out from one of the universities in the area. She enrolled on the course after being made redundant. She is another student who specifically mentioned her father's attitude as having a major negative influence on her life, but she goes on to talk about a number of other experiences too:

> *Leila: I went to a mixed sex grammar school and I left with seven O-levels when I was sixteen. I thought about the reasons why I left a lot, in the last few years. I actually left to get married. My father told me he didn't think it was a good idea but it didn't stop me. I think the real reason I wanted to get married was because I didn't have a very happy home life, and I was trying to get away from him. We get on alright now, but at the time, I think it was probably the easiest thing for both of us and it was the best excuse possible for leaving home.*
>
> *I think his plans for me were that I should have stayed on, got my A-Levels and gone to University. But knowing what I was like at the time, I probably would have flunked University, I don't think I would have got through it. Very quiet and very shy and I don't think I would have survived being away from home on my own.*

Leila told me that her father was very much the controlling force within the family:

> *Mum didn't have any say in it. Whatever he wanted, she did, she was at home looking after us, that was her place. In some respects, he had*

*a very victorian attitude towards his marriage, but not towards his*
*children. Well, we were very, very strict. He had some very victorian*
*attitudes about how to bring up kids, no freedom whatsoever, but as far*
*as education and the prospects were concerned, I could have been a*
*lad. He was a lot less strict with the other two. I think he probably*
*realised he'd gone a bit too far with me, he'd been too strict.*

However, Leila's move away from home was not the escape that she had thought it would be - she entered a stultifying marital relationship. Her role was clearly located in the home and she felt isolated, lonely, and frustrated, with most of her friends still in education and no support from her extended family:

*I worked for about six months just after I got married, and then had a*
*baby and that was that! It was a very difficult time really because the*
*feller that I married was probably in the same sort of mode as my*
*father. They reckon that you pick fellers who resemble your parents.*
*He wanted somebody to have his meals ready, do all the washing, look*
*after his kids, look after the house, and after twelve months I was*
*bored silly.*

*When I went into it, I thought I loved him. You think when you're*
*young and idealist that love conquers everything. Then when you're*
*left there with a toddler and you can't go anywhere, 'cos you're so tied,*
*nobody'll come and baby-sit, I was just so bored, I was taking it out on*
*the kid, I was losing my temper with him. I thought the answer was*
*having another baby, and obviously it just makes things worse. I kept*
*saying to him, 'I'm stagnating, I feel as though I'm going mad,' and he*
*couldn't understand how I felt.*
*My mother had made it obvious that she didn't want anything to do*
*with bringing up her grandchildren. She wouldn't baby-sit, she*
*wouldn't look after them during the day or anything. She'd got her kids*
*off her hands and she wanted her freedom.*

Her marital situation worsened, and she and her husband separated and eventually divorced:

*Things with my husband were getting very, very bad, and I said, 'Look,*
*I've got to do something about this,' I don't know whether it was him or*
*just the situation but we ended up with a trial separation where he went*
*to South Africa for a year and left me with the kids. So I went along to*
*the local day nursery, and said, 'I'm a single parent, please can I put*
*my kids in the nursery and can I get a job?' and I managed to get a job*
*as a clerical assistant, and that was great until he decided to come*
*back from South Africa. He said they wouldn't give him a resident's*
*permit while he was separated. So were we going to get back together*
*again, or were we going to get divorced? and I said, 'I'm quite enjoying*
*being on my own', the only problem was, by this time, the eldest lad*
*was five, he was at school, and I was having problems with child-care*

*during the holidays. So after a bit of argy-bargy, we decided that he would have custody of the kids and I would be on my own.*

Leila did not mention the children again after this point. She went on to tell me that she formed a close relationship with another partner who was encouraging her to return to education. Unfortunately he died very suddenly, leaving her in very difficult financial circumstances.

*About this time I'd met this other feller, and he said, 'Well if you're stuck for somewhere to live, come and live with me,' and we got a quite close relationship there. I think he was pushing me towards getting a University place then, but he died before anything came of it, and then of course I've got no money, no house, so it's a question of trying to get a better job, trying to find somewhere else to live. And then I was just sort of living from hand to mouth really, until Dan came along and moved in with me and then we got a bit of spare money. I did a TOPS course to do the computer programming and we've been doing OK ever since then.*

Leila had been working as a computer programmer, but was made redundant the year before she started her course. However, she was very bored with the job and it was a combination of her redundancy, boredom with the job for which she was trained and her age which made her question what she was doing and the direction she wanted her life to take:

*I've been working for the last twelve years, as a computer programmer, and it was a combination of circumstances, I was made redundant twice within two years, I was finding it extremely difficult to get another job after I was made redundant the first time. A lot of the jobs that I was qualified for, I wasn't even being offered an interview, because the people doing the interviewing were young men - it's a very unfair situation, but rather than try and battle, I thought, 'I'm better off out of it', because to be honest, after ten years of programming, I'd had enough, I was bored with it, 'cause I'd done it. You know, you've written one sales ledger, you've written hundreds of them, they're all the same. There's no challenge left any more when you've done one of everything .....*

*..... and because of my age as well, I was having a bit of a mid-life crisis and started thinking, 'What am I doing with my life? There must be some purpose to it. I've got this brain, why don't I start using it? Why don't I prove to myself that I'm capable of doing it?' So there was that at the back of my mind, I was having a couple of spells of depression as well, which I think was to do with the work situation.*

Leila addressed this identity crisis by taking an aptitude test at the local careers advisory service and enrolling on her current course, although she does not have a clear career pattern in mind. I asked her why she chose that particular course:

> *Because I loved chemistry at school, and obviously you do get to know yourself a little bit in 40 years. That's the way my mind works, I've got a logical mind, and it's got to be science subjects rather than non-science, definitely ..... In a way, it's an indulgence to do the course, because it's something that I'm interested in. Even if I don't end up getting the right career at the end of it, the course itself is interesting and it's showing me that I am capable of doing it, because I've done quite well so far. No, I haven't got a definite career in mind, so in a way, it's a bit of self-indulgence isn't it?*

For this student, there is intrinsic satisfaction in the course she is doing, but there is also a strong element of proving to herself that she has some academic ability. She went on to reinforce this point and also to tell me how much her confidence had grown since she started the course:

> *I feel more confident, I have got a brain ..... that first day (at college) I felt terrible! Very self-conscious, no confidence at all, wondering a lot about what sort of people they were going to be on the course, whether they were all going to be really, really clever. Apart from learning a lot of, well I won't call it useless information ..... it's proving to me that I can still do it, that my memory's not gone, though it takes me a bit longer to store it. I've remembered a lot of things that I learnt at school, it's rather surprised me how much of what I learnt 25 years ago is still there. I averaged 92% overall in the first lot of exams. I was pleased I'd come out top to be honest - relieved.*

Leila is another student who reached a watershed in her life - her redundancy made her address her whole identity. Her return to education has served a number of purposes. She is clearly enjoying the course and finds considerable intrinsic satisfaction in studying - she makes this point quite clearly when she talks of the course being *'a bit of self-indulgence'*. She has also gained considerable confidence in both herself and her ability and although she hoped for a better job at the end of her course, this wasn't of primary importance, her major benefits are in the here and now.

Whereas Leila is at the older end of the age group, Aurora is at the opposite end, being the youngest student I interviewed. She links this section and the next. Her painful experiences began in her childhood, but her unplanned pregnancy involved her in a violent relationship.

## Aurora

**Aurora is** 22, divorced and living alone with a 2 year old daughter. She is also enrolled at a local college on the foundation year of the science degree. She told me that her first painful experiences were at school where she experienced cultural racism. This had the effect of making her fear school and she changed schools frequently, attending sporadically:

> *Aurora: Well originally when I was at school, I was racially abused. This sounds hard because I know I'm white, but my mother was German and there was a boy at school and he knew about this and he took it into the comprehensive school - and there was a lot of trouble because of the forty years of war celebrations, forty years since war had begun. And erm, I got school phobia as it was, and went to several comprehensive schools and the last one I went to I went back a year. It sort of put me off school. Took a lot of will power to get back into school and then I missed another year there, finally got back to school, did my GCSE's and I thought that's it, I've had enough.*

I asked how her parents handled the racial abuse:

> *I can't really go into it 'cos er, the racial view wasn't just directed at me it was directed at my brother - he went back a year when he changed schools when he was being abused - and then this, one guy sort of messed up the first year of his A levels ..... This is really complicated but to cut a long story short, there's certain top politicals in Austen who erm, actually decided to erm, start action against my family. Particularly ..... against my father and they actually decided that they were going to cause my mum to have a nervous breakdown - and it killed her ..... She died when I was fourteen.*

At this point Aurora became quite distressed, and I switched off the tape and reassured her that she didn't have to talk about anything which she found too distressing. She told me she would be alright providing she didn't go into too much detail. She moved from this topic and went on to tell me that she had left school and worked in insurance. She had become pregnant at nineteen and brought her planned marriage forward. Her husband's violence, not apparent prior to their marriage, emerged almost immediately:

> *I was working for a while, then I got married. I had a daughter and I actually had to leave my husband because there was abuse ..... Well, not openly at my daughter all the time ..... I went in a refuge for a fortnight. Then the council got me a flat.*

> *The minute we got married he completely changed. It was like Jekyll and Hyde. It became very frightening - the doctor actually said afterwards that, well from the description of what I gave him it sounded like he was a paranoid schizophrenic. Apparently they're very*

*good at hiding what they're like. But also, it wasn't just him it was his parents attitude to it all. I think the strain was really from them. His family was actually encouraging the lying. It was my hardest thing to believe.*

*They had another granddaughter who was illegitimate, and they just pandered to her. They didn't want her to just walk out and leave the kid. They didn't have any rights as far as she was concerned, whereas with me, I was married, they'd got a hold on me, I was stuck then. They could do what they liked to me and I'd have to put up with it.*

*So they just tortured me. And, well they tried taking me to court for contact with my daughter but they didn't get anywhere. I don't have anything to do with them .....*

Aurora returned to education because she was bored at home, and the course was *'a chance to try something new'*. Her father looks after her daughter, and they seem to have a mutual support system. She tends not to get too friendly with the other students, but recognises that this is probably because of her past experiences:

*I know some of them are quite good and I'm friendly with them, but they support each other more than anything. I certainly keep myself going ..... I've always been a bit of a loner. I get on with everybody, but I'm not friends with everybody, I don't get too pally. I suppose that's partly because of the way I've been treated ..... I don't like to get too close to people. I think I've learned to put a front on ..... I've had to, to survive ..... it's all my experiences that have made me the way I am ..... I'm a real fighter, which I think is the reason I keep going .....*

She told me that her main aim from the course is independence through a well-paid job, though she does not have a specific career plan:

*..... to get a degree and then get a nice job and get lots of money. Well, ..... I'm so used to managing on such little money that if I got a job that did pay a lot of money I'd probably have a lot of money saved up in the bank. It's a form of security isn't it? I know there's certain areas that I can go into, like, spaces in research, I don't know exactly what, it's very, sort of, general at the moment, what I'd like to do. I don't want to remain on social security benefits for ever, paying the bills and left with nothing.*

She told me that the biggest gain from the course this year was confidence, but she is also beginning to recognise her academic ability:

*The thing at the back of my mind, is can I really do this? Am I good enough? You know? I did OK in the last semester -I did two chemistry exams and got 92% for both of them and 93% in biology. The one I didn't do so well on was the maths. I got 78% in maths ..... so I feel a bit more confident about the next lot of exams coming up next month.*

There are many issues which this student is working through, a few of which are being addressed in her return to education. During the whole interview, her body language was very protective. Her arms were folded, her legs crossed and she was sitting right back in the corner of her chair. She did relax a little as we talked, but frequently her answers to my questions were minimal, especially when getting close to personal feelings. Once the tape had been switched off, she told me that her confidence had been badly damaged by her early experiences and was further affected by her marriage, but she was determined *'to do something with my life'*. For Aurora, education certainly seems to be acting as a vehicle for independence and an improved self-image.

## Summary

Aurora's need to have some control over her life reflects one of the most powerful factors in all the women's stories. All of them talked of different events in their childhood which had a major influence on their lives and had affected their self-perception in some way. There was a common rejection of, or a need to modify, the way in which some part of their identity has been defined, either by their family, past or present, or by others in society and a need to redefine these parts of their identity for themselves. In addition, for those students with household and caring responsibilities, there is a need for something outside of their domestic role - this was particularly strong with Vida.

Very clearly, the women were gaining much more from their return to education than the qualifications from the course on which they were enrolled. A common factor for all women, was a need to prove, both to themselves and to others, that they had academic ability - something which for many of them, had been thwarted in their childhood. For Dilys and Gloria particularly, a return to education was a long-awaited opportunity to achieve something they felt they had been denied.

Another common thread was a strong desire for independence. This is not generally financial independence, although this was mentioned. Rather, it was personal independence - the need to be seen as individuals in their own right, with greater control over their lives than they have had hitherto.

Important too, was the need for a positive self-image. It is not just the way others see them which is important to the women returners, but also the way they see themselves. This is clearly linked with the growing confidence which many women reported. For most of the students, this need for a different self-image appeared to coincide with a particular stage in their lives, or particular events which made them reassess themselves and their lives and then prompted a consideration of a return to education.

These mature students were grouped together because they reported painful experiences in their childhood which have had some effect on the rest of their lives. Most of these experiences were located within the family, but there were powerful social influences at work too, just as there were with the next three students.

## ii) Unplanned pregnancies, life course and a return to education

These women did not present trauma in their early childhood, rather it was the circumstances surrounding unplanned pregnancies which led them into controlling restrictive relationships. Again, each of the stories is unique and the students have made very different links between their experiences and their return to education. Claire for example, is looking for some independence in the male dominated world of car maintenance. Bryony and Frances express a need for independence which is linked with their resistance to their partner's desire to locate them primarily within the home. They link education and identity through talk of confidence and proving their ability which is not only a common factor, but also links them with the foregoing group.

### Claire

**Claire** is 31, divorced with 2 children. As well as running her own dress-making business, based on an industrial estate, she is a full-time student on a women's motor vehicle course at a local college. She mentioned little about her early family life, although it does not seem to have been particularly happy. Her difficulties appeared to start when she became pregnant and was married, at sixteen. However, it was not necessarily the children, rather the relationship which was the problem:

> *Claire: I left school at sixteen, straight after my O levels. I had my first baby at sixteen and I left school and then went straight into the marriage and had two children. I was sixteen and eighteen when I had my children, but I was quite maternal at that age actually. I couldn't cope with it now, but when they were younger I was quite happy to look after them at home. But I was more restricted by my husband. You know, he was really jealous so I didn't socialise or do anything. I lost all my friends - so you know?*
> *He left when I was eighteen so since then I've just been on my own. Well I threw him out actually. Make no bones about it.*
> *He was violent and I wasn't prepared to put up with it. I didn't see that he was likely to get any better so - I've been on my own since then. So basically I didn't do anything at all for fourteen years, I've just stared at the walls.*

After this point, Claire did not discuss the violence further, but when the tape was switched off, she told me that her husband had been quite violent. She had a nervous breakdown after he left and spent two years 'drugged up to the teeth' just lying on the settee either asleep or just looking at the walls, with 'the kids running round me'. Her benefit from education is two-fold. She has always been interested in motor mechanics, but it is also a topic which can serve her fierce desire for independence:

> I just wanted to learn about motor vehicles. I've always wanted to learn about them, and well last year, actually, was the first time that I heard about the course. It's not as a career move. It's just to satisfy my own curiosity and interests. If I'm interested in something then I want to learn about it. I'll probably do the exams, well I will do the exam at the end. I may be interested in taking it up for a year or two, but not as a sort of full time occupation. Just to basically keep my own car going without having to pay someone else to do it, and fetch somebody else round every time something conks out.
> It's saved me a lot already and it galls me to have to ask anybody to fix it 'cos I don't know how. I like to know how to do everything just about.

J:      So there's a streak of independence in you there, is there?

> More than a streak I'd think, yes. I don't like to have to rely on anybody at all. Well I've nobody to run to - so it's taking it to a garage and I'm not happy about that, so - I've never had anybody looking after me so I've always had to get on and do it myself. You can't rely on people so how can you depend on them?

She gets a great deal of intrinsic satisfaction from the course, which is linked largely with her interest and the fact that it is giving her independence:

> The course is brilliant really, 'cos everybody gets on really well, I think everybody enjoys it because we don't take it as seriously as the boys even though we may be serious about what we're doing ..... to learn it's fun for us.

> I suppose they're expected to follow it up as a career ..... you know, work and this sort of thing, We're doing it - even if we would like to follow it on and make a career out of it - we're doing it because we're interested in it. I mean, if you're not interested, if a woman isn't interested in motor vehicle mechanics she's not going to come on a course, you know, not just to earn a living, they'll find other ways of doing it - go and get a cleaning job or something if you need to earn a few pounds. So it's, yes, it's fun. I would be really upset if there was any reason why I had to give it up.

Claire also mentioned a change in herself which she links with her growing confidence. I asked her if she thought she had changed since coming on the course:

*I'm very shy ..... I'm enjoying myself more. It really is the only time I see anybody, you know, I occasionally see somebody in the corridor at work, but to talk to and to have a laugh with it's the only time I see anyone, so, yes I would say that I've become a bit more outgoing - and I've been more confident .....*

Claire's return to education and her enjoyment of the course is linked in with her fierce desire for independence and control over her own life, but also, it has given her an increase in confidence and certainly a more positive self-image.

My interview with Claire was quite difficult. She was quiet with closed body language. I found it difficult to get her to talk freely - most of her answers were short and some were quite cynical. She told me that generally she didn't talk seriously to anyone because *'people mostly don't listen and why waste your breath?'* As the interview went on, she relaxed a little, but gentle attempts at probing for more information were not successful.

## Bryony

**Bryony** is the second of this group of students who were pregnant in their teens before marriage. She is 46, married with three children, two of whom are away from home. She is studying on a full-time science access course at a local college which will give her an acceptable entry qualification into higher education. She told me that she thought she had wasted her early education, particularly her 11+ opportunity:

> *I think I've had quite a poor education - I went to a church school and I took my eleven plus and failed it deliberately. I've only told about two people that in my life because I feel so ashamed. I wanted to stay with my friends, and I knew my friends wouldn't get there. But I actually didn't find it too bad so I put the wrong answers down. I did tell my mother at the time in case I got found out. So then I went to a school on the east side of Austen, which was a poor school. I used to do the minimum work, really, to get me through. But I didn't get any encouragement from home. They didn't really mind whether I did well or not ..... they didn't take any interest really.*

She left school at 15 and worked in routine clerical work. She became pregnant at 18, prior to her marriage and told me she still remembers the shame of it:

> *Bryony: First of all when I was pregnant, I was desperate not to have a baby. I just didn't want to get married. But I couldn't speak to my parents, my father definitely not and my mother, who would have been very embarrassed and I'd brought shame on the family so I just had to get married. And you have to cover yourself up, you know, to hope that when you've had the baby nobody notices you've been pregnant.*

*I felt so ashamed of myself that I went through with it. And I didn't*
*want to. I didn't want the baby and I certainly didn't want to get*
*married ..... my parents were fairly strict and you just, you didn't*
*argue because they didn't understand. So there was no point in trying*
*to talk to them, they didn't understand at all.*

I asked her why she felt so guilty about being pregnant and again, her response was a reflection of the social pressure she had already described:

*Because first of all to have sex before marriage, I was made to feel*
*absolutely dirty and because, because of all the moral issues and my*
*upbringing. My parents were so much against it. Not being married at*
*eighteen, they quite accepted that because really, looking back in 1966,*
*a lot of my friends were married at eighteen, nineteen.*

*So it wasn't that, it was just actually having sex before you were*
*married or being found out and having a baby. And it was shameful*
*for my parents to meet the neighbours. You know, what would the*
*neighbours think and the family, and I was just made to feel so*
*ashamed of myself. When I went to the clinic, before we got married*
*and they knew I wasn't married, they still called your name as 'Mrs'.*
*so again you got the shame thing, the guilt thing again, that you should*
*have been married.*

Bryony had difficulty in accepting her new identity which was located in the home and her caring responsibilities:

*I got married in April and my son was born at the end of August.*
*I didn't have any help in looking after him because I'd had him and,*
*you know, you've made your bed and you lie on it now. So I didn't*
*have any help so there's no way I could have gone back to work, but it*
*nearly drove me mad with my first child. I just wanted to go back to*
*work. I don't know whether I really wanted him. But looking back on*
*it, I did want him, I just needed to get back out for a few days a week or*
*something. And so my husband then suggested 'why don't you go to*
*your local keep fit classes - something like that?' Being physical*
*again, that was the turning point I think really, because I then did go to*
*the local keep fit class and that led on to eventually the training, my*
*movement training.*

I asked Bryony why she had chosen to return to education and do the course she was doing now. She told me that she had been helping her husband establish a business. He had had a severe car accident about fifteen years ago and almost died; the driver of the other car did die. He was hospitalised for four months and was then made redundant. They set up and ran a party-plan furnishing business for several years and eventually they set up a similar business in a shop, which he now runs, although she does the accounts and the personnel work. She told me they did not work well

together, but she enjoyed the personnel work, which means, as she told me: *'I can keep clear, well away from him'*. It also gave her the opportunity to do a full-time course. She told me that she had done several courses before she enrolled for her current science access course, but because these were mostly connected with her fitness teaching, she did not really regard them as academic:

> *I'd never taken GCSE's and I was married at eighteen. I had three children, the first when I was nineteen, the second at twenty one and the third when I was twenty seven so I feel like I've not really had much of an education. I've been waiting really to come back, even though I've done things in between - but the proper academic side I've been waiting.*

Although Bryony's husband was encouraging and supportive of the training involved in her fitness work, he is not happy about her return to academic education, even though it is something which she has wanted to do for a long time. She feels that this is because they have different values and because of his lack of understanding of her need for mental stimulation and challenge:

> *He can't understand why I want to do it. He can't understand why I don't want to get a job and earn money. Because money is more important to him than it is to me. It would help if I worked and brought some money in which I did when my daughter was at University, to help with the fees and that. But I found that working as a telephonist and being a telephonist/receptionist was not challenging enough and I was bored out of my mind.*
> *So when my husband suggested that I do something again, like that, I just couldn't face it. I can't face twenty years of working a switchboard and filing because I'm not qualified to do anything but I feel I'm capable of doing more. I think he may feel that now the children are older he can't understand why I just don't want to go and get any job - because he can't see the point in what I'm doing. He thinks it's a waste of time, and a year here and three years at higher education is just a waste of time when I could be earning money. We have different views on it.*

Even though Bryony's aim is a 'better' job, she has no clear idea of what that might be. It seems she simply wants to fulfil her potential:

> *I want to get myself an education, even though it's late, and I want to, not particularly go on to do a degree, I'm not bothered about that, I want to get some qualifications that would lead to an interesting job. Something challenging. Something interesting that I haven't sussed out in a day.*

She has not found the course easy, but she has not considered giving it up. Her confidence was low when the course started, but has improved considerably:

*The first day I felt shocking, terrible. Because, going in the first
morning and first of all going in a hall with all the sixteen year olds as
well, they looked as I walked in, because obviously they thought at my
age I was the tutor, you see.
So I felt like a fish out of water really. Dreadful, absolutely. It took
quite a while, it took months actually, but Christmas was the turning
point when I started to feel better.*

Bryony is continuing with her course despite experiencing considerable domestic
pressure which I have discussed in chapter five. It seems that she has been striving for
most of her adult life for some independence, autonomy and power to define her own
identity outside the home, and an academic education is the vehicle she is using.
Although she has been successful in her fitness courses and teaching, this is clearly not
enough for her. She does not regard this as a 'real' education which will expand her
mind and develop her thinking, rather she sees it as training for a specific reason and
she is determined to take the opportunities she feels she threw away in her childhood.
This, I felt, was just as important to her as her aim for a more fulfilling job. When the
tape was switched off, she told me that she felt too old, at 46, to do the course, but she
is fighting her husband's control and is determined to complete her studies. She is
clearly wanting to establish an identity over which she has more influence than she has
had hitherto.


## Frances

**Frances'** social and economic circumstances differ from those of Bryony. She lives in
an area of high unemployment, which is designated deprived by the European Social
Fund and in receipt of funding for community provision. The courses are free at the
community training and education centre and Frances has been a part-time student for
the past two years. She is currently studying the equivalent of A-level English,
validated by the South Yorkshire Open College Federation, and goes to a woodwork
class, one morning a week. Her compulsory education was in a comprehensive
school, and her unplanned pregnancy started whilst she was still there, not through
ignorance, but through embarrassment about buying contraceptives. She delayed
telling her mother because of family circumstances:

*Frances: When I got pregnant in the first place, I didn't dare tell my
mum because my Nan had just had a stroke - my mum's not a strong
person and I thought well that's all she needs, she'll just have a
breakdown or something. So I didn't tell them. So I was about seven
months, when it was too late to do anything. I just used to wear my
coat all the time.*

*I had her in the April, and it was a February and we were on t' Pennine
Way. We went on a walk over there, and it was like five foot deep in
snow and I thought, 'What am I doing here?' And they'd got, like, big
plastic bags, you know, when it was break, we sat in those 'cos it was
that cold. And I thought, 'Honestly, what am I doing here?' I just felt
like stopping in mine and dying. I must've been mad. And it would
have been a bit after that, that I told my twin sister, Liza - we were in a
French lesson and I said to Liza, 'I've got something to tell you'. She
says, 'What?' I says, 'I'm pregnant'. She says, 'Christ, Frances!' in
front of all the class. She just didn't believe me. She was like
mesmerised and it was actually one of the teachers what took me home,
and told my mum.*

Social attitudes, particularly among the older generation, were reflected in her father's
attitude to-wards the pregnancy, and she had to leave home when the baby was born:

*My dad was alive then - how many years ago then, fourteen, fifteen - it
isn't such a crime now as it used to be in the old days. Dad didn't say
anything - 'cos he was a lot older than my mum - I think he was about
twenty five years older than her - and he just looked and went into the
other room. You know, like they do, stormed off. And that was that.
Then he said, 'Oh well you've got to leave home. You've got to get
married'. And I didn't want to but I went to live with Shelly's dad - I
stopped at home till the day I went into labour and after that I had to
live with him.*

This relationship was fairly short-lived, and she lived on her own for some time, on the
estate where she still lives:

*I was with him till Shelly was about eighteen months, and then I'd just
had enough, I left him. He used to be a heavy drinker, he was a lot
older than me, t' final straw was he was womanising with this other
woman and I walked round the corner and there they were, holding
hands. I thought I'm not standing for this any more and I left. And
even then I didn't go back home. We'd just moved on to the Greenfield
then, and he'd left me with this house that was just going to be
modernised. I had to do all the decorating, see to all the builders, look
after Shelly and it was awful - but it was still better than living with
him.*

Frances has lived with her current partner for six years, but it would appear to be an
uneasy alliance. She receives separate income as a single parent, and appears to take
full responsibility for domestic chores and childcare. Her partner is not particularly
happy with her return to education and this manifests itself in his refusal to help with
the children, even though he is at home most of the day. She feels this is a deliberate
attempt to control her:

*I wouldn't claim with Steve because he thinks his money's for going to
the pub and drinking. If we had to rely on his money, I don't know how
much he'd give me but he's just not grown up enough or mature enough
to handle things like that.*

*At one bit, before we had Mark we was going to get married and I just
couldn't. He never put me first. If he was more reliable ..... I just
couldn't go through with it. I'm classed as a single parent but 'cos he's
there, it's handy when I can't get to pick Mark up from school or
anything, you know, if he's there - 'Well you go and pick him up'. But
at one time, when he was having to take him we had a terrible row.
'I'm not taking him to school and I'm not picking him up'. I was in a
right flap thinking who I could get to do it for me. It was going to be
another day that I wasn't going to be in you see. So he said he
wouldn't do it. And sometimes, because Sandy's not his daughter, it's
all 'it's your daughter, you do it'.*

However, she has refused to let this prevent her attendance at the centre:

*This is my third year now so he's used to it, but at first, well he, and his
family were the same. 'I don't know, what you going for? What do you
want, when you pass exams what you going to do?' He didn't like it,
but he saw that I wasn't going to stop it just because he didn't like it
and I suppose he's come round to the idea now.*

For Frances, education provides, many things. Firstly, she sees her return to education
as something very much for herself. She very much enjoys courses which give her a
life and identity out of home:

*I do English. We're doing advanced literature first, South Yorkshire
Open College. Then on Wednesdays I've got a part time job, which is
opening the workshop up at the community centre for the woodwork
and I do woodwork on Wednesdays.*

*I was absolutely bored and fed up. And I thought 'well it's better than
watching tele' so I might go and have a go at that because it's
something to do. So I thought well, I like reading, I spend most of my
time reading, so I'm doing English*

Secondly, she is proud of her achievement:

*He went to the social the other week and he was filling a form out for
something and when it got to the exam bit I said, 'Well two years ago I
wouldn't have been able to put anything down where it says
qualifications. But now I can put GCSE English Language and
Literature'. He says, 'Alright, alright.' I says, 'now you can see why
I'm going.'*

*I just got my certificates last week, it came through and I put them on the wall, and it's something to be proud of - something for yourself and not what they've, not for them.*
*My daughter says 'oh look she's bragging again' - I said, 'well you'd brag if you'd done it.'*

Thirdly, Frances' achievement has boosted her confidence. I asked her if she had plans to move on from the neighbourhood centre:

*At first it put me off 'cos I thought, well I were right goon when I were young. You know, I know that's not the case now, I mean, you get to know people. I actually went down to college to a women's studies do, they had an evening, and that was quite good - loads of people older than me and I thought, 'well I won't be the only one'. So I might, it just depends. I really don't know what I want to do though, with my life. I could go to university if I managed to get a place, the tutor says .....*

Fourthly, she also recognises that education may be the only way she can get out of her current situation:

*I think, if you've got a better education - I mean, it might sound snobbish or something - but the better your chances are of having a house of your own one day instead of living on a council estate. I hated it on here when I first moved .....*

Finally though, the main point she makes is that what she is doing is for herself:

*It's interest. I'm interested in the work that we do in English and I like writing, and I'd like to probably, one day, if I could, write a book. I mean, I've got plenty of things to put in but it's just putting them down. I think it was just interest. It's nice to have something to do other than - something you want to do other than things that have to be done. I like doing it. You've got a life out of home haven't you?*

Clearly, Frances is gaining many benefits from her education, all of which are linked with her striving for some independence and an identity which she is defining, rather than it being defined by others. It is interesting that she lives in a very restrictive environment, but has carved out an independent identity within that framework. Although her unplanned pregnancy had a major impact on her life, this in itself was not the central issue, rather it is her relationship with her partner which is the ongoing problem.

## Summary

Unplanned pregnancy had a major effect on the lives of these three students and were associated with repressive relationships. These controlling relationships are linked with

the students' return to education in terms of a need for independence and control over their identity. As with the last group of students, this independence is linked with a resistance to the power and control of significant others. They have taken very different courses but have common links between their lives and their return to education. Claire's car maintenance course is important to her because it means that she is no longer defined as dependent in this particularly male dominated area. For Bryony and Frances, the need for independence is linked with a resistance to the power and control of their partners to define their identity as primarily located within a domestic setting.

For all three women, working within very different frameworks, the major link with education was the desire to exert more control over their lives than they had previously had. Education has served this purpose for all of them, in different ways, regardless of the course on which they are enrolled. With this increasing control, as with the students in the previous group, has come an increase in confidence and a more positive self-image.

# Part III: Mega trauma and the links with education

Independence, control over their lives, and the connections between these and identity are the three major links which the final group of students also make with education. For these students, traumatic experiences started early and have often continued, perhaps in different forms throughout their lives. As with the other students, the stories are very individual, but they all talk of confidence, a more positive self-image, self-fulfilment and independence. The stories are of psychological trauma, physical abuse, and sometimes both and what separates these students from the others are the major and seemingly ongoing effects of their painful experiences. Netta's story of psychological trauma starts this section and Della's story, which is one of both psychological and physical abuse, stands on its own to conclude the chapter.

## Netta

**Netta** is 23, married with two children, aged three and four and is on a one year full-time women's science and technology course at a local college. Because it is a non-traditional course for women, the course is sponsored by the European Social Fund and is free, with an allowance and free creche facilities. Netta talks of her childhood as being a difficult time for her and this seems to have had considerable ongoing effects

on her life. I asked why she didn't go further with her education when she was at school:

> *Netta: I got five 0-levels and CSEs but I could have done really well. I was a rebellious teenager. I didn't like school, because I didn't get on with anybody. I find it hard to get on with people, I'm alright for so long and then I sort of take a dislike to them ..... I don't like to get on with people, I'd rather not bother. I'd rather just live and get on with my life and not worry about anybody else's .....*
>
> *I suppose it goes back to my childhood, didn't like my mother syndrome, something like that. My parents got divorced when I was little, I was seven. I haven't seen my dad since and I suppose from that, going through that sort of trauma made me stand up for myself. There's quite a few things I can put it down to emotionally. I'm a wreck, up and down all the time, all through me life I've been up and down going through phases and fads .....*
>
> *Me mum remarried and my stepdad kept going on about University all the time. That's what he wanted me to do and because he said he wanted me to do it I was going to go the other way and not do it.*

Netta's resistance to control was not only reflected in her opposition to family pressure, but also in her opposition to gender stereotyped topics. At school, she resisted the traditional gendered subjects, and opted for metalwork, woodwork and technical drawing. When I asked why, she said:

> *Because I was awkward and because society was telling me I had to do girlie things I was going to do the opposite, and I enjoyed it, so I did it.*

This led her into a non-traditional training scheme when she left school, but to her irritation, she found that gender factors were still influential:

> *I went for a YTS in Engineering.*
> *There were quite a few girls on the YTS and they all tended to get grouped together and I didn't like that very much. I didn't want to get stuck with them because they were just there for laugh. They didn't take it as seriously as I did and they weren't as good at it as I was and I would rather have been with the boys or teenagers doing the proper engineering stuff instead of pratting about - the students with special needs and the females were all put to one side and that really irritated me .....(I got) City and Guilds in basic engineering competence and similar in a communications course but I left when I had my first daughter.*

I asked Netta about the seeming ambivalence between her resistance to the gender stereotype and becoming pregnant and she told me that she had become pregnant deliberately:

*I actually got myself pregnant so he would marry me and he did. It
was so stupid at the time but I didn't want him to leave. I was 17 and
stupid and I was insistent that I was in love with him and he was going
to stay with me for the rest of my life so I made him, we're still together
now. I don't know why because I was anti everything at the time. I
didn't even like babies so I don't know why I went into that, I just did. I
suppose that's why I don't like motherhood too much now because I'm
stuck at home looking after kids and having to be the one that does it -
that annoys me.*

It could be argued that although there is some ambivalence, becoming pregnant
reflected Netta's need to control her life. However, she subsequently resents the
control that her domestic and caring responsibilities impose, which had led to
depression. She told me after the tape was switched off that she was trying to do
some self analysis and asked me what was the difference between psychiatry and
psychology. She wouldn't tell me why she asked that so there are obviously issues
which she is working through which she did not wish to discuss with me.

*My (male) doctor and my health visitor actually told me to come back
to college because I was suffering from depression - from being stuck
in the house I was told. That's why I went part time last year and it did
help so I came full time this year. I don't have time to be depressed
any more, too busy ..... I'm finding something else to do with my time
and not have to look after the kids all day .....
(and) I get £28.00 per week which is standard for everybody. It goes
into my own little bank account and I'm taking driving lessons out of it
so I can make myself more mobile.*

She is using the course as a stepping stone into an area which is non-traditional, and
has applied for courses at several universities within reasonable commuting distance,
although she does not have a clear career path marked out:

*They're all engineering and manufacturing systems more the
mechanical side of it but I'm not too sure what sort of jobs I'll get out
of it at the end .....*

but there is also an element of proving that she can do it too:

*When I was at secondary school, me mum was doing her degree
course. If she can do one, so can I.*

Her final comment on the tape though:

*I didn't want to have to settle down into anything because I had to but
its like I said to you ..... I'm doing this for myself!*

Netta is clearly striving for an identity different from what she sees as her expected
gendered role in both the public and the private sphere. Her return to education on a

non-traditional course and her aim for an occupation which is not perceived as typically female reflect this aim. It is also giving her some independence and as well as being therapeutic. This therapy is double-sided. As she points out, education has relieved her depression, but she is aware that it is also the means through which she has some control over her life. Netta's desire for some power over defining her identity, which is threaded through the interview, is reflected in her final remark above. It was also evident in another remark after the tape was switched off, when she told me that her husband was a bit apprehensive about her doing the course but she was going to do it anyway. He was worried about her getting a better job than he had when she'd finished but that was not actually going to stop her doing what she wanted to do.

## Gerry

**Gerry's** painful experiences also started in her childhood. She is 26, single, with no children and lives at home with her parents. She left school at 16 and entered further education, training as a chef. She started work at 19, mostly short-term, part-time work *'cheffing/waitressing'*. She told me that she lost her penultimate job as a casino waitress largely because *'I was too big, I didn't fit the image they wanted to promote in their casino'* (she weighed 24 stones at the time). Her last job as a holiday temp. at a local university spurred her into enrolling for an access course which she completed last year. She is currently enrolled on the foundation year of a 4-year combined studies degree course at a local college - the following three years being undertaken at a local university.

Gerry links the start of her problems with the family home move from Scotland to Derbyshire. She was also aware of the long-term effects of some of her difficulties:

> Gerry: .....we moved to Derbyshire from Scotland and I had a heavy
> Scottish accent and I was complete outcast because of that plus the fact
> everybody had been to primary school together and here was this
> person from outside coming in trying to make friends with people ..... It
> wasn't up until the last year of school I actually made proper friends
> and even then it was only a couple of them.
>
> I personally think a lot of people tend to carry a lot of baggage with
> them through life you know from previous things that have happened
> you build up this sort of stigma which is attached. You're like a social
> outcast and it tends to affect the way you think about yourself mentally.
> Obviously trying to make friends with lots of sweets I put on an awful
> lot of weight which in turn affects again the way people look
> at me. My sister was particularly nasty towards me at that time
> obviously venting her frustrations on me to the point where we literally

*very rarely spoke to each other. It was hate ..... and that added to the problems as well I know.*

She went on to tell me about the sexual abuse she experienced in her childhood and its effect on her:

*From the period age 11 through to 12, I was sexually abused for a year. My brother was responsible for that and that is something that at the time obviously I hadn't a clue what was going on. I didn't recognise or understand the consequences of what was going on and in fact I didn't actually speak to anybody about what happened until I was about 21 or 22. I never mentioned it to anybody and that really just messed me up completely - totally affected my attitude. I didn't realise it then but looking at it now I realise it has affected to a huge extent the way I look on things and the way I look on what has happened in my life and how I deal with those things ..... I have so many reservations about 'will I get hurt', 'what will happen', 'what do these people want from me', 'what do I want from myself' that I find it increasingly difficult at times ..... I find it very difficult to go into a totally different social setting and create new friends and I just find whatever I try and decide, whatever decision it is in my life whether it be big or small is affected by what's happened in the past.*

*I'm trying to sort of come away from that and leave the past behind which is very difficult to do because the memory's constantly there. In particular I have a real problem with situations where I'm in a male orientated environment. I have a high level of aggression which I constantly have to keep in check and I'm constantly running things through my mind all the time which makes it very difficult when I'm sat in a lesson and I'm trying to listen to somebody telling me all this information and I have all this other stuff going round in my mind.*

She went on to link her school experiences and her abuse and then talks about the long-term difficulties they created for her:

*The two main reasons for why I put weight on in the first place was because one was carrying a lot of sweets round to make friends and the other was to try and hide myself hide away from men in particular because I felt that if I was big, men wouldn't want to come near me. When you're young, fair enough but when you get older you suddenly start to realise its not as clear cut as that and then you get the situation where you want a relationship but you daren't have a relationship because you don't know how you would react and you get this vicious circle building up and you go round and round and round until you just don't know where you are. You don't know where the beginning is you don't know where the end is you just go round and round in a circle and the more you worry the more you get depressed the more you come down on yourself the worse it gets.*

*I got to a stage when I was sort of 16, 17 - I ran away from home
while I was at school a couple of times ..... and it was all these
questions 'why did you do it, tell us?' I was so mixed up I didn't know
what to tell them. I just said 'I don't know'. I couldn't tell them what
had been happening. It would have absolutely torn their whole world
apart. It would have made things even worse and it would made me
feel worse and I couldn't have handled it.*

*I tried to commit suicide twice. The first time I actually sat on a
window ledge three storeys up thinking I'll jump out and I hadn't the
courage to do it. The second time I actually had a knife at my wrists
and I was ready for cutting my wrists and my brother came into the
room. We had a struggle and I ended up cutting my thumb instead. A
few years later I took a load of tablets but unfortunately I'd taken a
load of vitamin tablets thinking that this was it - I was going to finish
with life and all they did were make me feel extremely sick for about
two days.*

In her early twenties, Gerry began to have counselling for depression, which the
counsellor assumed was because of her weight. It took Gerry a year to tell the
counsellor about all her experiences and she found that experience in itself fairly
traumatic:

*I didn't know where I was as a person or what I wanted to do with life.
I was just aimlessly going along from one thing to another and
desperately trying to pick myself up and when I got kicked in the teeth,
desperately tried to pick myself up and carry on with the next thing,
without really thinking about what it was and where it was I wanted to
go. It just seemed like a natural way - you get knocked down and get
on with the next thing. It's quite frightening when you start talking.
The first time I talked to that counsellor and I started talking about
how I actually felt, that was quite frightening and quite difficult to
come to terms with all the feelings that have built up over the years.*

Gerry's problems continued when she returned to education and although she
recognises the origins of them, they are still painful:

*I think I went through a lot of problems when I was on the access
course because previously I'd been involved with a man for the first
relationship that I had had - purely platonic but he let me down quite
badly. I found he was already living with somebody else, so the one
fella I started to trust betrayed that trust. Then I got involved with
another gentleman, well I wouldn't call him a gentleman because he
wasn't a gentleman, on the access course and that was actually a
physical relationship from the word go and I think it was almost a case
of I was so desperate to have a relationship, that kind of relationship
with somebody, I just threw myself into it and I had all sorts of
problems when that relationship broke up because I went through all*

*the same feelings that I had all those years ago that I was worthless,*
*that I was a failure, that I couldn't cope with anything and so I found*
*the last few months in particular of the access course very difficult.*

Gerry still does not feel able to be open about the abuse she experienced and she has conflicting emotions about her brother, which she finds difficult to handle:

*My brother and I have a curious relationship we have never ever*
*spoken of what happened - as far as he's concerned, consciously and*
*openly it didn't happen .....I have no doubt that in the deep dark*
*recesses of his mind it is there and every so often he will be reminded*
*of it, but when I was going out with Phil on the access course, he said*
*to me 'well you're innocent, you've never done anything before' .....*
*I've come so close to saying 'but don't you remember this?' and stopped*
*myself. I think more than anything now because he is actually married*
*and he's got a settled life and I think if I brought it up now it wouldn't*
*just affect him it would affect his wife and I couldn't live with that. I*
*love my brother dearly and if anything happened to him I would be*
*there like a shot but at the same time I hate his guts and I have real*
*problems at times when I see him and his wife together. I hate the*
*happiness that he's got and the success that he's got and I get very*
*angry at that, very angry. Again these are all things that a few years*
*ago I wouldn't have admitted to, I wouldn't have even recognised that*
*was the reason why I felt the way I did or how I felt really, but we get*
*along like an ordinary brother and sister. It's only when we argue that*
*the difference comes to light because the aggression I have towards*
*him comes out and there have been a number of times when he said 'I*
*can't understand why you are so aggressive towards me' and I think 'oh*
*god, don't you realise?' He doesn't realise the effect it's had.*

Gerry told me that her unwillingness to reveal her brother's part in the abuse is partly to protect herself. Again, her ambivalent feelings show through:

*I couldn't tell my parents who it was because it would tear their world*
*apart and I couldn't do that because it would hurt me because the*
*people who are most central to my life are my parents. At the end of*
*the day my family are the most important thing in my life. They are the*
*only thing that have given me any continuity and I cling to that to the*
*extent that I won't hear a word said against them. I get really angry if*
*people comment even on my brother. I really do rise up in his*
*defence. Why I should I don't know because sometimes he really does*
*deserve it, but they are the most important thing and I couldn't harm*
*that. To tell them that it was actually my brother would actually rip the*
*family apart and I think know after all these years although it might*
*give me some personal satisfaction to some extent and it might help me*
*in some way to lift that burden it would also create other burdens that I*
*couldn't live with.*

Since she has been receiving counselling, Gerry has become part of a help-line network for victims of abuse and she went on to tell me of a client who had named her family abuser and was ostracised by her family. This had reinforced Gerry's decision to keep quiet about her brother.

I asked her why she decided to do the course now and she told me that her decision to study sciences on the access course had been a mistake, and although she had passed, she had realised over the year that she wanted to work with people in a caring situation, but there is also a major element of proving her ability:

> *Well I felt that if I didn't do it now I would never do it and I sort of came to a point where I thought 'I can either carry on the way that I am going and make a total mess of my life or try and get something positive from the negative' - try to get to a position where I can actually carry on with my life...... I think more than anything because I fear this sort of inferiority. My sister and my brother have both got degrees but I hadn't got that kind of qualification and I think probably in the back of my mind I was feeling that I had to prove myself, not just to them but to myself..... that spurred me on - perhaps this was a way I could prove to myself, more to myself than anybody else that I wasn't a failure. Even if I didn't actually succeed it was something that I actually got the courage to go and try and to have a go at......with everything that happened I felt almost like a failure, well I failed at this; I failed at that.'*

Interwoven with the need to prove her ability is her desire to exercise power and control over her life:

> *..... to some extent I've made progress. I'd actually decided for myself instead of other people deciding for me, to go on the access course. It was a decision I'd made rather than other people which was something that hadn't really happened before. So I'm going to see it through so I can say to myself I'd done it against all the odds against anything that's happened I've come through the other side and I've actually achieved something. My mum will tell you that I felt really proud the first year when I got my credits and I took my mum and my brother and my sister-in-law along to the presentation evening because I wanted them to be there I wanted some of my family to see the fact that I had actually achieved something. I mean in the scheme of things it wasn't very much but to me it was a lot.'*

Gerry's ongoing painful experiences are still having an effect on her. Returning to education is enabling her to take some control over her life and is helping her to build a new image, a large part of which is tied up with proving her ability, both to herself and to others. She told me *'I felt very daunted when I first came back into education'*, and although she did not talk specifically about her growing confidence during the taped

interview, it is implicit in what she said throughout. I gave Gerry a lift to the bus stop after the interview and she told me that she was determined to do something with her life, to get her degree and to work with people. She also told me she was dieting and had lost some weight. This, together with her reference to courage, is an indication of how much she has moved forward since she has been at college.

## Petra

**Petra's** painful experiences are also rooted in her childhood. She is 40, married with no children, and currently in the third year of a four year degree course with a social work qualification at a local university. She had a secondary school education and although she could have transferred at 13, she remained where she was and left school at 14 with no qualifications:

> *Petra: I failed my 11+. At 13 I got a chance to transfer to the grammar school but I don't think it would have worked out because by this time my mother was an alcoholic ..... so I most certainly wouldn't have got the support I needed. I can remember having this piece of paper for them to sign so I could go and I had it in my pocket for ages and I showed it to them then put it back into my pocket - it's so strange now - I can remember feeling a bit hurt with the fact that nobody took it seriously.*

As she implies here, it was the effects of her mother's alcoholism rather than the alcoholism itself which were the problem. Her mother started drinking when Petra was around 11 and was drinking heavily two years later. Petra had to take responsibility for her sister, who was 8 years her junior, and report her behaviour to her father who worked shifts and could not be there all the time. She feels that this supervisory and controlling role still affects her relationship with her sister:

> *It was difficult for me because when my sister was about 5 she (her mother) was quite heavily into her drinking so I had to take on responsibility for my sister. It was a lot of responsibility because I was very young, my father worked shifts. It really affected our relationship a bit because I don't think I was particularly good at it. I was only a child myself but I used to have to report things she'd done because she was a very strong willed child and she was quite naughty and I used to have to tell me dad about things she'd done. She remembers that now and if she tells me something in confidence she'll say 'I know you'll tell my dad', and I say 'of course I won't tell my dad, I used to have to do it when you were getting in the ice cream van and going for a ride round the block with the ice cream man - of course I did - you should be able to work that out for yourself now' but she still doesn't quite trust me .....*

The situation worsened considerably and Petra went to live with her grandparents, visiting her mother occasionally:

> *It actually got worse because for two years it was really like hell on earth. Julie used to want to come with me everywhere and I didn't want it, but I knew my mother wouldn't harm her other than out of neglect. I mean I can look back now and see of course it was a harmful situation but I said 'no, you'll be alright with her and I won't be too long' or 'I shan't be late' and I used to leave her and I would get home and the neighbours had fetched her so she was obviously a very frightened little girl. Eventually the doctor said to my father that he would have to sort something out otherwise it would be a case of us having to move out and I actually had to live with my grandparents. They didn't want my sister - she was seen as a bit of a handful ..... and she clearly wasn't wanted. My father stayed on with my mother for two years but after a few weeks of us all being split up Julie eventually came to us and about a year later my dad came as well ..... I used to go round Sunday mornings to see her because she wasn't drunk then - that was the best time .....*

By this time Petra had left school and was working as a tracer in a local engineering company. She was still taking a large part of the responsibility for her sister and was finding the whole situation more and more difficult:

> *So we were all living there and it was obviously far too much for her ..... I was about 19 ..... I used to do as much as I could, more than my sister and dad. My dad had carried my mum all these years doing housework etc. but once he got back home he didn't do anything - sat in the arm chair and Julie was still the baby. I used to get Julie up for school before I went to work and I used to help out with washing and stuff. I used to go back into Austen on a Saturday with my Grandma to help her with the shopping ..... the whole situation deteriorated. I had relatives in Hull and a boyfriend and I used to go over to cousins and I had a very good social life. He understood the situation totally as he had lost his mother and he suggested I move there which I did. Got a job and it was 'what is she doing? why is she doing this?' and no one understood it. I don't think people understand it to this day ..... An aunt told me only a couple of years ago she thought my lot (then) was alright, which shocked me .....*

Petra still has guilt feelings about leaving her sister and takes much responsibility for what she sees as her sister's emotional problems:

> *Julie stopped where she was ..... and it changed the relationship until she got married herself. She was just devastated because I had gone. We used to take her on holiday and she used to visit but I don't suppose it could have done her any good really. At the time I felt it was a bit irresponsible of me ..... She finds it difficult to show her emotion, she*

*couldn't put her arm round me to say well done - she always sends me*
*a good luck card before my exams but that's the most she can do .....*

After her marriage when she was 20, Petra moved around the country quite a lot for her husband's work, but her painful experiences did not end:

*It was a really traumatic time generally. I'd really been brought up by*
*my gran because of my mum but the day we moved down to Twyford*
*she had a heart attack and died three days later and I was really upset*
*- I'd left all my friends behind .....*
*Tim was head hunted and he decided to move to this job in London*
*and it was an absolute nightmare, he only stayed about three months*
*and we went to Peterborough and unfortunately that job didn't work*
*out at all and they just got rid of a load of people and he was one .....*
*He'd got extremely bad angina and the stupid doctors were putting it*
*down to stress because of his situation and I had to fight to get any*
*medical attention at all so he had a heart attack and nearly died. That*
*was a very difficult time because we were away from family. We'd*
*moved to Peterborough and I didn't really make a lot of friends there*
*but I did a job share and they were marvellous and helped me through*
*this terrible time.*

When Petra and her husband moved back to this part of the country, she took on some responsibility for her mother, although she found her deteriorating condition difficult to handle:

*Then I came back here and walked into all the problems with my*
*mother - that year before we moved here Tim lost his job, had trouble*
*finding another job and my mother burnt her house down.*
*My sister didn't want anything to do with her towards the end at all -*
*she really had to cut her off for her own survival. I was the only*
*person in the end who she had. Everybody else had to abandon her*
*simply for their own survival. When I lived away I could maintain that*
*relationship from a distance but moving here she was only 9/10 miles*
*away. She died fairly soon - by that time she'd got extremely bad*
*cirrhosis of the liver and her second husband had left her and she had*
*just gone downhill. She went into hospital from the burns from this*
*fire she'd had and then she came out and of course she wanted me to*
*look after her, but I just couldn't so she went into a nursing home -*
*eventually discharged herself. She came out on the Friday and the*
*snow came that Friday night and I thought at least she can't get out*
*and get a drink - she was in a warden place, but she did get out and, I*
*don't blame her really, she was dying, she knew she was dying but she*
*drank ..... and went back into hospital and her parting words to me 'I*
*hope you rot in hell' because I wouldn't take her on. I couldn't. I*
*might as well have gone and buried myself in the garden .....*

I asked Petra why she had decided to return to education when she did and she told me she had done the occasional O-level when she was moving around the country, initially encouraged by a supportive colleague:

> *Maureen (a colleague) said, go and do Sociology - you'll enjoy it, and I thought I'd give it a try but I thought I would never pass, because I'd left school with no qualifications ..... they had to show me how to write an essay because I didn't know and to my surprise I passed and I think it was that that triggered everything off .....*

She also recognised that her job prospects would be enhanced with some academic qualifications:

> *Then I thought I'd do English because it needed improving and also I was looking at jobs in the civil service around that time and needed two O levels so I actually did my GCSE exam two days before his heart attack .....*

But she also discovered intrinsic satisfaction in education:

> *The college wrote to me with the details about the access course and I thought I quite fancy this. So I was seriously thinking of doing this course for its own sake because I found that I liked studying and to do it for a year full time would be marvellous, but that had to get shelved when we moved here ..... but then I started the access course here .....*

Her confidence grew through her achievement on the access course:

> *I was very pleased to come into the A level Sociology and the A level English lit. I think if I hadn't done that and seen that I could work along side A level students I don't think I would have had the confidence to go into HE.*

She went on to tell me about her ambivalent feelings when she started at university. However, her confidence has grown to the extent that she did not mention concerns about the work, but about her subsequent employment:

> *I didn't really think I would survive that first year and I'm still wondering whether social work is what I should be doing but I suppose I'm gaining more confidence as I'm going along .....*

Petra's doubts over social work are clearly rooted in her experiences:

> *I think what bothers me with social work is that you don't qualify now as a generic social worker. You have what is called a focused area of practice which dominates your second year and I don't know what I want from my focused area - I don't really want to work with children and families. That's where the work is - that's where the jobs are but I don't think I could be objective ..... Because of my ..... I'd find it very*

*distressing to leave the children in the situations that the law would say*
*I have to leave them in.*

I think this is a very significant comment. Petra told me she chose the social work course because she had done considerable part-time clerical work in social services and allied organisations. She seems to be looking for a professional qualification in an area concerned with people but at the same time is apprehensive of the personal challenges it will bring.

When the tape was switched off, over a cup of tea, she told me that her confidence had grown enormously since she had returned to full-time education. She also told me that she had enormous guilt feelings about her sister and mother, but also that she had been sexually abused by an uncle at quite a young age. She eventually told her mother who dealt with it very effectively and was very supportive.

As well as gaining her paper qualifications, Petra is benefiting from education through her growing confidence and being able to prove her ability. I think there are interesting links between her chosen course, her guilt feelings about her sister and mother and her ambivalence to social work.

Working with disadvantage groups, albeit in a different setting, is also Jenny's ultimate goal.

## Jenny

**Jenny** is 37, married with three children. She has been studying at a neighbourhood centre for about three years, on a variety of courses such as basic English, advanced English sponsored by the South Yorkshire Open College Federation, typing, office practice- whatever the centre offers, she is prepared to enrol for. The courses are free, supported by the European Social Fund because this is a designated deprived area. She is very aware of the social and cultural constraints on her life and is frustrated not only by private control, exerted within her family, but also public control - through socialisation, cultural norms within her neighbourhood and her perception of attitudes in the wider society, particularly in respect of the benefits system. She took GCE's when she was in mainstream education, but became pregnant shortly after she had started a course in nursery nursing:

> *Jenny: I was pregnant. I'd been going out with Trev from being*
> *thirteen, absolutely green because we'd got no sex education*
> *whatsoever; we was an exam group so you wasn't given the sex*
> *education. I was sixteen when I got married, and seventeen when I had*
> *my oldest baby. When we were married, the powers that be told my*
> *husband that he was my legal guardian so that were it ..... and I kind of*

*let him. I got some real flack off my mum when I were pregnant and
getting married - one of my aunts were actually cheeky enough to say,
'What you marrying that scrubber for? It's beneath you.' There were
all that pressure.*

*I go down to my mum's now and she says, 'She's throwing her life
away'. And I'm thinking 'they're not telling me nothing I can't see,' but
I'm in a catch 22 situation. I married Trev because I loved him not
'cos I were pregnant but, now sometimes, 'you've thrown a career
away', er, 'why han't you done this?' 'It's a shame, you're wasting your
life' and everything. And there's Trev sat back saying, 'Er, yeah, and
I'm here.'*

Jenny's husband has been ill, suffering from depression, for the last thirteen years of
their twenty year marriage and she told me he is very resentful of her return to
education. What she is talking about here is the conflicting attitudes between her
extended family members who feel she continues to 'waste her life', and her husband
who remind her that his needs have to be considered. He is constantly reminding her
by both words and actions that he has considerable control over her life:

*I can't actually see Trev getting well and going out to work again, but
we're in a dog-in-t'manger situation - he doesn't want me to. He's a
qualified motor mechanic but he had a nervous breakdown which made
him agoraphobic and he's been home now for thirteen years - and I've
looked after him. He couldn't even go in the garden unless I went in
the garden with him. In between that thirteen year I've had two more
babies. One's got minor motor damage and some growth motor
damage, the youngest; the other one's an acute asthmatic, so I have to
be there to see to them. He could see to them in the house, but he
won't.*

Jenny attempts to play down her progress and enjoyment of the course, but her
husband's resentment of her education appears to have grown recently and he
threatened divorce. This resulted in her breaking down in the doctor's surgery:

*It's stressful now and I've got to see a community psychiatric nurse
because of the stress. I actually collapsed in the doctor's because he
knows that I am developing more - and trying to keep that bit subdued
is hard. He'll not come when I get anything, but he'll not acknowledge
that I've got a certificate. Not long ago all the students who took the
RSA exam were put in the Austen Journal. I'm four foot ten so I get
stuck on the front row don't I? And people at Darnall are saying, 'I
saw you in the paper', and I'm thinking 'oh my God', and his face - I
could literally see it slipping more and more. But the argument is that
he knew I wasn't stupid when he married me. I tell him 'I'm not the little
woman that sits there sewing.'*
*Things've really come to a head, you know, these last few months, so
much so that he actually threatened me with divorce.*

*That's how serious it's just got you see, so I've got to re-educate Trev
else I .....*

I asked her how she managed to return to education if he was so much against it:

*I came out while he was on tablets. I'm not saying it was easy, I was
actually a battered wife at one time. I'm four foot ten and Trev's six
foot four, so there's a big difference in size er, he still, now he's gone
from physical to mental. He doesn't realise he's doing it but it's the
same type of thing. Well I presume he doesn't because he knows that
I've got to see somebody and he knows that there's something wrong,
that I'm getting to nearly screaming stage at times.*

As well as the private control, Jenny is also very aware of the public influence on a
woman's identity once she is married. She is clearly resentful of her loss of individual
identity:

*You lose your identity. You stop being a person when you get married
and especially when she's had that first baby, she becomes a non-
person. You don't become anybody. I suppose at the age I was then,
and it was early seventies, I didn't fit in. Now there's quite a few
unmarried mothers. When I took Rick to nursery the mothers were
older, so they looked at me as if I were a bit of dirt that had crawled
from under a stone - even my sister in law, who'd got one at nursery at
same time. The only people I found that ever did take any notice were
some of the staff, 'cos they knew I'd done the nursery nursing. So, of
course, I were handy for voluntary helper - do the painting and that.
But then I wasn't called Jenny, I was called Rick's mum, or Trev's wife.
And you want to stand on a pedestal and shout, 'look at me - there's me
here. I am somebody if you'd take notice'*

Jenny is very aware of the neighbourhood norms which not only influences her
husband's attitude but also serves to define her identity and lay some limitations on
what she can do:

*We don't go out much 'cos of Trev's illness but I've noticed if we do go
out the women sit down and have a drink when the male goes and
fetches it. Alright he might fetch her one glass of lager say, but the
second drink he doesn't say 'do you want anything different?' My
favourite trick is when we have been out I change a drink every drink.
Trev knows this and I blooming drive him nuts, absolutely drives him
crazy but it's just this perverse little thing - notice me I might only be a
woman but I've got a mind.*

*Trev's always kept me on a tight rein, never let me go out. I've never
been to night clubs and things like this, but letting the man go for a
drink, well he's a man, been working all day - it's acceptable. If you go
in a pub, all eyes are on you. You're either two things - you're either on
the game as they put it, or some bloody bloke's not got you in control*

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*..... your husband's under t'thumb or he's a wimp or whatever they want
to call them. And that's just because you go for a drink.*

*This area that we're in now, Greenfield, it's still accepted that the
man's the one that's the breadwinner. If the woman goes out then he's
looked down on, er, so there's all that peer pressure to the males, 'What
you doing letting her go out?' type of thing. It's high unemployment
round here, they just don't accept that there's a partnership. They were
always brought up that the males went to work. My husband's one of
six. I'm not saying they're uneducated but my mum-in-law's gone out
cleaning, that's what was accepted. She were always in for the kids. In
this area you'll find a lot of 'em's like that. They've always been there
for the kids. They're not a good mother if they're not, you know? It
don't matter whether they've laid on the floor, like I lay on the floor
and do homework with my kids, but that doesn't make me a good
mother. At the end of the day, if my kids have a hot meal, if they're
clean when they go to school, if I'm there to pick them up, that makes
you a good mother, that makes you accepted by society otherwise
you're not accepted, you're like an outcast.
Everybody, I don't care who they are, everybody has to conform to
society in some ways, or life's made hard for you, really hard. But it's
not just made hard for you. I consider that I'm a good mother but if I
wasn't there for my kids the kids would be made to feel that I'm a bad
mother as well. So it snowballs the effect.*

Even Jenny's return to education is tempered by what she sees as acceptable within the
community in which she lives. She contrasts this with her own family's background
and attitudes and acknowledges that it causes her continual conflict:

*So rather than stay at home I went into education (but) I'm on call
now for t'phone. In the last six months I bet I've been called out about
twelve times - out of lessons, out of t'centre. It's a kind of draw -
you've still got that string attached that you feel as though you're
neglecting your family. It's what society puts on you, it's like a mental
hold. The woman looks after the family and if you are not there for
them you're neglecting them ..... I just can't accept that is all you're
meant to do in life, because I know it's not.*

*In my family the women have always worked. The women have always
gone into education. I'm not saying we're brilliantly educated but
we're middle of the road education, so to me it's fairly natural.
My great-grandma were a school teacher - which is not acceptable in a
lot of the society that Trev comes from. On both sides, on my father's
side and my mother's, it's different, a different life. It's really hard you
know, I suppose I'm like stuck in no-man's land trying to merge - if it
were Trev that were doing these courses and wanting to go on I would
back him - and people would expect me to back him, yet because I'm
female and it's me that's got - I suppose it's some type of drive -I'm
seen as a freak - you shouldn't do it.*

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As well as the private control of her husband and the public control of the neighbourhood in which she lives, Jenny feels that her opportunities are also restricted because of the structure of the benefits system. I have discussed this in chapter five, but the point which she makes is that any benefits which she receives personally could make the family worse off financially. I asked Jenny why, given that there were so many pressures on her, she had come back into education. She has aspirations but they are tinged with realism:

*I've been working at the school now for seven or eight year on a voluntary basis, teaching special needs. I would love to either go into hospitals and work within an 'ospital or work within a school. But who's going to let me get that education at the end of the day? People say it's up to you but no, it's not up to you. You find the doors shut, you know? My age now is going against me, I suppose, I'm thirty seven. If I was to go teaching - it's a three year course, I'm forty. What school's going to accept a forty year old against somebody at twenty six?*

*If the government bring where mothers can go in and do their qualifications while they work, and make it worthwhile that people can work, then that would be great for me.*

*But I am restricted to here. I'd love to do some type of research which I'd need to go to University or some type of higher education establishment. (but) I can't see a college being pleased if you get a phone call that says will you come out of college, t'little one's having an asthma attack!*

*And I can't see him (her husband) letting me go on a campus life. I have a bit of social life at the centre when they have the parties, the Christmas parties and that, but you're still limited. You hear the government say, 'Look at this, you'll have a carefree life at university and everything'. You only need somebody like Trev watching that and 'there's no way my wife's doing that, type of thing'. So you're limited. The English teacher keeps pushing me, - 'why don't I do more?' but you're stopped at every turn.*

*I've still got family pressures, I've still got Trev's illness. I've still got government pressures because they're saying everybody's got an equal opportunity - but no you haven't. You can't make your family worse off than what they are, and the benefits that you get goes on what your husband earns, or what he's entitled to.*

J       So this is more than about job prospects then?

*Jenny: It is. It's not just job prospects. With what I've got, without bragging, I could get a decent job. I know I could go further but every bend that you turn, every corner you turn, there's either society -*

*because of ways that they've been brought up - or there's a government
department that stops you.*

*I'm a female. Nobody's going to hold their hand out to me and say,
'You've got to work, you need to work to support your family, aren't you
doing a good job?'*

There is an also an element of having to prove her ability to her extended family:

*I like to prove people wrong I suppose. What started me on was my
mum had a party. Now my mum can be very cruel and my twin sister's
always been the main one, and we went to this, something like a
women's gathering and somebody happened to turn round to me and
say, 'Oh how's Trev and Rick?' And I says, 'Oh they're great' and my
mum turned round and said, 'Don't take no notice of our Jenny, she's
no topic of conversation only Trev and the kids'. And I thought 'I'll
show you'. I admit sometimes now when I get a certificate, I kind of
put it there and I'll say, 'Oh I've just passed this, I've just done ..... '*

She has tremendous pride in her achievement and a determination not to give it up:

*Alright it has made me ill but if I give way then what have I achieved
with all these years? I've not achieved nothing. I might as well have
just said, 'I've gone back to that person who sits in a corner and does
nothing', which I'm not willing to do. Alright I might not get chance to
do much with it but at least I know I've achieved something - I've got
enough certificates now to nearly plaster a wall.*

She is also developing a new identity through the knowledge she has acquired from her
education. This gives her a certain amount of higher status in the neighbourhood and
within her family:

*I did one course, social studies ..... so I know how to look the law up
and I find that they're coming to me now for advice and I keep wanting
to say, 'but I've no topic of conversation', but you know, you bite your
tongue just to let things go. But I think that were where it started and
people just ignoring me - 'don't take no notice of her -what's she
doing?'*

Jenny suggests it is her own obstinacy and determination not to give in to the social
pressure which makes her continue to do what she is doing:

*I'm bloody minded I suppose. If I want something ..... you've got to
work at it. I were once described as having a male ego. Now I don't
know whether that were insult or what, but if I wasn't like that I think I
would have given in. I think they meant I was just strong minded, to
some extent. I'm not that strong minded, it does hurt when they're
being nasty, but I'm good at putting a front on. Luckily I've never
broke down here (at the centre).*

There is also a fight to exert more control over her own life and for some independence, both from her husband and his family:

> *When Trev said our marriage was over, been over for three or four months, I took him at word and it were just the last straw. Now what he's saying is, 'but it is over if you continue your education'. So I'm kind of digging my heels in and thinking, 'you need me more than I need you'.*

> *He'd pulled the reins in. I'm just stretching the reins now do you know? I do tug at the bit quite often. I'm seen as, not a freak or anything but something with my husband's family. 'What's she doing now? How can she do that?' So it's fighting all way.*

Education appears to be Jenny's lifeline. These remarks were scattered throughout the interview:

> *I'm doing these courses now, they're not all what I want to do. I'm not a typist but there's a course that's on offer here - while ever there's courses running here, I shall take them.*

> *You need something like this. If it's only to keep your brain going, you know?*

> *I have fought for what I've got. People don't realise how hard you have to fight.*

> *You've got to be a strong individual to get on.*

> *I'm rebelling - if I hadn't, I would have folded, I would have folded*

> *It's the way that I escape the unfairness I suppose.*

Clearly for Jenny, education is linked with her apparently desperate need for some independence and to have some control over how her own identity is defined. Her story reflects and reinforces those of many of the women, though Jenny's verbalisation of her feelings is rather more explicit than some of the others have been. Her last point about fairness, is also a central issue in Sheila's story.


## Sheila

**Sheila** is 40 and married with no children - her only child died a few years ago. She is in the third year of a four-year degree course with a social work qualification at a local university. Her story starts when she was quite young, at home, the youngest by eight years of five children. She is the only child of her mother, but has four half-brothers and sisters. She took the 11+ but her success was not the happy event she felt it should have been, though in hindsight she is more accepting of her parent's attitude:

*Sheila: I passed my Eleven Plus to go to the grammar school ..... and then being told not to get my hopes up because I wouldn't be able to go to university. In actual fact I think it was quite a worry to them that I was even going to grammar school for financial reasons. It was quite a prestigious grammar school, very expensive uniform and equipment and I think that caused quite a worry to my father.*

*Everybody else's parents seemed to be celebrating this thing. The other people in my class at school got bikes and watches and things and you also got your name in the paper - your parents have to take your name and a letter, and that didn't happen for me. I was extremely unhappy ..... upset and angry. I felt lots and lots of mixed feelings. It's only looking back now that I also can see the worry that they had financially that I can handle all that you know. I don't think there were any sort of thoughts at all about me achieving, I think that generally speaking my parents just thought I'd get married and that it wasn't important.*

Sheila felt that her education took second place to the domestic responsibilities which were expected of her as a young female. This appeared to cause considerable problems for her, particularly in school, but it reinforced the traditional gender role:

*I were very unhappy when I got to grammar school - lot of reasons, and one of them was that I always went to school with a sick feeling in my stomach when I hadn't done my homework and that were basically because at home I had jobs to do. My eldest sister by this time had just had her second child and was suffering post-natal depression, but we didn't know then it was post-natal depression ..... and I used to have to go home and look after the children. I was the youngest female and I had to go and look after the children and put them to bed after school and I had things I had to do at home.*

*I didn't say anything because .... right into finishing school I would have not had any sort of effect on my parents - my sister needed help with the children. No, I didn't say anything because I thought it was pointless. But I was always getting into trouble. I'd manage to write something before the class started during break or dinner time. I have a very good memory of that and making up excuses. If I'd told the teachers what were happening then they would have to approach my parents and I'd be in trouble.*
*I managed quite well in the third year and came out fourth in the whole class. Things were calmer at home and that allowed me to work.*

The difference in the school/home ethos was not just in terms of attitude to-wards education, the hidden curriculum also affected Sheila. She felt isolated at the grammar school, unable to participate in extra-curricular activities and with no peer contact from her previous school. She left at the minimum leaving age:

*But there were other things as well, things like, I couldn't do what the others did, I didn't fit. I were probably, looking back, the poorest pupil in the year out of all the people I knew. Things like my blazer had a badge that was stitched on and my blazer had been somebody else's. It had wide lapels and this badge was different .....*
*I left when I was fifteen, didn't take any exams .....*

Sheila got a job in Boots as a trainee dispensing assistant, but had to leave when she became pregnant at sixteen. Boots not only operated a marriage bar, but also a policy of not employing visibly pregnant women:

*You had to leave.*
*To stay on at Boots after you got married you had to have special permission from the Area Manager and really it were only people who were well in .....*
*It were 1969. I were pregnant and that actually ruled it out because you never, ever, ever had a pregnant women behind the counter at Boots, so I couldn't even work there until I were, you know later on in the pregnancy. I had to leave as I was getting married because, well I didn't have the permission to stay anyway. and being pregnant before I got married .....*

Although she had only been working for a short period, her loss of financial independence was difficult for Sheila to handle:

*I'd had quite a long period on this maternity allowance and I can remember when it had gone I was in a real panic that I didn't have any money at all. I hated it, I really hated it. There were no family allowance then, so I didn't have anything that was mine. Managing on one wage wasn't too bad because we never had much money anyway. It was my independence.*

*When I was pregnant I needed a coat because it was getting towards winter and I were big and none of my coats went round me and I can remember feeling totally humiliated, just asking. I suppose that, I thought that because the wage was actually paid for Joe's labour to him, it felt like his.*

It is at this point that she begins to talk of fairness:

*I weren't really aware of women's issues then and the only models that I had to go on were my parents. Mum didn't work and dad worked and you know he kept his wage. I didn't question that then but there was something, I couldn't explain where it came from, but something inside me somewhere along the line as a child I got this thing about fairness and I knew that I didn't have a fair share ..... I don't know where that came from because I were bought up very much within the home to fulfil a women's role and yet there's something inside me about it's not fair.*

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After her son was born, Sheila gave up any thought of working until he was older.
When he was five, he was diagnosed as having muscular dystrophy. During a fund-
raising event at a local youth club, she was offered some part-time work, in the Youth
Service, in the evenings. She talks of a mixture of feelings:

> *This job came up which was a life saver because finding out Neil had
> got Muscular Dystrophy I didn't think I'd ever be able to do anything.
> ..... two conflicting feelings about first of all the grief that this were
> happening to Neil and I don't think I got the guilt thing, perhaps I did
> and I didn't acknowledge it. But I know later on in Neil's life I looked
> forward, meaning purely looking forward to as opposed to being
> optimistic, and thought about what I would do after Neil's death, if I
> thought in those terms I would then feel guilty afterwards so perhaps
> there were some feeling of guilt about.*

However, her evening work caused relationship problems between her and her
husband, largely over the caring responsibility for their son, and she found it easier to
enlist the help of others:

> *It was usually two night a week, but it caused problems, not in the
> sense that we had arguments about it but purely and simply Neil was
> still my responsibility and so if it were Joe's shift week it were my
> responsibility to make arrangements for Neil. Even leisure - during the
> summer he played cricket and if he'd got a match on the night that I
> were at work it were my responsibility to find somebody. It was never
> Joe's responsibility but if he was there he would be quite happy about
> caring for Neil.*

> *When the training started, that involved some weekends and an extra
> night in the week. If I were on a training course at the weekend Neil
> would go and stay with my parents for the weekend and the extra night,
> if Joe were in he looked after him but I think probably because Neil
> liked to go to his grandparents so much, it was an easy way out rather
> than negotiate with Joe.*

Around this time, Sheila *'went through a bad patch'* of wanting to work full-time,
which she felt was impossible because of her son. By this time, Neil was attending a
school for physically disabled children, so she returned to college and did some 0-
levels. This was a day-time course, but she had set up a mutual support system with a
neighbour whose child also went to the same school, but by the time she started A-
levels, her son, who was in his teens, needed a wheelchair and she had to leave
college. She talked of this being a very painful time:

> *It were a very emotional time for me ..... it were a minefield of
> emotions.*

*When Neil went into a wheelchair he put weight on very quickly and he*
*was very soon in a position where my father couldn't lift him and so my*
*father just couldn't carry him upstairs any more because of his weight.*
*And that put an end to that support system as well. So, when Neil went*
*into a wheelchair the support that I had very soon disappeared.*

This period also created greater strain in her relationship. Sheila links this with the way
her husband perceived their respective roles, but she also talks about control - her
anger at her helplessness in the situation, and what her husband saw as her attempt to
control him:

*Up to Neil's death I was always responsible, it were the biggest risk*
*between Joe and myself. He would very often not come home in time*
*and I'd have to make this judgement about, do I leave Neil with a drink*
*watching TV or do I wait and if I went I would spend all evening*
*thinking, worrying. If I didn't go, I'd be thinking about the kids waiting*
*..... and I used to get really angry about it because I had all this*
*pressure on me ..... We didn't have a telephone then - I had to leave*
*t'door open so that people could get in to him, the house were unsecure*
*and it meant anybody could get in ..... so he were left in a very*
*vulnerable position.*

*Sometimes you know there were anger and tears. There were pleading,*
*everything, but we still couldn't agree. (I felt) completely utterly*
*frustrated and even now Neil's been dead three years, it brings up all*
*the anger that I felt then and it's one of those things that occurs when*
*you're having a row about something.*

These issues are clearly still fresh in her mind:

*..... my work didn't value. It's so unthinkable that Joe wouldn't be able*
*to go to work in the morning because I wasn't there to look after Neil*
*and yet that's what happened to me, I'd always be asking somebody to*
*come and watch him, you know before Joe came home and it was, I can*
*barely talk about it now, its .....*

*We've talked about it and you know like these last two years and Joe*
*will say it was about 'you can't tell me what to do ..... ' He weren't*
*exactly sitting at end of road in t'car to annoy me but he wouldn't stop*
*work. But yea, it were about control. In time it had an effect on my*
*decision as to whether to finish work.*

When her son became really ill, Sheila gave up both studying and work to nurse him:

*When Neil fell really ill, I gave up work to nurse him. because by this*
*time it could go literally from a sore throat in the morning to*
*hospitalisation by evening - his health would deteriorate very quickly,*
*and it were a case that if he were ill I wanted to be there because I*
*could have lost him and I didn't want to be at work. It were my choice*

*at that point - there were no questions about Joe giving work up
because that's been the pattern all along.*

From being quite young then, Sheila's identity has been largely defined, and certainly
circumscribed by her gendered role, despite her resistance to it. Her son's death
brought many emotions to the surface. Apart from the obvious pain, she expressed a
powerful loss of identity and fear of dependence. She was advised to take about a year
before making any major decisions and this gave her time to think about her position

> *After he died I took some time out to sort myself out. it also meant that
> I were without a purpose. But it was - its strange really - the door had
> closed behind me and I'd this great vast something in front of me and it
> took some doing to step out into that.*

> *I was very aware very quickly that I were dependant on Joe for certain
> requirements. Up to that point I'd never ever been married simply for
> me, I was pregnant when I got married. I weren't aware of this through
> the marriage and yet as soon as I lost Neil I realised that we'd never
> just been alone really. I realised really quickly what a vulnerable
> position I was in, that if Joe decided that I didn't suit him any more, he
> certainly didn't need me for his child care requirements. Some friends
> of ours split up a few months before and that made me aware of my
> vulnerability and that's probably the reason why I questioned it so
> quickly. I realised that, that the few things I had left in the world were
> dependant upon Joe. I hated it so much I can't tell you. Had Joe left
> me at that point, I couldn't even see me, everything seemed to be gone
> or dependant upon Joe and I knew then that I had to do something very
> positive.*

Sheila had thought about going to higher education some time before, and in fact had
already begun A-levels, but again, it was her fear of dependence which was the major
motivating factor:

> *I'd known for a long time that one day Neil wouldn't be dependant
> upon me because we knew right from the start that he would die,
> probably late teens, which were when he did die. I knew that one day I
> wouldn't have any responsibilities and that I wanted to go to university
> ..... it's been there quite a long time but I have to say I think that the
> things that actually drove me at the time after Neil's death were
> insecurity and fear ..... it was panic of becoming dependent - very very
> strong fear.*

> *I'd made a decision not to go back to the Youth Service because I
> thought we'd both go to work in the day eventually and both come
> home ..... it's not secure anyway .....
> After a year I were just about ready to start - we had a lot of marriage
> problems - he weren't handling his grief I know now and I were getting
> abusive phone calls every night. We had the phone number changed to*

*ex-directory and they still kept coming. Neil's friend died a couple of months later. The day after the funeral I jumped out of bed, four o'clock in the morning ..... and had a nervous breakdown. Another year passed - I had agoraphobia, initially I'd been heavily sedated, when I came out of that, what I did were join some craft classes for a year to get back into it, then did the Access course.*

During this period, Sheila was still dependent upon her husband *'which didn't help'*. When I asked her what she had in mind when she chose the access course, her reply was a vehement *'independence!'*, but she also had a specific career aim: *'I knew I wanted to be a social worker'*. Her desire for independence was so strong that although she had applied to the local universities she would have been prepared to move out of the area:

*I applied for Austen University, the idea was that I would apply to Austen first. I wanted a degree and so the idea was that I would apply to what were then Austen Polytechnic and Austen University and if I didn't get on I would then go anywhere in the country that would have me. I wanted to do Austen because of my parents and my marriage, but if Bath would have had me and Austen wouldn't I'd have gone to that.*

She is in receipt of a grant but feels that her independence is violated because it is assessed on her husband's income and although he pays for her petrol and some books she still feels that it is a form of control:

*My grant's assessed on Joe's income. I can't actually draw money out of my student account because there isn't enough. Joe pays for my petrol and my books, but I don't get what he should pay*

Her resentment extends beyond the financial situation between her and her husband, and she verbalises, like Jenny, the unfairness of the benefits system which in many instances appears to create dependency:

*I don't think that its fair that I'm not eligible for a full grant, but, I think what is really frustrating for me as well is being discriminated against because we actually have a marriage licence. There's those with long term partners - they're in a similar financial situation to me, they've never worked, you know 'cos they've had children but they haven't got a marriage licence, and they get a full grant.*

Sheila's major benefit from education is her potential independence and an identity which is outside of her domestic role and over which she has some control. Her determination in this area is reflected in her response when I asked her whether she had had to negotiate with Joe about going to university:

*No. I think that he knew in any case I was going - that there were no questions, I were going, and that it would have been a waste of time, had he not wanted me to go, to try and stop me because I would have gone.*

*Starting at university was one of the happiest days of my life ..... I felt like I were always trying to get off, to go, and every time I got to the front door, something happened to stop me, and yet, all my life I think I knew I'd get there .....*

*I think mostly I'm just getting stronger and stronger, but I think the most important thing is that every day I'm there is another day closer - it just goes back to saying I want to be independent. I must say that independence is very strong, but also an identity is very very important. The period when I were not working and I were just a wife, I would never say that ..... I need that identity and independence.*

I asked Sheila whether she would move out of the immediate area for a job and whether she had discussed this with Joe:

*That might shock him actually. In a way I've just taken it for granted that I would work somewhere within the area and I realised that I'm prepared to go anywhere to get a job. I don't mean leave Joe, but if I needed to go and work somewhere else for a couple of years to get experience and perhaps come back then I will.*

*I haven't discussed it with him to be honest, not because I daren't speak to him about it or anything but only because it's been going through me head.*

Again, the importance which Sheila attaches to independence comes through:

*I must have given some thought to my marriage. I do actually want it to continue but I want it to continue because I want to be together, not because we're in any way dependent on each other. I've been thinking about this ..... I'm forty one, I've been dependent all my adult life and if after all these years you can't stand it (separation for work) then perhaps we shouldn't be together, I'm not going to wait 'til I'm fifty five to regret, you know what's past. It'll be painful but if it happens it happens.*

Her course is clearly making her examine her identity:

*Recently you know, partly because of the course and all stuff we did like gender, I wonder what it were, what this seed were that was sown in my childhood, and if I could find it I'd go and give it to every other girl that I met .....*

Sheila's return to education at all levels has clearly served many purposes - an identity outside the home, therapy, some control over her own life, the fulfilment of a long-held, though maybe not always verbalised, ambition, and a redress of the unfairness she perceives. Most importantly for her however, it is helping to meet her need for both financial and psychological independence.

## Summary

This last group of five students experienced a variety of painful events which had a major effect on the course of their lives and defined their identities in particular ways at both private and public levels. The women's stories told of lives which had been closely circumscribed by powerful others and of a need to resist this control and gain some independence within their particular circumstances. Netta for example, was resistant to the gendered nature of her domestic role and because *'it's me that has to do it'*. She is looking to redefine herself along less clearly gendered lines. For Gerry, the *'courage to do something'* was central to the new self-image she was developing - 'the doing' seeming to be as important as the end product. Petra is gaining confidence and proving her ability through education. She also makes tentative links between her guilt feelings and her future career through the vehicle of education. Jenny's courses are *'the way I escape the unfairness'* and help with her determination not to allow the neighbourhood culture to totally determine her identity and the new respect she is gaining from her family through her education is giving her a more positive self-image. Sheila also talks about redress of the unfairness she has experienced because of her gendered identity. Her higher education course is the fulfilment of a long-held ambition which will give her financial and psychological independence.

Overall the students talked of confidence, a more positive self-image, the respect of others, proving ability and independence, all of which are concerned with the women's need to re-define at least a part of their identities in their own way through education. I have an impression of women fighting for personal survival, not in a physical, but in a psychological sense and education is the vehicle they are using. For all the women, education could be seen as therapeutic in its broadest sense.

So, returning to the title of this chapter:

# What *is* in education for women?

Students return to education for many reasons. Whatever they are aiming at, the central theme of this chapter is the links they are making with education now. It is very

clear that the students with whom I talked were gaining a great deal more from their return to education than just paper qualifications.

A number of common strands have emerged from the stories. The women made clear links between education, increasing confidence and independence which will give them greater power and control over their lives. The following are a few extracts from the chapter which epitomise the many links which the students made:

> It's made me value me a lot I think, it's made me see myself a lot differently, and I'm a lot happier about myself.

> ..... I had actually achieved something ..... in the scheme of things it wasn't very much but to me it was a lot.'

> ..... we started in the September and I got all the credits done easy ..... I thought, God I've done it again! I was so bloody proud of myself

> I'm proud of myself, to be honest, I'm very proud of myself .....

> It boosts your confidence and it all makes you feel much better

> I've got more confidence now than what I've ever had really

> Definitely something personal. I wanted to prove to people that I had got some worth. It's given me something positive.

> The main issue? I think getting rid of little skeletons in the cupboard ..... the course has helped. I wouldn't have done it without being on the course.

> It's something to be proud of - something for yourself

> You've got a life out of home haven't you?

> I might not get chance to do much with it but at least I know I've achieved something

> Starting at university was one of the happiest days of my life .....

> Independence is very strong, but also an identity is very very important. I need that identity and independence.

These extracts are a reflection of the changing and more positive perceptions which the women have of themselves. Changes such as increasing confidence, fulfilment, a more positive self-image, independence and so on are over-arching themes, threaded through all the stories, but perhaps more powerfully evident in those which included painful experiences. If identity is a sense of who we are and where we belong in society, then

the changes about which the women were talking fit well into this conceptual framework. It is not necessarily that the women are looking for a new identity, rather it seems to be an edited version of an identity over which they feel they have had insufficient control. For many of the women, the 'real me' is emerging - this was particularly evident with Dilys for example. Quite often with her increasing confidence, a student's perception of herself changed whilst she was in education and it was almost as if she was discovering a different self - Vida puts this nicely: *'I think gradually it has been a metamorphosis of me'.*

For some students, education is linked with a particular aspect of an identity, or the development of a part of their identity which was latent. For those students with domestic or caring responsibilities, it was the desire for an identity outside of and as well as, rather than instead of their household duties, which was important. Frances puts this well: *' it's something to be proud of - something for yourself and not for them. You've got a life out of home ..... '.*

For a large number, particularly those who talked of painful experiences, education is linked with a desire to remedy a negative self-image hugely influenced by the attitude and behaviour of significant others, either directly, as with Gerry for example, or indirectly, as with Alison. Often, this negative self-image was imposed (and sometimes resisted) from a very early age, and education seems to be a means by which many of the students with whom I spoke were taking back some power and control over the way in which their identity had been defined.

Students have many issues then, of both a personal and practical nature, which they address when they return to education. During the course of my discussion with local college staff, it was suggested that in order to gain more background information on these issues, I should talk to a particular voluntary worker whose post brought her into contact with many students. When I went along to talk to her, she did indeed confirm that students came to her with many problems and that there was a gender dimension to their difficulties, but what she went on to tell me was an extremely traumatic personal story. I have decided to present this story separately from the others, not only because of its intensely painful nature and the powerful links with education, but also because of the almost accidental way in which it was collected, which reinforces to some degree the frequency of the link between education and the extent of trauma in women's lives.

**Della** is aged 40, divorced and has three children. She returned to education two years ago as a full-time student at a local college and has completed an access course. During the access course she applied for and succeeded in getting a voluntary part-time post with the Students' Union, based at the same college. She has taken a sabbatical and continued with that this year. Her elder daughter is in her second year at university, her second daughter is at the same college as Della. Her son, aged 13 is at a school in the area which provides for special educational needs.

She was second oldest in a working class (her categorisation) family of seven children and her traumatic experiences started early, though she may not have recognised them as such at the time:

> *My mother....was always putting us down. There were seven of us, the oldest was my sister, she (her mother) always said to us that she never wanted any of us except her, you know, blatantly, in the face 'I never wanted any of you' and I think when I got to the age of 10 I started rebelling against her for putting all her crap on me and I hated her, I still do, I was worthless and never wanted .....*

Her rebellion was reflected in her refusal to go to grammar school, to do homework, to wear school uniform and to do the traditional 'female subjects' such as cookery and needlework. She seemed to constantly challenge school authority:

> *I eventually got expelled in my fourth year ..... I wouldn't conform to their views of what girls should be, so I was out*

> *They would say you will do this and I would say but what for, why? and I would flatly refuse to do homework. I would question what the teachers said. Everybody else sat there 'she's going to be in trouble again'. I thought 'well it's not trouble, I want to know why' and it eventually came to one teacher, I had been off about two weeks with tonsillitis and I came back and they said 'have you done your homework?' and I said 'no, I didn't know anything about it in the first place' so , you know the tubes they put papers in? Well, he hit me with one of them and I hit him back and that was it you know - out you go - so I went and got a job - 15 and a bit.*

Della had a good relationship with her father though:

> *My father was totally different, he was always there. He stood by us regardless. If there was trouble or anything else he was there, but he died the day before I got married. He died on the Friday and I got married on the Saturday .....*

She married at 19 and had her first child at 20:

> *I think my life just ended, I got stuck in the usual role of me being at home with a child, no help, no support and just sort of festering .....*

*I was screaming inside, I was dying. I thought well, I will become this mother. I accepted I've got this child and I've got this husband that didn't work but can always find money to go out drinking. He never helped in any way and I didn't get help from my mother. Basically, I cut her off. My sister and my two older brothers, they've got their own families. My husband's side were a typical working class family and they kept themselves to themselves, they helped each other but wouldn't help me -     Because I wasn't born of their name and I was somebody else's daughter.*

Over the next six years she had two more children, by which time she was 26. The violence started after her third child was born.

*He was domineering. What he said went. I'd fallen in the trap, very dependent. Before the last child was born there was no signs of physical violence and then when Jon was born in 1980 the physical violence started. I was trying to question - what have I done? I'd find something I'd done to justify what he done to me - I didn't do this right or I said that wrong or his tea wasn't ready, silly stupid things. The violence got worse. You know the push became a hit and the hit became a punch and the punches became harder and then I've had my legs broken, I've had black eyes, I've had my teeth knocked out, my lips split, fingers broken and when he knocked my front teeth out, Jon would be three, the eldest ten and the other one seven. He left that night, he actually came back about three hours later, said he'd been to his sister's and called up and couldn't get any answer ..... He said he'd reported himself, I thought yes of course he had. Now every time I got an injury I told the hospital or the doctor that he'd done it but I told him that I had made an excuse.*

*About a week after he had knocked my teeth out he came in the house and I thought 'you'd do worse if you don't let him back in'. I got all the threats as usual and I said 'if your hand comes near me again I'll stab you'. The violence stopped for about two or three months and then he got back into his old routine. He came at me and I got a knife and I threatened him. From that he didn't physically hurt me and the violence was, I could see it coming, the violence was directed at my eldest daughter. All this time his family knew what he was doing, I never told any of mine - I thought it's my problem and I'll sort it out but his family knew and I couldn't understand why they had never said anything to him - come to see me or anything else and that's when I thought it's because I'm somebody else's daughter. Their daughters had had violence from their partners and the whole family had charged up and sorted them out but I thought 'they haven't done it for me. Where are they?' I thought - 'somebody else's daughter that's what it is' and his mother actually turned round and said 'well he's your husband after all and you have to accept what comes', and I said 'no I don't'. I'd been through enough they (the children) hadn't actually*

been physically hurt by then but I knew they were mentally and emotionally hurting.

It came to this particular night and Donna would be 14 ½ getting ready for her mock exams ...... Jon was quite small and talks a lot and she was getting on with revising and all she said was Jon would you mind keeping quiet while I'm revising? Well, he blew his top. He went nuts - he threatened to put her through a window. He went into t'kitchen, he got a hammer, he smashed every stick of furniture in the house, every single bit. Jon and Katie the middle daughter they went upstairs. I thought they'll just be holding each other. I was scared Donna was going to get it obviously ..... and I was scared that if I joined in I was going to get it as well ..... This went on for two or three hours at least. All this screaming and shouting going on. He hadn't hit her yet but I could see it coming so I grabbed Donna and said to go over the road to her friend Denise and said stay there. I said 'I'll sort it out' and one almighty fight and that's the time I ended up with broken fingers and a split lip and where I got strength from I don't know but I threw him out. I locked the doors, threw all his clothes out, straight out of the bedroom window, called the police. They came and it was, well it's done with, it's a domestic and you know a typical male attitude, they couldn't see what we had been through and they were going to let him get away with it again.

The next morning Donna phoned and I said 'you can come home now he's not coming back again'. She said 'but you said that before'. 'I know I said it before but this time this is it'. 'But you've said that before', and I said 'I know, you're going to have to trust me on this one, we've all had enough'. That was on the Friday night. On the Monday morning I went straight round to the solicitor's. I got a solicitor - a nice woman and I gave everything to her, the whole lot. After a while she began issuing divorce proceedings. The papers were delivered to him by private detective and three months later another set of papers were delivered and still no response and then it was like nine or ten months and still no response. He said he hadn't received them and we had to appeal to the court to say look he has received these papers three times and they had to take a statement from the private detective who said yes the papers containing this, this and this I have delivered three times and there has been no response and it went through. Well it started to go through and he wanted access to Jon, not the girls they weren't his he always said, none of them were his but he wanted access to Jon basically because he is the only son and he is the only one to carry that family name on. ..... I didn't want Jon to see him, then I thought if I just said no he's going to make trouble, so I did it on a voluntary basis. Saturday I was to drop him off about 11 and pick him up about 4, and I used to dread picking him up. In the few minutes I dropped Jon off and the few minutes when I picked him up I got 'I want to kill you, you're going to die ..... He used to phone up, passing all these threats down the phone all through the night. I told my

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*solicitor this and she said 'what you have to do now is every time he says something when you see him or on t' phone write the date and time down'. I did and I had this huge pile of papers. Donna continued to work for her GCSE's. She got nine all A's and B's - how, I'll never know.*

*It came to the family court because he was contesting custody .....
They said I was how did they say, mentally disturbed. I used to believe this - I was going mental.*

*And he wanted Jon so desperately he couldn't be bothered to turn up at the family court for the custody hearing so custody went to me anyway. I couldn't see it going any other way and he continued to see his dad but it got to the stage where I couldn't take him, someone else used to take him. Then on a Friday after about a year or so Jon refused to go. He screamed abuse at me. He'd come back on a Saturday in tears, screaming at me in temper. I thought he must be doing something to him or the family must be saying something. Well I took him to the doctor's and said well look this is what's happening - he's constantly wetting t'bed, constantly screaming and shouting in his sleep. He referred him to child psychiatrist at the children's hospital and on the first session there were tears and the only thing he could say was he didn't want to turn out like his dad.*
*I sit with Jon as well - even to this day he'll not go in by himself. The psychiatrist found out that he (his father) had been saying all these things to him - what he's going to do to me, what he's going to do to Donna, what he's going to do to Katie and he'd kept it to himself - he was 8 or 9.*

*Yes, besides these emotional mental problems he's got, he's got educational problems as well, quite bad ones. Whether this is due to what happened to him - he now attends a special needs school, for about 15 months now. He knows that nothing is anyone's fault now because he used to blame Donna - this is all your fault - and she believed it and she went into deep depression and she couldn't go to the doctors. I went to the doctor's and explained it to him ..... how I've managed to cope with all the crap, with Jon's problems and Donna's depression, I don't know how I managed to bring her out of that .....*

Following the divorce. Della's two younger children had quite severe emotional problems which she is still helping them through. She spent the first year after her divorce helping them through the trauma, although she recognised a need in herself to *'do something - I wanted something for me'*. The following year she was persuaded by her elder daughter to enrol in the local college:

*She said 'Why don't you go to college?' 'No I can't do that, it's only for young people.' I'd been out of education you know 24 years and I just said no, I really wanted to go but I was too scared, absolutely terrified*

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> *- what is this older woman going to do in college with all these young
> people? I didn't want to but she bullied and bullied me until I actually
> came down and I ended up doing 3 GCSE's.
> She said I could do it, but I didn't think I could, for about the first six
> months I was packing it in every week ..... it was just having that
> motivation, a bit more get up and go, confidence.....'*

Despite having a great deal of stress-related illness, she enrolled the following year,
after some persuasion, on the Access course which she completed with ease. This gave
her a great deal of pride in her achievement:

> *I got some confidence back then and I started the second year on
> access. Everybody was in this access room - who are you, have you got
> any previous qualifications, and there were no qualifications, no
> qualifications and I'd got qualifications and it went round and I
> thought nobody else had got anything! As you get to know one another
> during the first six or eight weeks the comments I got was 'when we
> went round that room and said who we were and what we got, you
> looked so confident, really voiced out' I thought 'Oh great!'*

> *It got to about February as we started in the September and I got all
> the credits done easy ..... I thought, 'God I've done it again!' I was so
> bloody proud of myself ..... I got so many students coming up asking
> for help .....*

Della's confidence had grown massively during this period, so much so that she was
persuaded to take on a voluntary post within the college:

> *So there was a vacancy for a voluntary post and a female lecturer said
> 'why don't you go for it?' and I thought 'no I can't do that', 'well you
> can always give it a try'. So I did and that was my first involvement
> with it. I thought it was absolutely wonderful, it gave me even more
> confidence.'*

As well as boosting her confidence, it has also given her some power over defining her
identity. It is not a new or different identity, but an aspect of her which she is
developing. She has respect and prestige in this job which makes her feel that she is a
worthwhile person:

> *Now I'm President of the whole college, I was elected by ballot. I love
> what I do now if it could be a a permanent job, but I know it's not. I've
> helped a lot of female students a hell of a lot. When its induction week
> I go round to classes and at the end I always say 'if you have problems
> whether its personal or academic don't just sit there you get up and tell
> someone and if they don't listen you come to me and I will try and sort
> it out for you'. It gives me great satisfaction and pleasure that I help
> someone whose been down and not known how to get out of it. I love*

*been around students young and old, it doesn't make any different to
me what they are who they are .....
I have got all my confidence back and great satisfaction with my work.
I'm going to do the next academic year then I'll go on to do a B.Ed.*

This confidence has spilled over into other areas of her life. Her son was still having severe psychological problems as a result of the trauma and had been excluded from school. She took on the might of the local education authority; refused to accept that it could be up to two years before he could be placed in a school which was equipped to help him with his difficulties:

*I didn't have a clue how to do it but since I got that confidence back I
thought 'I can do that and I can do this and my child is not going to do
without an education for 18 months to two years till they decide to find
him a place' ..... So I found him a school ..... Education said you can't
do this and I said 'yes I can ..... I can do anything I like .....' I started
Jon in a special school before they actually started their paperwork.*

Della's return to education has been clearly instrumental in her returning confidence. It is however a somewhat tenuous confidence, which was illustrated when I asked her what plans she had:

*I'm going to do this year, I don't feel, I'm not quite ..... probably
because of my emotions ..... doing what I do now and doing what I did
last year I feel safe ..... I'm going to stand again next year then I will
go on ..... I want to do a B.Ed in special needs ..... Now I'm scared of
nothing, but sometimes I am ..... I don't know ..... in HE there's not
going to be that personal support like I've had here ..... I'm not ready,
until I've dealt with everything I need to deal with within me then I
don't think I can go .....*

Della's experiences have clearly been very painful, both physically and psychologically. There is a search for a positive, acceptable self-image. Her daughter has played a key role in persuading Della that she could do it, which she acknowledges, but at the same time, she is determined to be independent:

*The original goal was not my goal, it was Donna's goal - I will go on to
higher education, and I thought 'if I can do this, I can do that quite
easily' and then we still had these mega problems with John .....
I was being pressurised by Donna and by the college. I said 'yes, I'm
going to do it', then I thought, 'no, I'm not, I'm going to do it in my own
time, when I'm ready'.*

This determination was reflected in her closing comment:

*There are still barriers I keep up where people are not allowed in, no
one in. In here is me, myself and I and there are parts of me that
nobody else can have, not even the kids, they belong to me.*

# The centrality of Della's story

I was stunned by Della's story, and did not immediately recognise its significance. It was only later, and into the initial analysis of the data that I recognised its central importance for a number of reasons:

Firstly, Della makes all the links with education which other students make, but not only this, she is clearly aware of the role which education has played and continues to play in her life. Secondly, the way in which I stumbled across this story confirms for me not only the frequency of the links between women's return to education and traumatic experiences, but also the 'chance' element in much social data collecting. Thirdly, Della's story was virtually the turning point in my shift from barriers to traumatic experiences as the focus of this thesis. Her story came about half way through the data collecting, when I was beginning to realise the extent of the frequency of such stories. This reinforces the value of a grounded theory approach from a feminist perspective. If I had used only my own agenda when I talked to Della, rather than being prepared to recognise hers, I may not have collected this very rich and interesting material and the exciting potential of the data could well have been overlooked.

On the face of it, Della's story fits excellently into the theoretical construct of patriarchy, particularly as espoused by Sylvia Walby (1990) in terms of domestic violence. Fitting less clearly into a patriarchal construct is her relationship with her mother and the way she has actively worked to exert some power and control over her life. This latter point is true not only for Della of course, it is threaded throughout the stories of all the students I interviewed.

The extent to which patriarchy is a useful conceptual tool in relation to the data I have presented will be discussed in the next chapter.

# Section III:  The Findings in Context

# Chapter 7: In search of a theoretical framework

## Introduction

To what extent is patriarchy a useful conceptual tool in the analysis of my data? This chapter sets out to examine the strengths and weaknesses of this theory, grounding the critique in the research findings.

My original intention had been to use an eclectic approach, as I have discussed in chapter one. However, the emergent data, discussed in chapters five and six, led me to clarify my focus from a bundle of theoretical preconceptions, incorporating patriarchy, power, ideology and structuration to one grounded in the research material. This chapter starts by briefly revisiting this focal re-adjustment before moving on to discuss the development of patriarchy as a conceptual tool within feminist literature. This section of the chapter culminates in a discussion of Sylvia Walby's (1989, 1990) concept of patriarchy and particularly the six overlapping and interlocking patriarchal structures which she uses to examine the position of men and women in this society. The theory is then tested, drawing on the research data and using verbatim illustrative material. Emerging from this is a discussion of the limitations of the theory, particularly in relation to psychological violence, guilt, control of women by other women and agency, again drawing on the research findings. Prior to the conclusion, Colette's story is used as a case study to explore the interaction between patriarchal control and agency.

## Theoretical constructs - one or many?

My intention at the start of this research was to look at the barriers which mature women experience when they return to further and higher education. As I have discussed in chapter five, there was significant evidence from the literature on mature students generally to indicate a gender difference in the difficulties and problems which adults faced on returning to academic education. This was reflected in my own experiences both as a mature student and a lecturer and also in the research carried out for my master's degree. Alongside this, was a growing predisposition towards patriarchy as a theoretical construct. However, I felt that much writing on this issue was rather deterministic and marginalised notions of agency. There seems little doubt that the major institutions in our society are male dominated and there was ample evidence from my earlier interviews of patriarchal influences on women's experiences, but did this tell the whole story? The fact that women were returning to learning

appeared to be indicative of agency. Giddens' theory of structuration (1984) took account of both structural influences and agency and the different levels at which power operates. This led me on to consider the nature of power and to reflect on ideology. I was particularly attracted to Lukes' 3-dimensional view (1974) which suggests that the most effective exercise of power is when people are persuaded that a situation is right and proper. Although he does not use the terms "ideology", this seemed to be an important concept to consider, particularly in relation to gender issues. My initial theoretical framework then had a number of elements: patriarchy, power, ideology and the relationship between structure and agency. However, since I began the research there have been three major interlocking shifts in my thinking.

## Changes in focus

The first shift was methodological - from a positivist to a grounded theory approach, as I have discussed in chapter one.

Secondly, over the months of interviewing, the traumatic experiences about which the students were telling me and the links with education became the central focus of the research, although of course the barriers cannot be ignored.

Thirdly, the breadth and depth of this unexpected and unsolicited material forced me into a re-focusing of my theoretical discussion from a focus based on initial pre-research background reading, to one grounded clearly in the data. What was emerging very clearly was the great extent of male dominance which pervaded all areas of the women's lives, either directly or indirectly, regardless of their age, partnered status, domestic situation or social class background. The imbalance of gender power was clear so I felt that patriarchy was obviously a useful conceptual tool. However, previous theorising on patriarchy did not appear to give the full answer to some aspects of the women's stories and I needed to explore it further, drawing on the research data to examine the explanatory power and reach of the concept. This is not to say that theories of power, ideology and structuration are not relevant. These are powerful concepts in their own right and would undoubtedly provide interesting alternative theoretical frameworks for analysis of the research findings at a later date.

The new focus then is on an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of patriarchy as a useful concept in relation to my research material. What follows in the next section is a brief discussion of the development of the concept of patriarchy within radical feminist literature, culminating in an outline of Walby's overlapping and interlocking structures.

# Patriarchy

Put in its simplest form, patriarchy is generally defined as a system whereby men dominate women. Its common usage in feminist writing stems from Kate Millett's arguments in the late 1960s. Whereas marxist feminists were attempting to extend marxist analysis to include women, the 'second wave' of feminism was looking to a different starting point, that of patriarchy, the domination of women by men. Radical feminists argued that since most known societies have been patriarchal, this should be the starting point for an analysis of women's position:

> *What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalised nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females ..... However muted its present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power.*

> *This is so because our society, like all other historical civilisations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office and finance - in short, every avenue of power within the society including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands.*
> *(Millett 1970, pp24-25)*

Some radical feminists located this imbalance of power clearly within the household and in reproduction (see for example, Firestone 1974) while others such as Rich 1980, Dworkin 1981, MacKinnon 1982) argue that male dominated sexuality is at the root of patriarchy.

Early radical feminist writing of this nature was criticised by later writers such as Michelle Barrett (1980), writing from a marxist perspective, and Acker (1989). Both Barrett and Acker argue that patriarchy used in this way gave the impression that male dominance is not only both universal and ahistorical, it is also guilty of a biological essentialist stance - that men and women are essentially different. This point is taken up by Delphy (1984) and Delphy & Leonard (1992) when they argue that only the actual act of giving birth is essentially female and all post-natal activities can be contracted.

Criticisms of essentialism also came from Sheila Rowbotham (1979), again writing from a marxist perspective. In addition, she makes the point that in its general usage, patriarchy implies a somewhat deterministic/fatalistic approach, which women appear to have little or no opportunity to counter.

Harriet Bradley (1989) among others, also argues that there is a tendency for patriarchy to be used as a universal blanket term, both currently and historically and

suggests that the term 'androcentric' is a much better concept in modern capitalist societies. Androcentricity suggests that male needs and priorities are pivotal in society. This however seems to take little account of the imbalance of power relations between men and women and the way in which social structures work, both overtly and covertly to maintain that imbalance.

The discussion over the term has little to do with the explanatory power or the reach of the concept of patriarchy. It is more concerned with the interpretation of the word and its general application, in the search for a working concept in a society in which there is clearly an imbalance between the positions of men and women.

Barrett does go on to highlight the importance of the term patriarchy, however it is defined, in focusing on the character of women's oppression, and Fox notes how the concept has altered public consciousness of gender issues, and has become part of the vocabulary of social science and everyday speech (Fox 1988, p164). Thus, for many people, it has come to be a generalised term for the dominance of men over women. Stacey (1993) develops this idea and argues that:

> ..... the concept of patriachy has not been used within feminist theory
> in any simple or unified way, but rather there are numerous definitions
> of the term, each with a slightly different emphasis.
>
> *(Stacey 1993, p53)*

Walby (1990) suggests that it would be surprising if a discussion of the term was not evident in feminist literature, since this is part and parcel of the development of most theories. Walby's work on patriarchy (1986, 1989, 1990) provides a useful starting point for my analysis, in particular because she looks at different levels and different areas in which patriarchy operates. Her theory builds on and extends considerable radical feminist theoretical literature and she goes some way to answering the general criticisms by suggesting that patriarchy can take different forms at different times and in different places . She defines patriarchy as:

> *A system of social structures and practices in which men dominate,*
> *oppress and exploit women.* *(Walby 1990, p20)*

and goes on to argue that the term social structure implies a general position and is important on two counts: firstly, it rejects biological determinism, and secondly, it rejects the notion that all men are dominant and all women are subordinate. The latter point implies that even where men want to support women's equality, the structure of society may limit their ability to do so. Her use of the word 'practices' is interesting:

> ..... in relation to each of the structures, it is possible to identify sets of
> patriarchal practices which are less deeply sedimented. Structures are
> emergent properties of practices. *(Walby 1990, p 20)*

Walby does not make clear what she means by 'less deeply sedimented' but my interpretation is that she is allowing for change - indeed change is central to her analysis of the shift from private to public patriarchy with industrialisation. The implication appears to be that practices can change, which will then influence the structures. She later discusses the influence of the various waves of feminism, which recognises the power and agency of women on a macro-scale, but then goes on to argue that this does not really reduce the power of patriarchy, it simply re-organises it, so that change within one structure will create a counteracting change in another. She does not however allow for individual agency - how women live and deal with their everyday situations. As Stacey (1993) argues:

> ..... the lack of space for any consideration of questions of identity and
> lived experience in this model leave (sic) it open to the criticisms of
> much structural analysis: it fails to explain how people negotiate such
> a system, how they resist or conform, and how and why it affects
> different women differently .....                                   (Stacey 1993, p57)

Walby's analysis then (along with most radical feminist theorising) is clearly structural. She maintains that there is no simple patriarchal structure in modern western societies. Rather, at its most abstract level, patriarchy can be conceptualised as a system of social relations, and at a less abstract level, as a system of six interlocking but interrelated structures which constitute a system of patriarchy:

> ..... patriarchy is composed of six structures: the patriarchal mode of
> production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in
> the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and
> patriarchal relations in cultural institutions.        (Walby 1990, p20).

The criterion she uses for the choice of the six structures is that:

> . They represent the most significant constellations of social relations
> which structure gender relations. Six is the smallest number of
> structures which can adequately grasp the varied forms of women's
> oppression in the period and place under question.
>                                                    (Walby 1989, p220).

Walby suggests that there has been a shift from private to public patriarchy over the last century, during which time the dominant form of women's oppression has changed. With private patriarchy, the primary site of oppression is household production, with women's labour expropriated by the men of the household and the principle strategy exclusionary - that is, locating women clearly in the home. In public patriarchy, there are two primary sites of oppression - the state and employment outside the home. In this situation there is more collective appropriation and the strategies segregationist and subordinating - that is women are located in certain areas of the public world and

are generally in positions inferior to men. She argues that the six structures still apply, though there are changing relationships within and between the structures. She presents this relationship in the form of a table. Apart from the dominant structures of oppression, she does not rank order what she terms as the 'wider patriarchal structures':

**Private and public patriarchy:**

| Form of Patriarchy | Private | Public |
|---|---|---|
| Dominant Structure | Household Production | Employment/State |
| Wider patriarchal structures | Employment<br>State<br>Sexuality<br>Violence<br>Culture | Household production<br>Sexuality<br>Violence<br>Culture |
| Period | 19th Century | 20th Century |
| Mode of expropriation | Individual | Collective |
| Patriarchal strategy | Exclusionary | Segregationist |

(Walby 1990, p24)

What follows is a brief exposition of these six areas, supplemented where relevant by work from other writers.

# The six patriarchal structures

## The patriarchal mode of production

According to Walby, women's labour is expropriated by their husbands (and sometimes their fathers) within the marriage and household relationship. Generally speaking there is no monetary reward for this labour, rather women are maintained, though even this may not always be the case, as part of the marriage contract between husband and wife. Walby maintains firstly that the domestic labour arrangements are a principal form of gender division and a serious form of inequality and secondly, that there are significant links between this and other forms of inequality. Put simply, she is saying that this created dependency within the household has powerful repercussions in other areas and conversely, inequalities in other areas such as paid work influence relationships within the home.

Delphy (1984) and Delphy & Leonard (1992) working from a radical feminist perspective but using marxist methodology, take this a stage further and argue that the family is the key site of women's oppression and all other inequalities stem from this. They see husbands as one class and housewives as another. Women work under patriarchal conditions of production - they work for the benefit of their husbands who expropriate their labour in return (sometimes) for maintenance. Their work, based on French peasant families has been criticised from a variety of perspectives but the key criticisms for me are that firstly, not all women are housewives, and secondly, the economic structure of the household is emphasised and other aspects such as cultural and sexual ideologies are ignored.

Unlike Delphy & Leonard, Walby does not rank her sites of oppression hierarchically and goes on to point out that many women choose marriage, which may be advantageous to them in comparison with other alternatives. However, this does not mean that they are not exploited within the marital relationship. *'Marriage is often the lesser of the evils in the limited options open to most women'* (Walby 1989, p222, see also Griffin 1989). This she links with gender relations in the area of paid work.

## Patriarchal relations in paid work

Walby draws on Weber's ideas of group closure here, to discuss both the exclusion of women from paid work and the segregation, vertically and horizontally, of men and women who are in the labour force (see also Reskin & Padavic 1994, Lewis 1992, Hakim 1979).

Women earn less than men; are engaged less in paid work than men; have more part-time, temporary and less secure employment than men and do different jobs from men (see also Social Trends 1995, Pillinger 1992). The interface here is with the domestic division of labour - women in the public sphere are primarily located in the caring and service industries, which is not only a reflection of their caring and servicing role in the home but also a reinforcement of it. This role is heavily influenced by the norms of our culture.

## Patriarchal culture

With this concept, Walby is concerned with the way in which gender is represented in society. The traditional approach is essentialist - that men and women are essentially different, in physical, emotional and psychological make-up. This approach influences the socialisation of men and women into different roles from early childhood through the institutions of the family, education, work, leisure and the media, particularly

television, films and magazines. These are instrumental in shaping not only individual identities, but also perceptions of the way others should behave (see among many others: Sharpe 1994, Thorne 1993, Spender & Sarah 1988, Deem 1980). Marshment (1993, p123) argues that *'Representation is a political issue'* - women's lack of power in a patriarchal society subjects them to the control of men. Smith (1987) puts this succinctly:

> *Our culture does not arise spontaneously; it is manufactured. [ .....]*
> *The making and dissemination of the forms of thought we make use of*
> *..... originate in positions of power. These positions of power are*
> *occupied by men almost exclusively, which means that our forms of*
> *thought put together a view of the world from a place women do not*
> *occupy.*                                                                    *(Smith 1987, p8)*

Cultural representations throughout all aspects of the media of what a woman is and how she should behave will therefore support men's interests either directly or indirectly.

Other work in this area has concentrated on discourse analysis, following Foucault's (1981) idea that control through language is more insidious and powerful than overt power, although Foucault himself had little to say about gender relations. Radical feminists such as Daly (1985), Spender (1980, 1983) and MacKinnon (1982) see the central issue to be how patriarchal discourses are created and maintained rather than how individuals become socialised and have focused on the different representations of gender in the media. Daly (1978) suggests that patriarchal beliefs are at the core of many religious, medical and cultural practices throughout the world and argues that the solution to this control of women is for them to develop a non-patriarchal language and culture.

Spender (1980) and more recently Cameron (1992), also highlight the importance of language as a controlling factor. They argue that language is patriarchally structured and in many instances, for example the use of the generic 'he' and 'man', renders women invisible. These terms not only reflect the power of men but also contribute to it. Both writers argue that a patriarchal language structure and gendered patterns of language interaction promote a particular view of both men and women and make it more difficult for women to think outside of this patriarchal structure.

## Patriarchal relations in sexuality

There appear to be two major schools of thought in this area. Those who believe that sexuality is an instinct or drive present in all human beings, and those who consider it to be socially constructed. The former typically follow a Freudian analysis, others,

particularly radical feminists, orient towards the second explanation. Walby along with many other writers (for example, Richardson 1993, Weeks 1990, Foucault, 1981, Jackson 1978), claims that sexuality is socially, rather than biologically or psychologically constructed. According to radical feminists, this construction is patriarchal in nature, which it has to be since we live in a patriarchal society, and both mirrors and reinforces women's inferior position. Richardson (1993) makes this point clearly:

> *Central to most radical feminist accounts ..... is the view that sexual relations are not simply a reflection of the power that men have over women in society generally, but also determine those unequal power relationships. In other words, sexual relations both reflect and serve to maintain women's subordination.* (Richardson 1993, p75)

The dominant structure is essentialist and heterosexual then. Its patriarchal nature not only marginalises sexuality which falls outside of this model, but also controls by defining fairly narrowly, the parameters of sexual behaviour and enables the continuance of a sexual double standard. Men sexually objectify women and this male-dominated definition pervades many areas, not just the straightforwardly sexual. It affects women's achievement in education (Jones & Mahoney 1989, Lees 1986), work (Witz 1993) and the way in which they are treated under the law. Sexual harassment by men of women in the workplace (Crime Concern 1993, Witz 1993, Stanko 1988), attitudes towards pornography (Dworkin 1981) and domestic violence (Maynard 1993) could be seen as examples and clearly link Walby's two areas of patriarchal control of sexuality and male violence.


## Male violence

Generally speaking, discussion of male violence against women has focused on this being a problem associated with a few psychologically disturbed men who are perceived as abnormal. This view is not borne out by evidence of rape and domestic violence which according to the statistics, is far more prevalent than could be accounted for by being simply the acts of a few disturbed men. Information from the London Rape Crisis Centre (1984) indicates that women do not report rape and domestic violence largely because of the fear of insensitive treatment by the police and judicial system. Research carried out by Diane Russell in 1978 in the United States revealed a very high incidence of violence against women, including rape or attempted rape and incestuous abuse before the age of 18. 44% of women in her sample of 930 experienced rape or attempted rape in their life-time and 16% of women reported incestuous abuse before the age of 18. Martha Nussbaum (Time Higher Educational

Supplement, 1996) presents some horrific figures on violence against women on a world scale. For example, more than 50% of married women in the largest slum of Bangkok reported regularly being beaten by their husbands; the UN Human Development Report for 1995 reports that one-third of women in Barbados, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and the United States report sexual abuse during childhood. However, the UK is notably absent from these figures and a recent discussion with a contact who works for the Probation Service revealed that there are no official figures on domestic violence; they are subsumed under 'Violence against the Person'. Local police initiatives though suggest that 28% of all reported assaults are of domestic violence (South Yorkshire Probation Service, November, 1995). Pizzey's work at the Chiswick Women's Refuge began to highlight the incidence of familial abuse in this country. The negative publicity she received from some sections of the media perhaps reflects the power of patriarchy as may the lack of available funding in this country for large-scale research similar to Russell's. Any research which has been done in this country has been small scale and local but has revealed disturbing figures. Mooney (1993) for example, researching domestic violence in North London, suggests that almost one third of women experience domestic violence in their lifetime. The Glasgow Women's Support Project, in conjunction with the Glasgow Evening Times (1990) discovered that two in every five women have been raped or sexually assaulted. These figures appear to be considerably higher than official figures. Even the British Crime Survey, designed to uncover unreported crime has had little success in this area. Largely, it is suggested, because of women's diffidence in discussing the issue, perhaps whilst the assailant is in the room (Hanmer & Saunders 1984). Official criminal statistics do indicate though an increased number of rapes over the last few years (Criminal Statistics, England & Wales, 1995). Given the foregoing discussion, these figures could mean an increase in actual rape or an increase in actual reporting without a real increase in the crime. However, if we consider the work of Hanmer & Saunders (1984) and Kelly (1988) into domestic violence and Sue Lees' (1994) recent research into rape, the prevalence of both rape and domestic violence is far greater than the official figures indicate.

According to Walby, male violence is best analysed in terms of patriarchal social structures. Male violence against women is both a direct and an indirect form of power. The impact of direct violence is clear, but the indirect impact is insidious in that women are aware of the potential, which constrains their actions:

> *It has a regular social form and, as a result of women's well-founded expectations of its routine nature, (violence) has consequences for women's actions. It is constituted as a set of various practices*

*including: rape, wife beating, father/daughter incest, flashing, sexual
harassment at work, sexual assault.          (Walby 1989, p224)*

She goes on to say (and this is borne out by the London Rape Crisis Centre) that the
state virtually condones male violence over women by its lack of an appropriate
structure to deal with violence in anything other than 'extreme' or 'inappropriate'
circumstances such as unprovoked violent attacks by a stranger. Furthermore, the
public discourse on rape and violence against women is a form of control in its own
right and influences the conduct and patterns of movement of most women (see also
Green et al 1990). The 'claim back the night' marches on American campuses and
more recently in Sheffield (November, 1995) are a reflection of this.

Clearly then, violence is linked with how a woman's sexuality is defined and controlled
and this is reinforced by considerable state legislation.

## Patriarchal state

Over the years, much government legislation and legal decisions have both reflected
and reinforced women's position in all sections of their lives and its influence can be
seen within the areas of work, family, sexuality and violence. Walby argues that
women's exclusion from access to state resources and power is a reflection of the
patriarchal system. Women are not present in any numbers in the decision-making
process, they cannot bring the same power to bear as men on the outcome of decisions,
the resolution of which tend to be patriarchal in nature. An example of this is the
denial of custody to lesbian mothers simply because they are lesbian which can be seen
as a reflection of patriarchal, heterosexual ideology. Secondly, the laws on rape and
domestic violence have been slow to change and are still largely discriminatory against
women. It is only as recently as 1990 that the law on marital rape was changed, and
even now in rape cases, the law allows for the differential examination of past sexual
histories, with the sexual history of the victim being examined as part of the defence
whereas an examination of the sexual history of the defendant is not allowed (Lees
1994). A clear link here between sexuality, violence and the role of the state.

A point which Walby underplays, which I feel is crucial to the position of women, is
the patriarchal nature of the establishment in the 1940s, of the welfare state and
particularly the benefits system. The continuation of the gendered nature of this
structure assumes a male, supportive breadwinner and a dependent wife and children,
particularly in the areas of cash benefits. As Wilson (1983) argues:

*One way of looking at social policy would be to describe it as a set of
structures created by men to shape the lives of women .....We find,
deeply embedded within them assumptions about women and their role*

*which seem sometimes to operate at the level of the 'taken for granted'*
*and sometimes to be part of deliberate planning for women.*

*(Wilson 1983, p33)*

It must be said though that the welfare benefits structure was based on the ideology of a 'middle-class ideal family type' which predominated in our society from the end of last century (Poster 1978, Barrett 1980), with a male breadwinner and dependant wife and children, despite the fact that there is a disjuncture between this ideal and the actual household structure of the working classes (in Barrett's terms the proletariat). In many working class households, women's wages, and often children's have been essential (Barrett 1980, p204). Many trades unions though, in the first half of this century, based their claim for higher wages on the principle of a 'family wage' for men (Wilson 1977, 1983, Land 1985) and even women's trade unions went along with this (Boston 1980).

Given the dominance of this ideology therefore, it is not surprising that welfare benefit legislation should be based on the same principles and this is reflected in Beveridge's speech:

> *The great majority of women (are) occupied on work which is vital*
> *though unpaid, without which their husbands could not do their paid*
> *work and without which the nation could not continue ..... in the next*
> *thirty years housewives as Mothers have vital work to do in ensuring*
> *the adequate continuance of the British race and British ideals in the*
> *world.* *(Beveridge 1942, pp49-52)*

The report was widely supported and only a few feminists petitioned for an independent income for women regardless of their marital status (Abbott & Bompass, 1943). Ministers defined their demands as unreasonable and the petition was dismissed (Wilson 1983). As Rose (1985) points out, married women were treated as extensions and dependants of men and:

> *The task of the national insurance system was to make it possible for*
> *husbands to provide for their wives in sickness, in health, in*
> *unemployment or in old age.* *(Rose 1985, p 244)*

This basic principle underpinned all benefit legislation, with married men receiving extra unemployment and sickness benefit for a wife who was not employed outside the home and an enhanced retirement pension for his wife if she had not made sufficient contributions for a pension in her own right. This principle of dependency was further reflected in the woman's right to 'opt out' of a full national insurance contribution on marriage, on the assumption that she would be covered by a married man's pension rights. Proposals by Beveridge talked of *'the composite needs of a married woman'* (Fraser 1973, p266) and the eventual National Insurance Act (1946) stated:

*The weekly rate of unemployment benefit, sickness benefit or a*
*retirement pension shall be increased ..... for any period during which*
*the beneficiary is residing with or is wholly or mainly maintaining his*
*wife who is not engaged in any gainful occupation or occupations .....*
<div align="right">*(Bruce 1973, p257)*</div>

These regulations also applied to what was then called 'National Assistance' and to-day is called 'Income Support' - a means-tested benefit for those who have not made the requisite number of contributions to receive statutory benefit. The patriarchal nature of this benefit is reflected in for example, cohabitation rules which have long affected discriminatory benefits (Fairbairns 1985, Donnison 1983, Wilson 1983) and very recently in the changing of housing priorities and erosion of means-tested benefits for single mothers. The assumption of a financially supportive husband is also embedded in the student grant system. Although grants are mandatory for the majority of first-time home students in higher education, for a married woman, they are means-tested on her husband's income, even though, once she has started her course, her own earnings are disregarded!

The benefits system is extremely complex and it is not appropriate to discuss it in great depth here. Rather the aim has been to illustrate the disadvantage which many women experience and which has been discussed extensively in feminist literature. This disadvantage existed prior to the establishment of the welfare state which reflected the patriarchal ideology underpinning our society and it seems that little has changed over the past fifty years.

## Summary

For Walby then, patriarchy is not simple or straightforward. It is a system of interlocking and overlapping structures, operating in different ways and to differing degrees at different times in both the public and the private spheres with is clear interaction. For example, women's caring and domestic responsibilities are reflected and reinforced by the culture of our society, particularly, though not solely, through the media. This then affects the position of women in the public sphere, with the majority of women who work and who have domestic and caring responsibilities working part-time which then reinforces their private dependency. This dependency is underpinned by the state, whose welfare policies assume an essentialist view of men and women and a heterosexual patriarchal relationship. This attitude towards a patriarchal private sphere is also reflected in the state's attitude towards domestic violence and 'date rape', though it must be admitted that this is slowly changing.

The changes in women's position which have taken place have been largely due to the influence of various 'waves' of feminism, in which women have sought collectively to change oppressive structures on a macro-level, regardless of their particular feminist perspective. Walby's overall argument though is that patriarchal control is pervasive; there is no 'privileged site' - no single area which can stand alone and change in any area will have repercussions in another area - merely generating new norms of masculinity and femininity still largely focusing upon a male defined heterosexuality.

Walby puts a powerful case and it will be interesting to examine the extent of the usefulness of patriarchy as a conceptual tool in relation to my research data. It is difficult to separate the students' experiences at a micro-level into Walby's six areas, since, as she maintains, there is considerable overlap and intertwining. However, trying to examine all six structures at the same time would create many practical difficulties. I have decided therefore to take each of these areas and examine the theory of patriarchy in the light of the material I have collected, particularly in relation to the incidence of trauma about which the students told me. This section starts as the last chapter finished, with Della's story, which is clearly located in patriarchal control through male violence.


# Patriarchy explored - the women's stories

## Violence

Della's story is a powerful example of men's control over women through physical violence. This was both direct:

> *Della: When Jon was born the physical violence started ..... I've had my legs broken, I've had black eyes, I've had my teeth knocked out, my lips split .....*

and indirect, with latent threats aimed at the children:

> *..... he came at me and I got a knife and I threatened him. From that he didn't physically hurt me and the violence was, I could see it coming, the violence was directed at my eldest daughter .....*

Claire, Aurora and Jenny also told me of physical abuse:

> *Claire: He was really jealous ..... he was violent ..... I didn't see he was going to get any better .....*

> *Aurora: I actually had to leave my husband because there was abuse..*

> *Jenny: My husband's getting really nasty just now. I was actually a*
> *battered wife at one time ..... I'm four foot ten and Trev's six foot four,*
> *so there's a big difference in size .....*

In addition to the actual violence, what both Jenny and Claire imply here is the threat of violence. As Walby and others point out, it is not necessarily direct violence which is the mechanism of control; it can be the fear of violence and it could be speculated that one of the reason's for Alison's conformity to her father's wishes was seeing his violence not only towards her brothers, but towards her mother. She told me of his response in a family dispute, when her aunt told her father that Alison had a gypsy boyfriend:

> *Alison: And of course he hit the roof. You know, it was a tit for tat*
> *thing - she'd (her aunt) just come to cause trouble - and it ended up*
> *with him nearly throttling my mum while she stood and laughed -*
> *literally - you know? Got her on the bed, hands round her throat and*
> *she's standing there. Because my mum was sticking up for me. She*
> *was there, always has been, stood between us, making sure that he*
> *didn't .....*

This violence, though not directed at Alison herself was nevertheless linked with her sexuality.

## Sexuality

The violence which Gerry experienced was very personal and direct, controlling and defining her sexuality through sexual abuse by her brother when she was a child. As she said, this has had an ongoing effect on her attitude towards other men:

> *Gerry: ..... that really just messed me up completely - totally affected*
> *my attitude ..... you want a relationship but you daren't .....*

Other examples can be drawn from the large proportion of women who were pregnant and single in their teens. The stories of Bryony, Claire and Frances are particularly relevant here, but many of the other women who were pregnant talked of their feelings. Their reaction and the reaction of others indicates a powerful influence on female sexual activity. I have talked about Frances who was made to leave home when the baby was born:

> *Frances: (My dad) said 'Oh well, you've got to leave home. You've got*
> *to get married,' and I didn't want to, but I went to live with Shelly's dad*
> *- I stopped at home 'til the day I went into labour then I went to live*
> *with him.*

Bryony had guilt feelings about letting down herself and her family. This was reinforced at the ante-natal clinic:

> *Bryony: I felt so ashamed of myself ..... and I'd brought shame on the family ..... because to have sex before marriage, I was made to feel absolutely dirty. When I went to the clinic they still called your name as 'Mrs' so again you got the shame thing .....*

Alison too talks about the shame, but also about her father's attitude:

> *Alison: I'd told my mum and she was fine about it, and he (her father) went up the wall. For the whole of the eight months he never spoke to me, not two words ..... I was so disappointed with myself becoming an unmarried mother ..... you can tell a lie and your lies will not get caught out, but you get pregnant and it grows in front of you for eight, nine months .....*

None of these women talked about the responsibility of the father of the child, and all expressed some sort of guilt feeling over being pregnant, as if getting pregnant was a lone performance! This is reflective of Walby's arguments about dual standards, which Vida also experienced in the treatment of her sexual adventures at school:

> *Vida: ..... the girls were really dragged through it and had to go for a virginity test, with a policewoman there as well .....and there was this ink we couldn't get off the passport and it was quite horrible and all the lads were gathered down the police station and sort of warned to keep it tucked in until they were 16 .....*

Vida's husband also began to exert control over her financially when he could not control her sexuality directly. As she told me, when he found out she was having an affair, his reaction was to close the joint bank account, cancel her credit card and change the locks on the car.

Netta's and Annabel's sexuality was defined in a more public arena - the world of education and work. Even though they appeared to reject the dominant gendered ideas concerning work, they were still constrained by patriarchal ideology. When she left school, Netta was given a place on a Youth Training Scheme on a City and Guilds course in basic engineering competence and a similar course in communications:

> *Netta: There were quite a few girls on the YTS and they all tended to get grouped together and I didn't like that very much I didn't want to get stuck with them because they were just there for laugh. They didn't take it as seriously as I did and they weren't as good at it as I was and I would rather have been with the boys or teenagers doing the proper engineering stuff instead of pratting about .....*

*The students with special needs and the females were all put to one side
and that really irritated me, they stopped it after a bit but it really
irritated me that because the IQ level was very low. It makes me sound
really ..... but they just didn't do anything, they just messed about all
the time, and I liked to get on with it and do it and learn something.*

This type of sexism was also experienced by Annabel. She is the only remaining
student on the second year of the Women's Motor Vehicle course and her experiences
may go some way to explaining why the numbers have shrunk so drastically:

*Annabel: They just treat me like I'm so stupid and it's very difficult to
fight that all the time ..... I just feel all my confidence going .....
Nobody comes near you. All day they ignore you and nobody says
anything all day to you, then they don't sign your job sheets because
they say they haven't seen what you're doing. This guy stood over me
and made me tighten the wheel nuts with a torque wrench. I thought he
was having me on but it was obvious he was going to force me to do it.
I thought later I should have said 'OK, now I've done this will you
teach me something proper?' but I thought he'd just go in the locker
room or whatever and have a good laugh about how he got the woman
to do the wheel nuts to-day .....*

Annabel also experiences considerable sexual harassment from both students and male
staff members:

*They won't sign the register unless you're in a classroom at a
particular time. You have to stand around in a really crowded room
with about forty blokes, you're the only woman, for ages 'til they call
out your name. So I usually like to go late on when nobody else is
there and I just say, look I'm here. And he'd say, 'I'm not going to sign
you in unless you're there at this time'. So I was not noted down for the
one morning - or they'd refuse to sign out worksheets on the same day
or make a real problem out of it.*

*One time I was in the workshop and somebody, some bloke, bumped
into me and the other said how he wanted to screw me and then they
started talking about whether he would like screwing ... here and in the
car, and all this kind of thing. The tutor was right there and he didn't
stop it. So I left the workshop ..... The tutor was standing next to them
and I said to him, 'You heard that didn't you?' He said, 'I swear to you
I didn't hear anything'. I don't know whether he did or he didn't .....*

*We have lecturers that just talk about 'lads' the whole time. And every
now and again they'd turn round and say 'Oh, people', but make a
point - 'Oh sorry - people'.
Some of the lecturers treat us decently so I think they copy that, you
know? But when the lecturers get disgusting then I think that's when
the boys get like it as well. 'Cos they copy a lot of behaviour from the*

*teachers. If somebody just says to them, 'this is not on', rather than like this kind of buddy, buddy thing.*
*I think they just think they're unmanly if they do something nice. They just think it's required of them to be as disgusting and vile as possible, they think that's required of them to be male.*

J        Have you complained about this?

*Annabel: Who to? The college wouldn't have any lecturers except for Jess, and I don't think they'll change officially about it either 'cos the whole department's run by men.*
*I have talked to people but as soon as you complain about them they just get worse, because they think you're personally after them. I actually want to get something out of this and if I threaten them or if they get scared I'm not going to learn anything.*
*There were weeks when I thought they were all doing the same thing, but independently, and I thought they'd organised it, like 'We're going to get rid of this woman this week.'*

*At the moment I'm finding it exhausting and incredibly undermining ..... it's actually hindering me to learn, I'm so worried about doing it wrong, I daren't attempt anything.*

Netta and Annabel were stepping outside of the cultural expectations of a woman's role and the treatment they experienced reflects powerful patriarchal influences on identity.

## Culture

As well as evidence of patriarchal influence in their current situation, there was considerable evidence of patriarchal control in the students' family of origin. Walby says little about the control which fathers exert over their daughters, but there is evidence from the data of fathers' coercive and controlling power as head of the household. Alison's story is almost wholly about her father's manipulation; Leila married early to get away from her father's control; Gloria emphasises her father's role in her mainstream education:

*Gloria: ..... he was contemptuous of women and expected women to be barefoot, pregnant and at the kitchen sink most of the time. Any hint of education or intelligence was just squashed. You know, you can't have women with brains, they're not there for that.*

Though this extent of control was not necessarily evident in all cases, most students' childhood and education had been influenced by attitudes and roles which were clearly gendered, reflecting the norms of a dominant patriarchal culture. The attitude of Gloria's father affected not only her but her brother as well:

*Gloria: My brother, I remember my Mum said, well we laugh about it now, but I remember my Mum saying to Steve 'Can you, er, you know, it's your turn to do the washing up'. And Steve said 'Why should I do it when I've got two sisters in the house?'*

Sheila talked of the links between domestic expectations because she was a female and her performance at school:

*Sheila: I were brought up very much within the home to fulfil a women's role and there were strong socialisation processes ..... My eldest sister was suffering from post-natal depression ..... I was the youngest female and I had to go and look after the children and put them to bed after school ..... It's no fun baking an apple pie (at school) when you have to do them anyway ..... I didn't say anything because it were pointless ..... my sister need help with the children ..... but I was always getting into trouble.*

Petra also experienced domestic responsibilities, influenced by the trauma of her mother's alcoholism. She was responsible from a very early age for her younger sister and then when she moved to her grandmother's house, she was expected to help with the domestic chores as well as continue to take responsibility for her younger sister.

The cultural controls about which Jenny spoke so passionately were linked to the area in which she lived. She talked of her frustration of the way in which her role was defined and constrained by neighbourhood values:

*It's attitude ..... I don't know whether it's just this area. They were always brought up that the males went to work ..... the women have always been there for the families, they've always had the home to run. It don't matter whether they've laid on the floor, like I lay on the floor and do homework with my kids, but that doesn't make me a good mother. At the end of the day, if my kids have a hot meal, if they're clean when they go to school, if I'm there to pick them up, that makes you accepted by society otherwise you're not accepted, you're like an outcast. Everybody, I don't care who they are, everybody has to conform to society in some ways.*

Jenny's story clearly linked the neighbourhood values in her area with the cultural expectations of her domestic role. She talked of the neighbourhood influences on her husband's attitude and his attempts to control and constrain her within her domestic identity. She fights against his control, but at the same time recognises the limitations of what she can do.

## Control in the household

Walby terms this the Patriarchal Mode of Production and discusses the way in which women's labour is expropriated by their husbands for little or no monetary reward. Jenny's story is an interesting example of this. She sees her home, her husband and her children as entirely her responsibility, despite the fact that her husband has not worked for thirteen years. She has been called out of class on numerous occasions to deal with domestic problems:

> *Trev's hopeless, absolutely ..... I'm on call now for t'phone ..... in the*
> *last six months I bet I've been called out about twelve times - out of*
> *lessons. Littlest had his fingers in the door and Trev couldn't even*
> *cope with that. The woman looks after the family .....*
> *How many women do you know that's got some money of their own?*
> *No woman has any money. Not the husband, he's still going to have*
> *his spending money, you're the one that got to make the budget go that*
> *bit further.*

Bryony's domestic relationship was also part of her traumatic experiences. Her husband can see no reason for her return to education and feels she should get out and get a job - any job - to contribute to the family income. This is despite the fact that she also helps him in his business and works part-time for her personal money:

> *Bryony: He didn't really want me to come to college.....so I go home,*
> *cook the meals, doing the ironing at the same time, as you do.......*
> *then I do my homework at night.....I get very tired.......he says it's my*
> *own fault....I'm punishing myself.....there's no reason for it.....so I don't*
> *say I'm tired, I just get on with it......he sees it as me being totally*
> *selfish, just thinking about myself when I should be supporting him.....*

The patriarchal control within Sheila's domestic arrangements were also clear, and a constant source of stress for her over the care of her sick son. Her husband saw the care of their son as her responsibility:

> *Sheila: ..... purely and simply Neil was still my responsibility ..... it*
> *were my responsibility to find somebody. It was never Joe's*
> *responsibility but if he was there he would be quite happy about caring*
> *for Neil.*

When her son's health deteriorated, it put greater strain on their relationship, which Sheila suggested was due to her husband's perception of their respective roles. She also talked about her feeling of helplessness in the situation:

> *Up to Neil's death I was always responsible, it were the biggest risk*
> *between Joe and myself. He would very often not come home in time*
> *(for her to go to her part-time evening work). Sometimes you know*
> *there were anger and tears. There were pleading, everything ..... my*

> *work didn't value. Joe will say it was about 'You can't tell me what to do ..... ' He weren't exactly sitting at end of road in t'car to annoy me but he wouldn't stop work.*

When Sheila entered higher education, she discovered that her grant was based on her husband's income. She expressed a great deal of resentment, especially since Joe did not make up the difference between the state's estimate of her needs as a student and what she was actually getting.

> *Sheila: I don't get a full grant, Joe pays for my petrol and books, but I don't get what he should pay. I find it frustrating that, I don't think that its fair that I'm not eligible for a full grant.*

This of course undermines the state's assumption of a male provider who will share his income or provide fully for his partner.


## The state

Sheila's grant situation is reflective of the experience of many women who return to education. For those women who are eligible for a mandatory grant, which is that group of women who are in higher education or on a foundation year of a degree course franchised out to a college, the grant is determined by personal circumstances. These include the woman's marital status. If she is married, and has not earned sufficient money outside the home in the last three years to meet independent status, her grant is assessed on the basis of her husband's income. Sheila told me that she felt discriminated against because she is married:

> *I think what is really frustrating for me as well is being discriminated against because we actually have a marriage licence. There's those with long term partners, but they haven't got a marriage licence, and they get a full grant.*
> *They're in a similar financial situation to me, they've never worked, you know 'cos they've had children. Their partner's worked but it's not taken into account, they just get full grant and that bothers me. It's not fair.*

Whether a woman is even considered for a grant is dependent upon her husband filling in the earnings declaration. A number of other women were in this position. Liz, Nola and Petra, all of whom were hoping to go to university the following year, knew they would receive grants below the maximum because of their husband's income, which means in effect that they are dependent upon their husband's support of their desire to go to university. Rhona's husband refused to complete the grant form, so she will get no maintenance grant at all:

> *Rhona: My fees are paid but I won't get a grant.......because first of all John doesn't want to fill in all the forms, right, he said 'It's you who's going to University not me ...... I'm just not prepared to give all this information for the grant which you may or may not get which may be a pittance depending on what I earn'.*

If her husband chose not to support her, she would not be able to go. She says:

> *No way, well I couldn't go. John gives me money for whatever I want, but he shouldn't have to, its me that's going to university .....*

For the women at Further Education level, the grant is discretionary, and therefore in the current economic climate, non-existent, unless the course is sponsored, for example by the European Social Fund. The aim of these is to encourage women into non-traditional areas, which in itself must be viewed as a positive move, but can also been seen as discriminating. Women who are enrolled on the management and technology course receive an allowance and free creche facilities, but students who are enrolled on the social science access course, with whom they mix in certain classes, get neither of these. One must wonder then whether institutions, at local, national and European levels are committed to equality of opportunity for women or whether these sponsored courses are so much window-dressing. There has been considerable discussion over the years of encouraging mature students back into education, but the institutional structure generally disadvantages married women, especially those with children or other caring responsibilities. Free tuition is mostly only associated with full-time courses, unless students are in receipt of certain state benefits, which most married women are not, and care for children or elderly dependents must generally be paid for.

In chapter five, Jenny talked about the limitations which the benefit structure imposed on her education:

> *Jenny: I'm a non-person, I've no money of my own, I'm not on any computer for any benefit 'cos it goes in my husband's name ..... I don't exist ..... he gets £20 a week for having me .....*
> *I come here (to the neighbourhood centre) 'cos its just down the road and everything's free ..... but if I want anything, I have to ask 'im for it ..... I can't go to (college) 'cos of the fares ..... there's all sorts I'd love to do but can't afford to do ..... because of t' benefit trap .....*

Della is in receipt of income support in her own right because she is divorced, but her experience of patriarchal state ideology was reflected in the police's attitude towards her husband's violence:

> *He went into t'kitchen, he got a hammer, he smashed every stick of furniture in the house, every single bit. That's the time I ended up with broken fingers and a split lip ..... I threw him out. I locked the doors,*

*called the police. They came and it was, well it's done with, it's a domestic and you know a typical male attitude, they couldn't see what we had been through and they were going to let him get away with it again.*

It seems then that though the rhetoric has changed, little has changed in reality and the patriarchal nature of the state continues to underpin patriarchal influences in other areas.

## Patriarchal relations in paid work

There is little evidence from the research data of trauma in the world of paid work. This is largely because most of the trauma about which the students spoke occurred in the domestic world and is located in the area of private patriarchy. This does not mean that this area of Walby's work is not relevant however, since there are connections between the women's experiences and position in the world of work. For example, Frances and Jenny did not work outside the home when they left school, because they were pregnant. Their current situation also limits their employment opportunities. Sheila's early life massively influenced her education and subsequent employment. On becoming pregnant before she was married, the firm for whom she worked, who also operated a marriage bar, was not prepared to employ a visibly pregnant woman. When she returned to work two evenings a week with the youth service, her part-time work had to fit around her responsibility for the care of her son. Gerry lost her job as a waitress because she was overweight and did not fit the 'image' of the night-club in which she worked.

It is also worth noting here that with the exception of Netta and Annabel, all the students who had been in employment, worked in traditionally female occupations in the caring and service industries - in retail, nursing and clerical work. All of them finished full-time work when they became pregnant, and where they did return to work, the job was often part-time with no security and of a lower status than before:

> *Wanda: I did actually try to get back to work full time and this is where I found very surprisingly the prejudice against women with children. I couldn't get a full time job even though I was applying for jobs that were well within my capabilities.*
> *I worked part-time in clerical work but had to pay a child-minder ..... it wasn't really worth it but I enjoyed it ..... When my marriage broke up I got welfare assistance with being part-time. When I moved back up here, I got a job as a care assistant in a nursing home .....*

Moira, who is 47, did not work seriously in paid employment after her first child was born:

> *Moira: I just drifted into secretarial. I was working five years. Got*
> *married and was married three years before I had my first baby. Then*
> *I didn't go back out to work. I've done little bits and pieces with Mark,*
> *my son. He had a ladies' dress shop and I would help him out at*
> *certain times until he got on his feet.*

So, although paid work is often not directly part of the women's stories, it is generally affected by their experiences in other areas, which is reflective of the pervasive nature of patriarchy.

## Summary

It seems that Walby's six structures are more than adequately supported by the students' stories. The interactive and overlapping nature of the structures is evident in much of what the women told me. For example, the violence which Della experienced at the hands of her husband was met with some indifference by the police which reflects the cultural definitions of acceptable behaviour between the sexes in the home. Jenny's pregnancy led her into a stultifying, controlling and violent domestic relationship in a neighbourhood where the cultural expectations of her as a woman served to further constrain her. Her situation is further restricted by her enforced dependency on her husband through the state benefit system.

Patriarchy presents a powerful case then, but I feel that the theory does not adequately cover some of the issues about which the students were talking.

# Testing the theory

Writings on patriarchy, including Walby's comprehensive analysis, appear to fall short in four areas in relation to the research data. Firstly, the issue of the psychological violence experienced by many of the women is not addressed. Secondly there is no discussion of feelings of guilt, which appears to be a major factor in the lives of many of the students. Thirdly, the power which women exert over other women is not easy to account for within patriarchy and finally, the concept of agency, downplayed within radical feminist perspectives, was very apparent in the women's stories.

So what evidence is there in the research data to support these statements?

## Psychological violence

Although the issue of physical violence is covered at length in feminist literature there is little or no evidence of a patriarchal analysis of psychological violence. A lengthy

on-line computerised literature search using key words such as psychological violence, abuse, mental abuse, mental cruelty provided references on the psychological aftermath of physical abuse, particularly in the area of child sex abuse (see for example Leitenberg et al 1992, Gold 1986) and looked frequently at people receiving psychiatric treatment. I found no references to a radical feminist analysis in this area. There are though a number of examples from the women's stories of what could be termed psychological violence.

Alison's experiences of psychological control by her father is one example.    This could be viewed as more damaging than physical violence since its effects are not manifest in a visual way and can go on affecting a woman's life for many years.  Alison's father had died a few months before we talked and at one point she became very distressed and I had to switch off the tape, during which time she told me she was having counselling to help her get over her love/hate feelings for him.

> *Alison: My father ..... very much a manipulator.  I kept thinking he was doing it for my interests, I didn't stop to think ..... he was just out for himself .....*

She went on to draw comparisons with her husband:

> *He is totally different in every way.  He wouldn't stand any monkey business.  He could see right through my dad and wouldn't let anyone manipulate me.  He's also done a great deal to build up my confidence, teach me how capable I am.  The influence he has on me is what I wish my father would have had at sixteen - somebody trying to get the best out of me and not just looking for their own ends.*

Many other students told me of experiences which would also come into the category of psychological violence.  For example, and to mention just a few:  Deidre talked about the effect of being told for many years by her (ex) husband that she was the stupid one of the family.

> *Deidre: Well, sometimes in married life you'll get your partner that he's always telling you that you're the idiot of the family and you can't do this and you can't do that - and after about nineteen years you eventually believe it - you know?*

Jenny is waiting to see the community psychiatric nurse because of her husband's attempts to control all aspects of her life:

> *Jenny: I'm good at putting a front on.  Luckily I've never broken down here, but I've got to see the CPN (Community Psychiatric Nurse) 'cos I collapsed in the doctor's.  I was actually a battered wife at one time, now he's gone from physical to mental.  He doesn't realise he's doing*

> *it, but it's the same type of thing ..... I'm getting to nearly screaming stage at times .....*

Jenny draws parallels here between physical and mental violence. This is also evident in other stories, particularly its ongoing effects, as both Della and Gerry illustrate well:

> *Della: I'd had a lot of stress related illnesses and this particular weekend I only stepped out of bed and I got this violent stomach cramp and I couldn't walk so she (her daughter) called for the doctor and he said you know this is the worst attack so far you have to go and talk to someone. The lecturer who took me for humanities was a counsellor and he heard me telling somebody what had happened and he said 'I would like to see you - would you like to come and talk about it?' I thought 'You're a man, you know nothing, you don't know my problems you don't know how I feel,' so I said no. I got to know him a little better and eventually thought I need to talk to someone and I booked an appointment with him, all the time thinking 'He can't understand what I've gone through, he can't relate to any of this.' It took me a good three or four months before I started letting some things out. I still see him now actually, not as regular but when I need to see him. I've still got a lot of anger but I deal with it and I actually cope with it.*

Gerry also talks of the ongoing effects of the trauma:

> *Gerry: (The abuse) really just messed me up completely - totally affected my attitude and the way I looked at things. I still do to a certain extent walk around with this huge chip on my shoulder ..... looking at it now I realise it has affected to a huge extent the way I look on things ..... Whatever I try and decide, whatever decision it is in my life is affected by what's happened in the past. I have a high level of aggression which I constantly have to keep in check .....*

In all of the stories in the 'mega trauma' section of the previous chapter, psychological violence is evident as an ongoing effect of the students' experiences, regardless of the nature of the trauma and in many instances it is part of the trauma. However, although this does not appear to be discussed per se within radical feminist literature, Walby's definition of patriarchy as *'a system of structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (Walby 1990, p20)* is still useful in illuminating this aspect of the data. There is no reason why the practices of which Walby writes should apply only to physical violence, which is one of her six structures. The stories told by Alison, Jenny, Della and Gerry are some of a number of examples I could have used to discuss psychological violence. This was not an area I probed particularly in the interviews - and is one of those many things which in hindsight I wish I had done. The issue of psychological violence is certainly a research topic worthy of investigation in its own right. It may well be that further research will be prompted as a result of the recent conviction of (March, 1996) and four year prison sentence given to a 'stalker' for

the psychological effect on his victim. This will surely bring awareness that psychological damage may not only present in those people receiving psychiatric treatment but may also be part and parcel of everyday lived experience for many people who never receive this type of therapy. However, a radio 4 programme recently broadcast a police chief's comment that he was pleased about the conviction and would like to see the police able to take earlier action before any _real_ damage was done *(his verbal emphasis)*! Maybe it is because the scars cannot so easily be seen that we underestimate the extent of psychological violence.

Many radical feminist writers have argued that it is necessary to listen to women's definition of what counts as violence in order to understand its effects on them (Kelly 1988, Stanko 1985, Hanmer & Saunders 1984). Liz Kelly talks of a much wider range of behaviour which women define as threatening or sexually harassing as well as violent than that conventionally accepted, but again her work focuses on sexual abuse rather than the ongoing, everyday trauma which many of the women I spoke to experienced. The women's stories provide many examples of psychological oppression, the incorporation and analysis of which can usefully extend the explanatory breadth of patriarchy as a conceptual framework. This argument would also seems relevant to the feelings of guilt which many women carried.


## Guilt

Walby makes no mention of guilt, and again, an extensive (1990 - 1996) on-line computerised literature search, using a variety of key words, revealed no direct references linking patriarchy and guilt. However, writers like Deem (1986) and Green et al (1990) use the concept of guilt when talking about the way men control women's leisure. Among other things, they discuss the way that many husbands control their wives leisure activities in a variety of ways if they disapprove of them. As well as direct control, strategies often included sulking and making the women feel guilty. Delphy and Leonard (1992) use the concept of guilt in discussing the allocation of personal disposable income within households. They argue that when the financial arrangements were joint in a family, especially when the family was dependent upon state benefit, women rarely spent money on themselves, and indeed cutting back on their own personal requirements was a way to make the money go further:

> *The money women take is spent on domestic needs, and they feel guilty about spending on themselves.* *(Delphy & Leonard 1992, p184)*

They go on to argue that this self-sacrifice on the part of women is

> *..... part of the wider ideology of the good, self-sacrificing wife and*
> *mother.                                  (Delphy & Leonard 1992, p150)*

Delphy & Leonard do not develop further this link between patriarchy, ideology and guilt, and I wonder if this is because guilt is perhaps a 'given' within patriarchal theorising - something accepted as being a consequence of women being made to feel that they are contravening (powerful) cultural norms.   As I have discussed in chapter six and also touch on later, we are socialised into gendered behaviour from an early age.  Both men and women internalise these roles, and if, as Delphy & Leonard, Deem and Green suggest, these roles are enforced partly through guilt, then this could be seen as a major example of patriarchal control over women.

I have already discussed the ways in which women and men are socialised into subordinate/dominant roles with clear gendered role expectations which are sustained by state legislation.   Wilson (1983) reinforces this point in her discussion of the establishment of the welfare state provisions in the 1940's.  What must be remembered of course is that powerful ideologies such as these do not just affect the way men see women, but also the way in which women see themselves.  So powerful is the ideology of women's caring, nurturing and self-sacrificing role, especially in the home, that stepping outside of these expectations leads to guilt feelings.  The discussion in chapters four and six on the reasons which the women gave for returning to learning and the way in which these changed over the course of the interview supports this argument.

There is ample evidence of guilt feelings in the research data.  These fall into two broad areas:  guilt about past experiences and guilt over a return to education.  The latter was linked primarily with women who had domestic/caring responsibilities with a perceived neglect of domestic duties, but these two categories are not mutually exclusive, as was evidenced with Bryony.  I have already described how she felt guilty because she was pregnant before she was married.  She went on to tell me how her husband made her feel guilty over her desire for a better education, when she could be out earning money and contributing to the family budget, though she is determined not to give in to his pressure.

Petra told me of the guilt feelings she had when she moved away from an intolerable family situation.  On the face of it this may not appear to be patriarchal control, since it was not direct but it was nevertheless built into cultural expectations of what she should do as a female:

> *Petra:  At the time I felt it was a bit irresponsible of me ..... it changed*
> *the relationship with Julie ..... she was just devastated because I had*

*gone. I don't suppose it could have done her any good. She finds it*
*difficult to show her emotion ..... she still doesn't quite trust me .....*

Gerry's guilt feelings were very clear in the presentation of her abuse. Her non-reporting of the incest also reflects cultural attitudes towards sexual crime and this was reinforced by her friend's experiences:

*Gerry: I actually act as a voluntary contact for people who have been*
*abused and one girl in particular who has become a good friend had*
*to take a statement out against her father and it totally ripped the*
*family apart and her family have nothing more to do with her. She*
*lives on her own and they don't speak to her, they don't keep in contact*
*with her. I'm not saying that would happen in my case, my family*
*might be a bit more understanding than that, they might react*
*differently, but I can't take that chance.*

This type of example implies a degree of blame on the survivors of this type of patriarchal control. The police reaction to Della's abuse - that it was *'a domestic'* - and their refusal to get involved despite the evidence of her husband's behaviour, also implies some fault on Della's part, which is a reflection of the state's underpinning of the gendered imbalance of power in society.

These two areas - psychological violence and guilt may well be linked more closely than I have implied here and again, is a potential area of research in the future. Whilst they are not discussed within Walby's work on patriarchal structures, they can be seen as an extension of her work. The following two areas though are less direct in their links with patriarchal power.

## Control by women

Patriarchy, by its definition, is concerned with the control of women by men and radical feminist literature obviously focuses on this issue. However, whilst there is ample evidence in the data of men controlling women in a variety of situations, there is also evidence of women controlling women, which does not fall quite so obviously within a patriarchal framework. For example, Dilys, Petra and Della reported control by mothers:

*Dilys: I never, ever got encouraged to go to school ..... my mam used*
*to make me have time off school to clean the house.*
*One day, my friends came up to my house and said 'We wondered why*
*you weren't here (at school)' - it was an exam or a mock exam or*
*something and I was hanging washing up in the kitchen; it was raining,*
*and I was nearly crying. I said 'My mum wouldn't let me come to*
*school, I've had to do the washing' and they couldn't believe it, but to*

*me that was it, that was all I knew. And I were cooking the tea and all*
*this - that's how it was.*
*I used to pretend that I didn't care about school when my mum made*
*me have time off. I thought 'Well that's alright,' because I wanted her*
*to think I was like my sister, 'cos she got on with my sister and*
*everything, but it didn't do me any good because even now we don't get*
*on .....*

The influence of Della's mother was more psychological than practical:

*Della: We couldn't do with my mother - she was always putting us*
*down. There were seven of us - the oldest my sister she always, always*
*said to us that she never ever wanted any of them except her you know*
*blatantly in the face 'I never wanted any of you' and I think when I got*
*to the age of 10 I started rebelling against her for putting all her crap*
*on me and I hated her, I still do - I was worthless and never wanted .....*

Petra's mother suffered from alcoholism. Although Petra moved away from her direct
influence in her teens, her mother continued to have some control over her until she
died:

*Petra: At 13, I got a chance to transfer to grammar school, but I don't*
*think it would have worked out because by this time my mother was an*
*alcoholic, she was very much into her drinking and I wouldn't have got*
*the support I needed .....*

Later, Petra moved around the country because of her husband's job and told me that
she could cope with her mother's difficulties at a distance, but when she moved back
into this area, it was more difficult:

*I was the only person in the end who she had, everybody else had to*
*abandon her simply for their own survival because she was such a*
*character. By that time she'd got extremely bad cirrhosis of the liver*
*and her second husband had left her and she had just gone down hill.*
*So she eventually went into hospital from the burns from this fire she'd*
*had and then she came out and 'course she wanted me to take her on*
*but I just couldn't, so she went into a nursing home and eventually*
*discharged herself ..... She - I don't blame her really she was dying she*
*knew she was dying but she drank ..... and went back into hospital and*
*her parting words to me 'I hope you rot in hell' because I wouldn't take*
*her on. I couldn't, I might as well have gone and buried myself in the*
*garden .....*

These are powerful stories of control by women; a topic which has not been overtly
addressed within Walby's concept of patriarchy. However, one could argue that part of
the ideological structure of our society is parental and particularly maternal control and
influence over children. This has been discussed extensively over the last forty or fifty
years (see for example, Nicolson 1993, Chodorow 1978, Bowlby 1953). Part of this

ideology is the expectation that children will love, respect and obey their parents. Rich (1977) argues though that the whole concept of motherhood is framed within a patriarchal structure. Evans (1995) extends this by suggesting that women's powerlessness in a patriarchal society may well lead them to exert power over their children - the only group over which society gives them legitimate control *'treating a child as the world has treated them'* (Evans 1995, p84).

One could also speculate on a pragmatic explanation - mothers see this as being the way women are treated, so their daughters may as well learn the lesson early. This is of course highly speculative and the lack of evidence in this area suggests that there is a need for considerable further research.

The trauma reported by these students because of the conflict with their mother is a clear indication that this was outside of the perceived ideological framework. However, there was not a passive acceptance of this situation. According to Della, the lack of power which she experienced with her mother, manifested itself in rebellious behaviour and Dilys and Petra moved away from their controlling situations as soon as they were able to. All of these stories show clear examples of agency.


## Agency

As I was presenting the data, a picture was growing in my mind of women enmeshed in a web of control and constraint from which there seemed to be little escape:
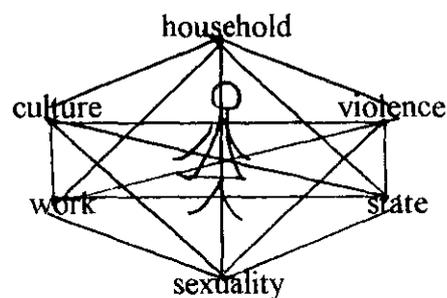


Whilst this diagram epitomises the overlapping and interlocking nature of patriarchy, it also implies that women have no power or control over the situation in which they find themselves. There is evidence from the data that the students with whom I talked have been controlled and constrained by the patriarchal nature of society, but does this mean that they have no agency - have absolutely no control over their lives? Are they passive victims? As a mature student and a lecturer in further and higher education, working primarily with mature women students I find this difficult to accept, and there is ample evidence from the research data to suggest that this is not the case. All the

students with whom I talked have acted in their own interests and shown autonomy and agency. All of them have shown tremendous courage and determination in realising their desire. Jenny, for example, is determined to carve out a different sort of identity for herself, despite physical and psychological pressure not only from her husband, but also from her neighbourhood. Gerry is determined to overcome the controlling effects of her sexual abuse. Deidre and Grace are resisting the ongoing power of their ex-husbands. Della is not only taking action to control her own life, she is helping her children towards some independence. All of them are using education as a vehicle for their own reasons. In fact, one could argue that the choice the women made to return to education is in itself indicative of agency, which according to Giddens is concerned with people's ability to act, rather than their intention (Giddens 1984, p9).

The return to education can be seen as a clear attempt by women to change at least some aspect of their lives. The main empirical chapter of this work is concerned with trauma and the links which the women make with education. The gains which the students were talking about, apart from the obvious paper qualifications, were fulfilment, an increasing confidence, a positive self-image and independence, all of which I have put under the umbrella term of identity. One or two students in fact did mention a 'different' identity. If we look at the converse of these gains - low confidence, lack of fulfilment, dependence and poor self-image and link them back into the women's stories, it can be argued that the patriarchal structure of society was instrumental either directly, or indirectly, in influencing these negative aspects of the students' identity. The women's return to education, taking some control over their own lives and acting in their own interests, has effected some change. This changing/modified identity though is still framed within an overall patriarchal social structure, which also imposes constraints on the women's agency.

## A case study - Colette's story

This chapter ends with the story of one student, Colette, which illustrates beautifully the interaction between structure and agency. I interviewed Colette quite early in the research programme, but the significance of what she told me did not emerge until a much later analysis of the data and certainly did not drive other interviews.

**Colette** is 31, married with two children aged 4 and 6. She enrolled in September 1993 on the EC funded course, Women into Management and Technology at a local college. Her traumatic experiences started with the birth of her first child, a son. It was a difficult pregnancy and a painful birth, culminating in a caesarean section. The

child was a difficult and fretful baby who did not sleep and she became exhausted. She blamed her husband for giving her this problem and her relationship with him deteriorated despite the fact that she acknowledges that he tried to be supportive. This he did in practical terms, but saw the problem as lying with her rather than the baby and did not recognise her need for emotional support:

> *Colette: My son was awful, still is, but that's me, he was awful as a baby - never slept, cried constantly. I felt like throwing him on t' bed a few times. I had a problem with the birth and everything. He was breach and I had to have a caesarean and it was quite a lot to add to but my husband said it was me and that's like a red rag to a bull. It just got worse and worse and I still don't get on with my son, even though, how can I say, he's not a horrible child he's good and everybody likes him at school ..... I wouldn't say I blamed him for what he did to me but it was a bad time and me and my husband didn't get on at all.*
>
> *I was awful and in the end Paul had a word with his mum and said 'Look you'll have to talk to her', because he was at the end of his tether and he said he used to drive round and think 'I daresn't go home, what's she going to be like?', which I can see. At that time, it was 'you give me this baby'. It's just like your husband that gets it and I let it all out and she (her mother-in-law) didn't understand because she'd had three wonderful children like they do.*
>
> *I've had another, because I didn't want just one. We had a girl and she was completely different ..... she's my favourite and he isn't. I've told Paul that but he just says 'You can't feel like that', but you do, you can't help how you feel can you?*

I asked Colette why she had chosen to return to education when she did:

> *Well, he'd started nursery. If it'd been her, I think I wouldn't have come. It was like 'he's going to nursery, there's somebody who can have him', because I don't really want him. I know I shouldn't say that, but perhaps that's the feeling. I mean, I don't want him, I mean all the time .....*
>
> *Paul wanted me to do it ..... because he knew how fed up and bored I was at home and I suppose how nasty I was ..... I get on better with the kids and I get on better with my husband as well because you tend to take it out on them don't you?*

I think an interesting issue is raised here - Colette's relationship with her husband seemed to be fine until the birth of her first child which seems to have had a major detrimental effect on it. However, he did try to be supportive and encouraged her to return to education as a possible way of easing her problems at home. When Colette went to college the situation with her husband appeared to improve. This is, I think, what she is talking about here, when she says she gets on better with her husband

because things do appear to have improved in relation to the children, but then seem to be deteriorating for a different reason:

> ..... *sometimes I could just be on my own ..... at the moment we are going through a bad patch, we just don't seem to see each other because I'm busy and he's working late ..... We are drifting apart and I don't know whether to blame me changing or what, but it's not good at the moment. I met up with some old colleagues where I used to work last week and everybody noticed that I was more confident basically, so is it for the good or not? Am I getting over the being married, having kids stage? Is the next step, like these you read in the paper, mum leaves home and disappears forever? I know this is awful, but I see myself on my own and that's really bad because of the kids ..... 'cos the kids should stay with mum ..... but if I'm honest, I would say that I see myself on my own .....*

Although the relationship does seem to be deteriorating, it seems she is better able to cope with it. Colette was almost thinking aloud at this point:

> *I don't think I'd ever get married again, I know this is awful but I see myself on my own and that's really bad because of the kids. I don't know what it is, I just know its a big turning point for me at the moment, which way to go and what to do. But I think Paul feels the same, I don't think it's just me, there's a big gap between us and it's not just from me it's from him as well. So what's going to happen in t'future I don't know. I don't how to bridge that gap, it seems to be getting wider ..... I think I don't want to, but then I do, I don't want to and then I think I should. I should rather than I do, because there's the kids involved. I don't blame college but it has changed my life so really if it come to a divorce or something I would have to say that's what really happened ..... we've just drifted apart ..... I would say that I see myself on my own.*

It seems there are many issues with which Colette is wrestling at the moment. She is recognising that she is changing and developing as a person and this change is causing some inner conflict. There are a number of ways in which education plays a part in her story:

As with many other students, her course is therapeutic:

> *I was fed up at home ..... I got where I was a bit miserable and not wanting to do anything or go anywhere. Now, I'm just a different person, ask anyone, they can see the change in me. I don't think I'm perhaps the old Colette that I was before the kids came along, because they change your life, but I really feel like I'm 21 again.*

She is also desperately trying to find an identity outside of her domestic and caring role:

*I wanted to do something for myself, yes for myself. I didn't want to be a mum with two kids. I wanted to do something for myself and not she's somebody's mum and that's Paul's wife type of thing and I must admit I've become Colette Smith again which was my maiden name and not Mrs Brown, who is just a mum and Paul's wife. Does that make sense? I do love my kids but I don't think I want to be a mum any more, are you with me?*

*(and) I must admit I've got where I'm not bothered any more about housework, whereas I was one to. If there was a bit of fluff there I'd get t' hoover out, I did take a lot of pride in the home. I think I'm just not bothered any more. Like yesterday, he said 'It could do with hoovering up in here' and I said 'Yes it could' and looked at him as if to say 'get t' hoover out then' ..... He didn't, but that doesn't bother me, whereas at one point we used to be bickering about that as well. But its true, things like that do get left ..... other things are more important aren't they now? I mean I sat there and did some homework instead of hoovering up.*

Colette appears to be wrestling with what she wants and what she feels society expects of her. I felt that for a large part of the interview she was thinking aloud and attempting to remedy a negative self-image she had of herself because of the way she felt. She has conflicting views of herself as a career woman, as a wife and as a mother:

*I do think I've changed ..... I haven't really been a career woman have I, but I think I'm going that way. At the end of it I do want a good job I don't really want the university education that this course leads to. I mean I say that now, but perhaps in another six months, I might change my mind and decide to go because I'm surprising myself with the results that I'm getting. I'm not just passing, I'm passing with a big step, and that's 70 and 80%. I always thought that I was thick, well you do don't you, I always did at school .....*

She raised the question 'Is it college that's done that to me or is it me?' but does recognise that there was a desire in her to do something outside of the home:

*I didn't sort of think 'Is it too much hassle to do it?'. There was something saying 'You are going to do it for yourself, for you, you're going to do it', and I think that's what started it off really. I would never give it up even if I failed things. I just want it.*

Her conflict over the children was clear. She recognised that whilst it may be socially acceptable for her to leave her husband, it was not so for her to dislike and maybe leave the children:

*It's hard telling people you don't get on with your son especially when he's only little. It's not acceptable. If I don't get on with my husband I should leave him and take the kids with me, because that's what*

*happens - the kids stay with mum. What frightens me I think, after a couple of months, would I change? You don't know till you do it. If I could like be away from them for like a few months I might think I do want my kids, I'm not bothered about my husband, you know what I mean? But you can't do that can you, you can't do that to the kids? Really, it's tough isn't it, especially when their only so young .....*

Everything that Colette told me was linked in with a strong desire for both social and economic independence:

*You do struggle on one wage with two small children, you want to do things you can't. But also it is the independence part of it as well, you don't want to be the little wife at home any more. I don't think most women do now. I think my age group is having four or five years at home and they've had enough. A lot of people I worked with went back to work straight away. Sometimes I regret that, I wish that I'd done that.*

*..... and also I want a social life as well. I don't know whether that comes along with the college bit, but I'm wanting to have the relaxation part of it on my own really, going out with my friends instead of my husband and sometimes I think 'Is that wrong?', but then I think 'No, he goes out, he goes out with football, why shouldn't I?' He doesn't say no you can't go but if there's not much money in the kitty, obviously we have words about it, which is right, but I find that we are drifting apart and I don't know whether to blame me changing or what.*

There are many aspects to Colette's story. Since being in education, she has gained in confidence and self-awareness and appears to be fighting conflicting emotions, many of them influenced by social pressure, to create a new identity for herself. Her guilt feelings are clear, again influenced by the social norms she feels she is contravening. She sees herself as deviant, almost morally evil in that she is contemplating leaving her children, but at the same time she is fighting the constraints and the identity which she sees as being imposed by her marriage and children.

The influence of patriarchy on Colette's life and feelings is clear, but it is not a total influence and there is clear evidence of agency. She is aware that what she is planning on doing is not what women are expected to do in this society, which is a reflection of the power of patriarchal influence but at the same time she seems to be determined to carve out a new identity for herself.

# Conclusion

This chapter set out to examine the usefulness of patriarchy as a conceptual framework in the analysis of the research data and in particular to the women's traumatic experiences.

There is ample evidence from the findings in support of the theory of patriarchy, particularly in relation to the way in which the identity of women is constrained and controlled by the dominant patriarchal ideology. This was in evidence throughout Walby's six structures and highlights the overlapping and interlocking nature of the way in which those structures work to reinforce gender divisions and influence the self perceptions of the students.

However, there are also areas where the theory does not go far enough and which highlight the inadequacies of patriarchy as an analytical tool, although the general tenor of the concept still applies. There is considerable evidence of guilt, psychological violence, the control of women by other women and the power of women to act in their own interests and take some control over the shape and direction of their lives. The major area here is I think the issue of agency which tends to be under-emphasised but which was very evident it the research data. Walby does say that:

> *Women are not passive victims of oppressive structures. They have*
> *struggled to change both their immediate circumstances and the wider*
> *social structures.*                            *(Walby 1990, p 200)*

which appears to be saying that women as a group have agency. However, she concludes her book by saying:

> *Women are no longer restricted to the domestic hearth, but have the*
> *whole society in which to roam and be exploited. (Walby 1990, p 201)*

which suggests that agency is not real but an illusion. However, the research data would suggest that although patriarchy may well provide the backcloth against which women shape their identity, agency, at least on a micro level is not illusory, but very real in the everyday lives of mature women returners to education.

# Chapter 8: Conclusion

At the start of this research, my plans were fairly clearly laid out. My aim was to investigate the backgrounds of and barriers experienced by mature women students who enter further and higher education after a number of years out of the education system. I intended to use a primarily positivist methodology and an eclectic explanatory framework drawing on theories of patriarchy, power, ideology and structuration. I raised a number of a priori questions, discussed in chapter 1, in relation to my research:

*'Does patriarchy explain the erection and maintenance of the barriers which mature women experience when returning to further and higher education?'*

*'Is there a fit between the broad structure of patriarchy and women's everyday lives?'*

*'If women surmount the barriers, does this call into question the explanatory reach of patriarchy as a theoretical structure?'*

As I saw it at the time, the research was fairly straightforward - collect the data using mainly quantitative methods and analyse the barriers using patriarchy as a theoretical tool. However, during the course of the research I made three major moves: in methodology, in focus, and in theoretical structure. These shifts, which are discussed in chapter one, did not happen overnight, rather they were part of a major ongoing learning process, the net result of which was a vastly different piece of work from that which I had originally envisaged. Neither were these shifts isolated occurrences, rather the shift in methodology was closely related to the shift in the focus and the theoretical structure.

The change of methodology, which is discussed in chapters one and two, was not simply a change in method, rather it was a shift in my whole approach to the research. The crucial factor was a growing awareness that I was looking more for explanations than "numbers of women who ..... " I realised over the months that if my real interest was in explanations and perceptions then it was greater depth rather than breadth which I needed in the research data. I was also reading considerable literature on feminist methodology which takes women as the focus in all aspects of the research, aiming to allow women's voices to be heard. I began the fieldwork then with a very different approach from what I had originally intended, but still focusing my thinking on the 'barriers' which I knew were there.

When I began to talk with the women, all the barriers which I had anticipated being present were there in the women's stories. However, in addition to this, the students were talking to me about personal issues, both current and in their past. I have argued

that it was the relaxed and non-judgmental structure of the interview which facilitated the telling of these stories which at first I set within a 'barriers' framework - perceiving them as major hurdles which the women had had to surmount. Theorising before the fieldwork had certainly conditioned what I was looking for. One of the major problems here was perhaps my lack of research training. Had I been more informed about ethnographic methodology and a grounded theory approach, I may well have realised sooner the implications of what the women were telling me. As it was, I had to learn ethnography 'on the job', via the women with whom I was talking, rather than as a technique which I applied.

As the fieldwork progressed, more and more of these painful stories, which I was by now describing as trauma, were being told, but I was still perceiving them as barriers. When I began to analyse the data, I was shocked at the frequency of these painful stories and although I found it difficult to detach myself from the notion of barriers, I was beginning to look at these happenings in a different way. There appeared to be a definite link between the women's experiences and their return to education and although the link was not yet clear, I began to realise the implications for my research. Were they more a motivation than a barrier I wondered?

This was, for me, a very difficult period in the research. On the one hand, the students had given me considerable data on barriers and there was a reasonable amount of literature which looked at the hurdles which mature students face when they return to education. On the other hand, the unexpected data on trauma which was emerging was interesting and exciting but the links with education were not clear and I was uncertain what I would find when I started to analyse the data in detail. This appeared to be new territory and I could find no obvious literature on the topic. I was apprehensive about letting go of the security of working with the known and with a clear structure, in order to focus on the unknown with no clear structure. After some considerable reflection, and discussions with my supervisor, friends and colleagues, I decided to go with the latter, but at this stage had no real idea what was going to emerge. Re-reading the literature on grounded theory was comforting in that it seemed that I should not be feeling secure at this stage! I found the transcripts extremely difficult to analyse initially because I was pulled into the content of the stories as I have discussed in chapter six. I found also that I was still seeing these painful experiences in terms of major hurdles which the students had met. I decided that the only way round this was to write a section on barriers, even if it was ultimately not included in the thesis. I could not at first understand the difficulty I experienced in writing this chapter, but I slowly realised that my pre-conceptions were still influencing my thinking - the term 'barriers' was mine and not the students'. Recognising this was part of the learning process of moving from positivism to an ethnographic grounded theory approach of

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hearing what the women were actually saying, rather than what I thought they were saying. There are clear links here between my change in methodology and the change in the focus of the thesis from barriers to trauma which is discussed in chapters one, five and six. My new and somewhat tentative and generalised objective was to look at the links between trauma and education from the women's perspective.

The trauma which was presented by around half of the women I interviewed is documented in chapter six. The painful experiences about which the women were talking to me ranged across their lives and took a variety of forms. Grouping and categorising were extremely difficult since the stories were very individual and I spent many hours grouping in different ways before finally settling on the categories I used. For example, I attempted a time-scale matrix with trauma on one axis and the different period of women's lives on the other, but this was too sequential, and did not reflect the variation in the women's progression from early childhood to now. I also realised though that a two-dimensional model was insufficient. I needed not only a 3-dimensional model which would include education and the links with past experiences, but also a model which could deal with their on-going effects.

I then tried to construct a model using key words and phrases used in the interviews. Negative phrases such as lack of confidence, poor self-image, lack of fulfilment, lack of independence were common, as were their counter-phrases when links were made with a return to learning. However, these factors were common to all students, whether they talked of trauma or not. In addition, I felt that the focus would be on the effects of education, rather than on the links between education and the women's painful experiences.

My attempt at constructing models was, to a large extent, an attempt to distance myself from the data. What I tried to avoid was making a judgement on the intensity of the trauma, according to my own criteria. The only basis I had for making this judgement was what the women said and the way they said it and this was open to considerable misinterpretation. A short film used as part of an Open University Summer School (Course K668, Mental Handicap: Changing Perspectives) discusses the way people who have had harrowing personal experiences distance themselves emotionally when talking to others about them (see also Fisher et al 1986). In addition to this, people do not have the same ability to verbalise their experiences. As Taylor & Bogdan maintain:

> *People simply do not have equal ability to provide detailed accounts of*
> *what they have been through and what they feel about it.*
> *(Taylor & Bogdan 1984, p84)*

If I was going to categorise in terms of trauma, then it had to be in terms of what the women told me, either directly or indirectly about how these painful experiences had affected their lives. In order to work within some sort of framework though, I divided the stories into trauma experienced early in the women's lives, trauma experienced later and trauma which was ongoing. Categorisation in this manner however, is clearly subjective and open to critical evaluation; a re-working of the data at some future time may well produce different structures.

What was very clear from the data was that whatever reasons the students gave for returning to education, they were gaining far more than just paper qualifications, and this was particularly true for those students who told me of traumatic experiences in their lives. Whatever level they were studying at, the women talked of issues such as an increase in confidence, some personal independence, a more positive or a less negative self-image and personal fulfilment. This is not to say that the paper qualifications were not important, since proof of ability can also be seen as an affirmation of self, especially when students recognise that their potential has not been fulfilled in their compulsory school years. Although students generally did not mention identity per se, the process of moving from individual stories to a generalisation of the data led me to use the concept of identity because it provided an overarching theme to draw together some of the positive psychological aspects about which the women were talking. It is difficult to pinpoint the time in the analysis which prompted this; it was simply a general accumulation or accretion of findings and a slow realisation of what seemed to be emerging and although the term was not used by many of the students, as a generic term it seemed to me to be the most appropriate. Thus, the main criterion for employing it, is its usefulness in enhancing my own understanding of what the women were saying, and it is up to the reader to decide whether I have faithfully reflected the voice of the women, or whether I am imposing my own perceptions.

The realisation, well into the analysis, that identity was a useful 'conceptual basket' into which to put the women's words, together with the shift from barriers to trauma throws up some of the difficulties and frustrations associated with a grounded theory approach. During the analysis of the data, I began to wonder whether some of the women who did not talk about painful experiences had given me cues which I did not pick up. I realised that this was an unavoidable consequence of grounded theory and the important thing to remember was that around 50% of the students with whom I spoke did present trauma and I had a very clear feeling that others had painful stories about which they were not yet prepared to talk. I also began to experience the frustration of seeing statements in the transcripts which I would have liked to pursue and questions I wished I had asked. For example, the students did not make direct links between their painful experiences and education. Although they sometimes made

indirect links as is evidenced in chapter six, it would have been interesting to have asked a more direct question.

It would also have been useful to ask more direct questions about links between trauma, identity and education. But the main factor for me here was the question of whether I should change my theoretical framework yet again at this late stage, and use the concept of identity as my analytical tool. However, after some thought, and a discussion with my supervisor, I decided to stay with a critique of patriarchy. There is little doubt though in my mind that identity theory would provide a valuable analytical tool and to re-work the data within a framework which focuses upon this would be an extremely interesting exercise in the future, particularly if this is linked with patriarchy, since the close links between patriarchy and identity have been clearly in evidence throughout the thesis.

The decision to centre upon the usefulness of patriarchy in relation to the data completed the three-fold shift from positivism to ethnography; from barriers to trauma and from eclecticism to a single theoretical focus and are clearly interrelated as I have discussed in chapter seven. This re-focusing from a preconceived theoretical structure to one grounded in the data highlighted four areas where patriarchy seems not to provide a full explanation. Whilst there is powerful evidence of patriarchal control with clear examples of the interactive and overlapping nature of the six structures which Walby outlines, patriarchy does not adequately cover issues of psychological violence, guilt, control of women by women and agency which were present in the women's stories.

Unlike physical violence, little is written on psychological violence in the literature on patriarchy. To my regret, it was not an area which I probed particularly in the interviews, rather it emerged during the analysis and of course this made me wish that I had pursued it. Little is also written about guilt, rather it would seem to be a 'given' within radical feminist theorising. It is treated almost as an 'aside' whereas it was very evident in the women's stories. In chapter seven, I have made tentative links between guilt and psychological violence. Further research may well link them more closely and in the process extend and develop the explanatory breadth of patriarchy.

Falling less clearly within a patriarchal framework is the control of women by other women, and in relation to the data, of mothers controlling daughters, although one or two writers do make indirect links. I have suggested in chapter seven that there may be a pragmatic explanation - that women are taught by their mothers what the 'real' world is like in their experience. This is of course highly speculative, but the lack of empirical evidence does suggest a need for research.

The major failing for me of most theorising on patriarchy is the marginalisation of autonomy and agency. All the women with whom I spoke showed agency by virtue of returning to learning and revealed considerable determination to have control over at least some aspects of their lives. One cannot deny though that the research findings revealed that this agency is still framed within an overall patriarchal social structure. This is evidenced throughout the thesis and is clear in Colette's story which is the penultimate section of chapter seven.

Patriarchy then has been a useful conceptual tool in relation to the data. That some areas have not been researched and addressed does not negate its explanatory power, rather these areas provide opportunities for further research and examination of the theory. I feel though that I have only scratched the surface of theorising trauma and need to take it further. There may well be many writers who would maintain that different theories would provide a better conceptual framework for the research data and indeed my original intention was to incorporate theories of power, structuration and ideology as well as patriarchy into the analysis. As I have said in chapter seven, these are powerful theories in their own right and would no doubt provide an interesting and useful analytical framework in the future.

This research set out to examine the barriers met by mature women students who had returned to education a considerable time after their mainstream education had finished. These barriers were there and have been reported. In addition to the barriers, the research data revealed a considerable amount of trauma in women's backgrounds, either current or in the past. This is not necessarily exceptional - trauma exists in the lives of many people, both men and women and the older one is, the more likely there are to be painful experiences. What is unique about these findings though is the connection with education. The research data reveals clear links between the trauma, the women's return to learning, and a desire to take control over at least a part of their lives, as I have discussed in chapter six. It seems to me that the women were also making connections in their mind between their past experiences and education, whether they made these explicit or not. This data was totally unsolicited and if there had been no connection in their minds at all, would the women have mentioned it?

It could be argued that the findings in themselves are highly speculative since the research was conducted in and around one northern city, by a single feminist researcher using a somewhat haphazard sampling procedure. Nevertheless, the women with whom I spoke did come from a wide range of demographic and socio-economic backgrounds, and the common themes, grounded in the data, linked the women by their gender rather than their material circumstances. Clearly though, my research sample was small and the findings of the research, whatever their impact, cannot be

extrapolated to a wider population. What they can do however is form the basis for more research of both a qualitative and quantitative nature to discover whether this is a single phenomenon due to a freak of sampling or whether it is an accurate reflection of women returners generally. Rigorous wide-scale research in other educational establishments in different geographical areas, with a larger, demonstrably representative sample is needed for further investigation.

Further research is also needed into whether there are other vehicles such as a craft or music or starting a business which women choose for their purpose as well as education. Implicit in what the students have said is the status which education brings but further research is needed in many areas to draw out these issues. One could also raise the issue of whether education is *the* major vehicle or one of many which women who have experienced trauma in their lives use to take control over aspects of their identity. If this is so, then one would expect to find a greater incidence of trauma reported by women who have returned to education. Certainly the figure of around 50% does seem extremely high, but again there is nothing with which to compare it. Comparisons need to be done with for example, women who have returned to paid work after a period of time out of the workforce, and perhaps also with a group of women in general, although operationalising this could be extremely difficult.

People generally do not have just one reason for doing things and it may well be that trauma is not be the sole motivating factor, but may be a contributing factor. Is the women's return a multi-step situation, for example, early school leaving, *plus* an unfulfilling job, *plus* trauma, *plus* a possible relationship problem, *plus* a number of other unknown factors in any order or combination?

With this small-scale but fruitful piece of research, I feel that I have laid the possible foundations for a great deal of further exploration. The issues surrounding women's return to learning are not simple, they are multi-causal and complex. These are some of the avenues I would want to explore in the future in relation to married women returners to education.

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