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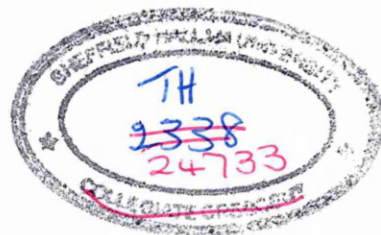
Barriers to Success? Access Entrants and Social Class Processes in Higher Education

Serena Anne Bufton

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore social-class processes within higher education through a study of the experiences of mature, largely working-class, Access entrants. It draws on data from a qualitative, longitudinal study of twenty-seven such entrants to a pre-1992 university, a post-1992 university and a college of further and higher education, all in the South Yorkshire region. The central finding is that, whilst all mature students entering higher education may experience some degree of disjunction, this is frequently more intense for those from working-class backgrounds, although factors of age, entry qualification and gender interact in complex ways to shape the experiences of mature entrants. It is suggested that, despite important differences between higher education institutions in terms of access strategies, ethos, student composition and levels of student support, the academic stance on which they are all premised, with its distanced and nuanced impartiality, may constitute a subtle source of disjunction for working-class students because it necessitates a detachment from, and symbolic re-ordering of, their social worlds. As a consequence, working-class students in higher education are likely to feel that they are entering an alien world. Drawing on Bourdieu's analogy of social life as game playing, it is contended that the working-class habitus provides resources for dealing with the experience of higher education but that participation in the academic 'game' has important consequences for selfhood and relationships with significant others, marking a potential betrayal of working-class roots and a loss of the 'sense of one's place'.

The theoretical framework adopted in the thesis rests upon a reformulation of Bourdieu's concepts and the methodological stance is one of critical realism. It is argued that social class operates at a number of distinct but interwoven levels. At the structural level, class is viewed as a *real* economic and cultural phenomenon with generative mechanisms of which social actors may not be aware. Working-class students in higher education may therefore only partially recognise the class-based nature of their disadvantage. Indeed, the processes of misrecognition and symbolic violence may encourage such students to believe that they lack the necessary skills and qualities to cope in this sphere. At the level of social action, however, class processes are implicated in the struggles for distinction in social life - material, cultural and symbolic - of purposive and active social agents, although social classes at this level may now operate more as modes of differentiation than as forms of collectivity (Savage, 2000). It is contended in this thesis that the relationships between the structural and cultural dimensions of social class, and between each of these and social agency, are contingent upon historical and social circumstances; these relationships can therefore only be specified in concrete, empirical contexts. (This is clearly demonstrated by the contingent combination of structural context, individual motivation and, in many cases, fortuitous events that lay behind the entry to higher education of the working-class students in this study.) Following this, it is argued that the generative mechanisms of social class affect what happens in a contingent, rather than a necessary, way so that the outcomes of the struggles for distinction in social life are not fixed. For this reason, class processes may contribute to the reproduction of existing patterns of disadvantage but the potential is also there for change: in the context of this study, for a progressive *demystification* of higher education and an increasing awareness among working-class groups of its possibilities.

## **Acknowledgements**

Many people have assisted in this enquiry into the experiences of Access entrants to higher education. I would particularly like to thank the interviewees, who gave up many hours to talk to me and trusted me with so much detail about their lives and feelings. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my supervisors, Doctor Anthony Rosie, Professor Peter Ashworth and Mr Robert Sykes, for their patience and support over many years. However, my heartfelt thanks goes to my family: to my mother, who recognised the importance of education and fought to give me the opportunities that she never had; and to my husband, who has supported me through the ups and downs of this protracted period of study.

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Table 1:

Social Class Background of Access Students in South Yorkshire 1992/3

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## Preface

In the early 1990s, many writers were confident that social class was of declining importance as a dimension of inequality and a source of identity in contemporary society (see, for example, Pakulski and Waters, 1996a, 1996b). I remained unconvinced: as a teacher of many years' standing in South Yorkshire - in secondary schools, on Access courses in colleges and in higher education - I felt that the reports of the 'death of social class' were premature.

In the early part of my career in the 1970s, teaching sociology in a comprehensive school in a designated 'Educational Priority Area' of Rotherham, I had anguished over the bright, working-class children who left school with few, if any, qualifications. No matter how hard we tried to engage these young people, they remained resoundingly indifferent, often good-naturedly allowing themselves to be persuaded and cajoled into completing a handful of subjects to Certificate of Secondary Education level but caring little about the outcome. My childhood friends had been similarly indifferent to education. (I discuss the research implications of my working-class background in 4.5.1.) Dismayed by the low levels of literacy and numeracy achieved by some of these working-class children, I transferred my efforts into teaching children with 'special needs' in inner-city schools. Many of these had lives scarred by poverty, domestic instability and violence. A number clearly had ability which they chose not to use in the educational setting, viewing education as an irrelevance and an intrusion into their lives and displaying hostility, resentment and, frequently, violence towards the school and its staff.

Moving on to further education in the mid 1980s, I became involved with adult returners studying at 'night school' and on Access courses. Many were from working-class backgrounds - people who, like the children I had taught a decade earlier, had left school as soon as they could to enter employment or add to the growing unemployment figures but who had subsequently developed an interest in studying or felt the need for further qualifications. I took on some teaching in higher education and came to have increasing contact with these mature, working-class students as they transferred from their Access courses to begin the long haul towards graduate status. Many had financial and

domestic difficulties which impeded their progress and most felt insecure and ill-at-ease in a learning context which appeared to be very different from the cosy and supportive atmosphere they had grown used to on their Access courses. Working with other tutors to help these students complete their first year, I began to realise that the 'skills' that they needed to acquire went beyond conventionally-defined 'study skills' as many seemed to have a problem adapting to the 'academic style' itself, the vocabulary, forms of argument and measured, impartial stance. The exact nature of this problem was difficult to pin down but social class appeared to be implicated in barriers which were as real as the financial and domestic difficulties that many of these students experienced.

This research was inspired by these experiences. Suspecting that the effects of social class might be felt in subtle ways in educational settings, I decided to trace the journeys of former Access students, whom I hoped would be largely drawn from working-class backgrounds, as they charted a path through social science degree courses in three different types of higher-education institution in the South Yorkshire region: a pre-1992 university ('Old University'), a post-1992 university ('New University'), and a college of further and higher education ('College'). Twenty-seven students were interviewed in each year of their degree courses - nineteen women and eight men aged between 23 and 55 years, the majority of whom proved to have working-class origins. Most of the interviews took place between November 1993 and August 1996 although one student, who had taken a year out, was interviewed in June 1997. (A discussion of the implications of the time lapse between the interviews and the writing up of the thesis takes place in Section 4.5.) The aim was to try to view higher education through the eyes of these students, to gain an insight into what it meant for them, their experiences as they progressed through it and the effects of these on selfhood and relationships with significant others in their lives.

The outline of the thesis is as follows. Chapter 1 examines the problem of the under-representation of working-class students in higher education and discusses the findings of studies into the experiences of mature, working-class and Access entrants, concluding with an outline of the research questions. Chapter 2 sets out the theoretical framework used in the thesis, a framework which draws largely, but not uncritically, on a reformulation of the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In this chapter there is also a discussion

of the nature of social identity and of the relationship between 'structure', 'culture' and 'agency' in social class processes, with particular reference to the education system. In Chapter 3, the methodological orientation of critical realism is discussed and this is followed, in Chapter 4, by an account of the research methods that were adopted in accordance with this orientation.

Chapters 5 to 9 report the findings of the research, organisation of these being partly chronological and partly thematic. Chapter 5 examines the early educational experiences of the interviewees, their attitudes towards higher education and the reasons for their decision to return to study. It draws upon Bourdieu's concept of *misrecognition* and emphasises the role of *contingency* in the journey to higher education, developing the argument outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 that social life can be explained as a working out of structural constraint and individual volition in given social and historical contexts.

In Chapter 6 the experiences and feelings of the interviewees as they transferred to higher education are explored. Preconceptions of higher education are contrasted with the perceived realities and a number of potential sources of disjunction illustrated - particularly age, gender, entry qualification and social class. It is argued that there are potential risks to selfhood for all mature students entering higher education but that these risks are greater for those drawn from working-class backgrounds.

Chapter 7 describes the experiences of the interviewees as they learned to adapt to the *academic stance* required in higher education. It is suggested that this stance implies a view of the world and of one's relationship to it which was seen as alien by many of the working-class interviewees in this study, who therefore experienced a form of class-based disjunction which was *additional to*, but articulated in complex ways with, disjunctions arising from age and gender. The chapter charts the strategies adopted by the interviewees to cope with this stance and how some of them learned to 'play the game' but experienced *symbolic violence* and a potential betrayal of their working-class roots. Nevertheless, it is argued that the presence of increasing numbers of working-class students in higher education could contribute to a process of increasing *demystification* of the academic stance.

Chapter 8 examines changes in selfhood and in relationships with significant others as the interviewees progressed through their courses in higher education. It is argued that the 'moral careers' of these interviewees were accompanied, to a greater or lesser extent, by potential changes in perceptions of the self which could be affirmed and reinforced - or denied and rejected - by significant others, such as family and friends, with consequences both for long-standing relationships and selfhood. The complex interplay of dimensions of class and gender are drawn out and strategies for dealing with dislocation in social relationships examined. It is contended that, for many of the interviewees, the final year in higher education was accompanied by a feeling of being caught between two very different contexts and identities, and an attitude of *ambivalence* - about the future, their relationships, and their social class membership.

Chapter 9 focuses on the experience of withdrawal from the course. Withdrawal is often the culmination of a set of complex and inter-related factors and each withdrawal has a unique history. This chapter focuses on a case study of one of the interviewees - Wendy - who withdrew from her course at Old University but returned a year later to complete. Wendy was chosen for the case study largely because her experience illustrates graphically the areas of disjunction discussed in previous chapters and, interestingly, a 'resolution' of disjunction which enabled her to return to complete her degree course. In addition, some of the other withdrawals were largely the consequence of problems which are not specific foci of the thesis, such as long-standing mental health or sexuality problems, or were due to reasons unconnected with the course, such as removal to another part of the country.

Chapter 10 chapter draws together the main findings of the research, sets out the claims to knowledge and identifies areas for further study. The central argument of this chapter is that the data support the view of social class as a relational process which operates in higher education at material, cultural and symbolic levels. Yet it is suggested that social class processes in higher education - and possibly, by implication, in society as a whole - are much more dynamic than allowed for in Bourdieu's model. It is argued that struggles for distinction in social life both draw upon and, in turn, influence, cultural and structural processes and that higher education is an important arena in which such struggles take place.

Universities are not a birthright for the middle classes. None of us can defend the position where five times as many young people from professional backgrounds enter higher education compared with those from unskilled and manual backgrounds – 73 to 74 percent compared with 13 to 14 percent – and when that gap has not narrowed in recent times.  
(Estelle Morris, The Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 2001)

### **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the under-representation of working-class students in higher education, reviewing the research into the possible reasons for this and exploring the experiences of those working-class students who do participate. (The concept ‘working class’ is not problematised in this chapter; there is a full discussion of the nature of social class in Chapter 2.) The focus is on mature (and, wherever possible, Access) students, although the complex inter-relation of dimensions of age, gender and social class in the educational setting implies that an exclusive focus on Access students is neither possible nor desirable. In addition, the recent outpouring of research into young, working-class students is clearly important and will be included where relevant. The chapter concludes with an outline, and justification, of the research questions posed in this thesis.

### **1.2 Social Inclusion in Higher Education**

#### **1.2.1 Working-Class Under-Representation and the Access Initiative**

Despite the rapid expansion in higher education since the 1980s, the under-representation of working-class students (Registrar General’s classes IIIM, IV and V)<sup>1</sup> remains entrenched (Select Committee on Education and Employment, 2000a).

Universities are already absorbing the majority of suitably-qualified A Level students (Baty, 2001: 1), which indicates that there are relatively large numbers of young people from under-represented groups leaving school or college without the qualifications with which they could gain access to higher education.

It was the recognition of this problem that lay behind the drive to widen access to higher

education in the 1980s and 1990s through the recruitment of non-traditional, mature students, largely through Access courses (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1987). The aim of Access courses is to reconstitute the student body by targeting those mature students who are traditionally under-represented in higher education (specifically, women and members of ethnic minority groups and the working class) and helping to develop their potential (Weil, 1989; Council for National Academic Awards [CNAА], 1989; CNAА, 1990). The Access initiative was particularly welcomed in areas of the country which had been hard hit by unemployment in the 1980s, such as South Yorkshire, whose traditional industries - coal-mining, steel-making and engineering - had undergone rapid decline (Campbell et al, 1996: 35). In this situation of economic decline and the loss of traditional sources of employment, Access courses provided one possible route out of unemployment, offering their students the opportunity to begin the transfer into new jobs or higher education.

Yet, although it is more than twenty years since the first Access courses were established, there is evidence that working-class students are still under-represented amongst mature as well as young entrants to higher education: only 12% of young entrants and 14% of mature entrants to first-time, first-degree programmes come from neighbourhoods with low rates of participation in higher education (defined as areas where the participation rate for under twenty-one-year-olds is less than two-thirds of the national average), despite the fact that, nationally, a third of young people live in these areas (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 1999).

### 1.2.2 Hidden Disadvantage

Although figures detailing the scale of under-representation of working-class students in higher education are useful, they tell us nothing about the more subtle forms of disadvantage: we also have to look at the *types* of courses and higher education institutions that working-class students are entering and their chances of staying in higher education until they graduate.

Forsyth and Furlong (2000: 47) argue that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are subject to a 'subtle, hidden disadvantage' because they are enrolling on different courses to those from more advantaged backgrounds. In a study of around five hundred students



in Scotland who had stayed on at school until the age of seventeen, they discovered that few of the students from disadvantaged backgrounds had gained access to 'desirable' institutions or the 'most advanced' subjects (ibid). Other studies bear out this finding, confirming that the polytechnics, post-1992 universities and colleges have been in the forefront of the move to widen access (see, for example, Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals/Higher Education Funding Council for England [CVCP/HEFCE] 1998: 30).

The relative under-representation of disadvantaged groups on 'prestigious' courses in 'desirable' higher education institutions applies to mature as well as young working-class entrants. For example, Egerton's analysis of data from the General Household Survey (1982-1992) concluded that, although working-class mature students were reaching numerical parity with their middle-class counterparts in higher education, they were more likely to be studying at 'less prestigious' institutions (Egerton, 2001). It is therefore likely that the higher education system is differentiated along class lines:

...social injustices lie not just in continuing exclusions from higher education, but are also to be found in the unequal patterns of choice made by the growing ranks of both young and mature students who take degree courses. Rather than being engaged in the same process, higher education applicants can be seen to be engaged in highly differentiated, unequal processes. (Reay 1998b: 519)

Research indicates that this class-based differentiation of the higher-education system is generally recognised. Archer and Hutchings (2000), in focus-group discussions with one hundred and nine non-participant Londoners, found that there was a perception of a hierarchy of prestige amongst higher-education institutions and an assumption that working-class students were concentrated in the less prestigious institutions. The respondents viewed higher education as a two-tier system. On the one hand, they identified universities like Oxford and Cambridge and other campus universities which were pleasant environments for middle-class students with good A Levels and financial support, offering prestigious degrees and future careers. On the other hand, however, there were the universities which catered for working-class students with vocational or Access qualifications - students who would have to undertake paid work as they studied and would have little time for a social life (Hutchings and Archer, 2001: 87). These

were ‘crap’ universities with lower standards and were less favourably regarded by employers (ibid).

A recent, large-scale research project has identified a number of influences on the choice of higher-education institution which are described as ‘overlapping circles of individual, family, friends and institution’ (Reay, David and Ball, 2001: 4). The authors contend that these affect both the perception of the *possibility* of higher education and the choice of higher-education institution. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ (which is discussed in 2.4.1), they stress the influence of the ‘institutional habitus’ on educational choice, arguing that the school or college a student attends has a powerful influence on the choice of higher-education institution. In some educational institutions, applications to Oxford or Cambridge are viewed as a natural and desirable choice; in others, horizons are much narrower. For example, the mature Access students in this study were discouraged from applying to certain universities because of their tutors’ ‘perceptions that many of the traditional universities are unwelcoming places for mature students’ (Reay, David and Ball, 2001: 10).

### 1.2.3 Social Class and Retention

Widening participation to higher education to include more students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds involves both recruiting and retaining these students, as a recent Select Committee on student retention points out: ‘Access to higher education is not only a matter of getting to university; it is also a matter of staying in and emerging in good standing’ (Select Committee on Education and Employment, 2001b: paragraph 1). However, there is increasing evidence that rates of non-completion are related in a complex ways to entry qualifications, age and social class. The Select Committee, for example, notes: ‘the differences in non-continuation rates between social classes are maintained across the spectrum of entry qualifications though non-continuation is greater at the lower A Level point range’ (ibid: paragraph 26). The Select Committee also notes that mature students are less likely to complete their courses than their younger counterparts (ibid: paragraph 46), although the research indicates that their reasons for withdrawal are different, often involving ‘external circumstances that required their presence at home or in paid employment’ (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998: 327).



The research demonstrates, then, that working-class students, both young and mature, are under-represented in higher education and that the level of this under-representation increases with the degree of prestige of the course or institution. Further, non-completion data suggests that both socio-economic background and age are implicated in the withdrawal of students from their courses. The reasons why this should be the case, and the research into the experiences of working-class students in higher education, will be explored in the remainder of this chapter.

### **1.3 Perceptions of Higher Education**

Research indicates that the barriers to higher education for working-class students are complex and inter-related, including educational, institutional, geographical, financial and more subtle social and cultural factors (see, for example, McGivney, 1996; Reay, 1998a, 1988b; Hatcher, 1998; Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998; Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Hutchings and Archer, 2001; Reay, David and Ball, 2001).

#### **1.3.1 Perceptions of Risk**

Many writers have drawn attention to the perception, held by working-class people, that, for them, higher education is an extremely risky venture. Archer and Hutchings (2000: 555), for example, argue that ‘the risks and benefits associated with participation are unequally distributed across social class, and, as such, access to higher education remains a more difficult and costly “choice” for working-class students’. These risks include failure or drop out, financial difficulties (especially since the introduction of tuition fees and the abolition of maintenance grants) and absence of supporting networks of family and friends. In addition, although the potential employment benefits may be recognised, many of the participants in the study by Archer and Hutchings felt that the job market was ‘overcrowded’ with graduates and that employment would not be easy for them to obtain (ibid: 566). Indeed, Egerton’s analysis of figures from the General Household Survey reveals that working-class mature graduates are more likely to have lesser occupational attainment than their middle-class counterparts (Egerton, 2001).

The assessments made by working-class groups of the nature of higher education and their chances of success within it have been viewed by some writers as an indication that

their under-representation reflects an informed and conscious decision based on a rational assessment of the potential risks and benefits to them of higher education. Reay and Ball, for example, argue:

...the working classes are caught up in a game in which they are required or expected to participate with commitment and enthusiasm but are invariably the losers....working-class apathy and fatalism can be redefined as a refusal to engage in a game where the stakes are often too high for working-class players. (Reay and Ball, 1997: 96)

Goldthorpe (1996) has recently made an attempt to use rational action theory [RAT] in order to secure micro foundations for social class analysis. The central premise of RAT is that social action is essentially rational because people usually act in such a way as to maximise the utility of their decisions and educational decisions, like any other, are made on the basis of a calculation of the expected costs and benefits of different choices. From this perspective, poor take-up of post-compulsory education by members of the working class can be seen as the outcome of a rational assessment: the cost of keeping children in education is relatively higher for working-class families and the benefits are less certain. Evaluating this argument, Hatcher (1998: 12) points out that micro processes of decision making are necessary in any explanation of social action but that they are not sufficient because they do not take into account the strong cultural element in trajectories through education.

### 1.3.2 A Culture of Non-Participation?

The argument that working-class groups have a culture of non-participation in higher education which goes beyond rational decisions about the potential risks and benefits of participating is not a new one (see, for example, Douglas, 1964) but it has gained currency again in recent years (if, indeed, it ever lost it). McGivney (1996), Green and Webb (1997) and Tett (1999), in studies of mature 'alternative' and Access entrants to higher education, report finding culturally-derived beliefs that higher education is not within the reach of those from the working class and that employment is the only option. Similarly, Robertson and Hillman note:

Students from lower socio-economic groups appear to be guided from an earlier age, by reason of habit, culture and professional or peer expectation, to anticipate

initial entry to the labour market rather than higher education.  
(Robertson and Hillman, 1997: paragraph 3.13)

Theories of working-class resistance to education have a long history (for example: Giroux, 1983; McFadden, 1995). Willis, in his study of twelve working-class boys in a secondary-modern school in the 1970s, noted how these boys drew upon resources from working-class culture to subvert the school system, effectively delivering themselves to the factory gates as soon as they were old enough to leave school (Willis, 1977). The idea of a 'culture clash' between working-class groups and educational institutions, and the resistance to them that this generates, continues to be explored in research projects. Lynch and O'Riordan (1998: 452), for example, draw attention to 'conflicts in cultural practices between the lifeworld of the [working class] students and the organisational culture of schools', arguing that the social and cultural background of these students is not valued in the educational system. The teachers they interviewed had a 'cultural deficit' view of their working-class students:

Teachers believed that middle-class parents and themselves shared the same cultural and educational expectations. Teachers, in the Dublin schools especially, saw working-class parents and their children as being hostile or indifferent to education. (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998: 460)

Along similar lines, Gorman, in research into attitudes towards education in a US city, noted that half of the working-class parents in the study had an attitude of resistance to education born of the 'scars inflicted by their interactions with members of the middle class' (Gorman, 1998: 22). These parents saw themselves as *different* to middle-class parents in an essential way: 'These working-class parents...thought that they were caring, down-to-earth, a (cultural) essence that separates them from middle-class, college-educated parents' (ibid: 21).

A number of writers have pointed to class differences in attitudes towards 'knowledge' and education. Some of Gorman's working-class respondents saw 'commonsense' knowledge as just as important as a degree (Gorman, 1998: 22). Similarly, the working-class women in Luttrell's study saw 'real intelligence' as common sense, 'a highly valued capacity that flourishes outside school' and can be ruined by too much education (Luttrell, 1989: 37). Luttrell argues:

Common sense has been characterised as a cultural form of knowledge, a way to apprehend the world as familiar and knowable, and as concrete knowledge to inform action....The women's definitions of common sense confirm these characterizations by identifying the knowledge that grows out of people's lived experiences. For these women, common sense is accessible; it requires no specialized training or credentials. (Luttrell, 1989: 37)

Tett's interviews with community activists recruited to higher education from working-class, disabled and ethnic minority backgrounds also revealed this prioritising of learning that came from life experiences over that gained in academic settings (Tett, 1999: 113).

The different value systems which underpin working-class resistance to education may be the product of a long history of its relative failure in the education system which has engendered strategies to avoid anxiety and survive in 'dangerous places' (Reay and Ball, 1997: 92-3). In their study, Reay and Ball found that working-class parents 'bring different concerns and perspectives on schooling to their choice making', prioritising 'fairness' and 'the accessibility and friendliness of teachers' rather than the academic record of the school (Reay and Ball, 1997: 92). They comment:

Working-class patterns of educational choice are characterised by ambivalence, and appear to be as much about the avoidance of anxiety, failure and rejection as they are about 'choosing a good school for my child'....Working-class choice of secondary schooling often seems to incorporate a process of self-elimination.... (ibid: 93)

The 'choice' of working-class people not to participate in higher education may therefore be seen as part of a wider process of cultural resistance to an educational system in which they have traditionally been disadvantaged. Higher education is perceived as the province of the middle-classes and, although its value is often recognised, it is seen as an alien environment. There is, as a consequence, little sense of ownership of higher education, as Archer and Hutchings note:

...working-class respondents generally positioned themselves 'outside' of HE (e.g. constructing HE as a white, and/or middle-class place), placing themselves as potentially able to take advantage of the benefits it can offer, but not as 'owners' of it. (Archer and Hutchings, 2000: 570)

The research, therefore, reveals a complex picture. Many members of the working-class select themselves out of the education system due to a combination of structural barriers (such as poor educational qualifications, financial difficulties or geographical location), cultural influences and rational choice-making. Lynch and O’Riordan explain this in the following terms:

Class differences in education are not the result of some set of preconceived preferences....rather, they are the by-product of an ongoing set of negotiations between agents and structures... (Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998: 447)

A theoretical framework which accommodates this view of educational decision-making as a product of the dynamic interplay of structural constraint and purposive social action will be explored in Chapter 2. However, it is important to note at this stage that, given the cultural resistance to education found among some working-class groups, their decision to return as adult learners, and their experiences when they do return, are of crucial importance. These experiences will be explored in the remainder of the chapter, which will consider the motivations to return and the problems of fitting in and coping with the academic demands of higher education. The consequent changes in relationships with significant others and perceptions of risk and personal change will also be discussed. The focus, wherever possible, will be Access entrants as these likely to be ‘non-traditional’ students in terms of entry qualification, age and social class background.

#### **1.4 The Return to Education**

Studies of mature and Access entrants to higher education have linked the decision to return to education for some of these students with critical turning points in the life course (Britton and Baxter, 1994). For these students, the return can be viewed as a response to crises such as marital breakdown (Pascall and Cox, 1993: 74) or unemployment (Green and Webb, 1997: 141) but is often unplanned and contingent upon chance factors and events - such as being in the right place at the right time to receive educational guidance (Webb et al, 1994: 213). Enrolment on an Access course is similarly unfocused in many cases and not always connected with any desire to progress to higher education (ibid).

A number of studies have drawn attention to gender differences in the motivations to return to education. Green and Webb (1997) identify two routes into higher education for 'alternative' and Access students: a 'fast-track' route for those, largely male, returners who are either dissatisfied with their present employment or are unemployed or redundant; and a 'slow-track' route for those, largely female, returners whose experiences of part-time study have changed their view of higher education and their suitability for it or whose changing domestic circumstances have made a return to education possible. Both Edwards (1993: 56) and Adams (1996: 205) indicate that men are more likely to have instrumental motivations (such as career goals) than women, who are motivated more often by personal development, interest in learning and the forging of an identity separate from their role in the family. Nevertheless, the return to employment is also a key factor for some women, who may feel that they need more qualifications to apply for jobs or may anticipate an improved standard of living for their families (Edwards, 1993: 56) or a need to provide for them in the event of marital breakdown (Pascall and Cox, 1993: 65). In such cases, education is 'unambiguously the route away from domesticity' and towards a career (ibid: 76). Indeed, Maynard and Pearsall (1994: 236) note that more women than men in their study placed an emphasis on education as a route into employment as the men were more likely to be disillusioned with employment and more likely to see education as an end in itself.

The virtues of education for personal growth and expanding horizons were almost universally commented upon in the study of mature women returners by Pascall and Cox (1993: 90), although the women were equivocal about the link between education and increased status and authority (ibid: 87-8). Education was seen not only as a way to gain self esteem through achieved worth (as opposed to the ascribed worth of women engaged solely in domestic and childcare activities) but also represented:

...a search for the self not only through formal, public learning, but also through a private process...of 'structuring' the thoughts, of seeking that almost mystical depth of knowledge...that transforms the base self into a being, precious in its possession of hidden knowledge. (Pascall and Cox, 1993: 83-4).

Similarly, Macdonald and Stratta (1998: 74) note that women returners in particular feel 'the need to prove themselves intellectually' and many of the mature, Access students in



Reay's research wanted to go to university 'to find themselves' (Reay, 2001: 337). The search for self-transformation through education is not confined to women, as Adams (1996: 205) discovered in her study of mature returners of both sexes to higher education. However, Adams notes that whilst the source of women's self-dissatisfaction is likely to lie within the family, it is men's position in the labour market - for example, in low-paid employment - that is frequently identified as a source of low self-esteem (ibid).

## **1.5 The Experience of Higher Education**

### **1.5.1 Fitting In**

Access entrants and mature students generally may feel that they have difficulty fitting into the higher education institution and may feel 'out of place' as a consequence of their age, gender, entry qualification or social class background.

#### **1.5.1.1 *Age and Experience***

Mature students may feel that they are 'socially marginalised, torn between competing groups and affiliations, not really belonging anywhere' (West, 1995: 140). What sets these students apart is not simply the fact that, as mature students, they are entering a system that has traditionally been (and, in many cases, continues to be) organised around the needs of younger students. In addition to this, they may well feel different because they have experience of life that younger students have not yet acquired – experience with which the curriculum of higher education does not necessarily engage.

The perceived immaturity of younger students may lead to feelings of isolation and stigmatisation on the part of mature students (Wilson, 1997: 355). In addition, however, life experience can act as a source of cleavage *within* mature student cohorts: those over the age of twenty-five are likely to feel different to those in the twenty-one to twenty-five age range, who do not necessarily see themselves as mature (Wilson, 1997: 353) and may attempt to find common ground with young students whilst still seeing themselves as having a more 'authentic' motivation than these young students, who they perceive as simply drifting into education (Wakeford, 1994: 251). The older mature students in Wakeford's study perceived a 'social risk' of feeling out of place in higher

education but, at the same time, saw their work style and motivation as superior to those of younger students and believed that they were 'better' students because they had life experiences (Wakeford, 1994: 250).

Wilson's (1997) study of mature students in higher education highlights the ambivalence that some feel about their status. Her research indicates that the student who fits in best is the student who, whatever his or her age, blends in and becomes accepted as 'just another student' (1997: 354). However, some mature students want to be seen in this way whilst also laying claim to special treatment in recognition of different difficulties, highlighting 'a double-bind in the experience of being a mature student' (Wilson, 1997: 354-5).

Maturity and life experience are also implicated in student-tutor relationships. Although many mature students express a need for tutor support, there appears to be some reluctance to seek this (Rosen, 1990: 78; Lodge et al, 1992: 7). Lodge et al note that, for some students, there appeared to be barriers between them and academic staff when it came to seeking help (ibid). When invited to explain what the difficulties were, typical responses were that students did not perceive tutors as being readily approachable or did not want to admit that they were having difficulties. Whilst some of the mature students in Wilson's study commented on the helpfulness of tutors, others thought that lecturers saw mature students as a threat because their life experience could be used to challenge tutors' opinions (Wilson, 1997: 361). Conversely, mature students may perceive lecturers as possessing academic knowledge but no life experience, as Edwards notes in her study of mature women in higher education:

Up in their 'ivory towers' there was no sense for these women...of lecturers suffering the same problems as they did - or therefore being able to understand their problems. Lecturers could thus only be approached for help for purely academic reasons, which the women felt was, after all, what they were there for. (Edwards, 1993: 94).

An inability to take part in university life may exacerbate the feelings of isolation that some mature students experience in higher education. Many researchers report that mature students generally do not participate fully in university activities, whether



recreational, social or political (Roderick et al, 1982: 20; Elsey, 1982: 75; Rosen, 1990: 58; Edwards, 1993: 356). These students frequently identify the pressures of family responsibilities and a 'sense of having no time to waste' as the reasons for this (Rosen 1990: 58). However, there is some evidence that male mature students may be more able to commit themselves fully to their student lives, both academically and socially (Maynard and Pearsall, 1994: 239). The social isolation experienced by some mature students may be associated with a feeling that they inhabit a 'weird' or 'unreal' life at university (Wilson, 1997: 357).

#### 1.5.1.2 *Gender*

It is clear that many mature students, especially female ones, are put under a great deal of strain by the attempt to combine full-time study with domestic and child-care commitments. As Edwards (1993: 62) notes, both the family and higher education are 'greedy institutions', requiring total loyalty and commitment. This implies not simply irreconcilable demands on time - creating a 'schizoid existence' for mature students, who consistently underestimate the problems of reconciling multiple roles (Roderick et al, 1982: 94; 123) - but also contradictory value systems. The values underlying higher education are based upon 'separation and objectivity': higher education, for younger students, is, ideally, a 'whole experience' involving eating, sleeping, leisure activities and friendships (Edwards, 1993: 63). The family, however, is 'based on values of affiliation and subjectivity' and makes claims on the student which directly challenge the normative assumptions of higher-education institutions (ibid). The constant juggling of priorities for female mature students in particular is therefore not simply a pragmatic consideration: it also involves a conflict of value systems.

#### 1.5.1.3 *Entry Qualification*

Access students in higher education have two more potential barriers to fitting in: their entry qualification and their social class background. As non-standard entrants, they are defined in comparison with the 'gold standard' of A Level entrants who they may perceive as having an advantage over them (Macdonald and Stratta, 1998: 70). Entering higher education with non-traditional qualifications, many Access entrants have fears about their ability to cope with the intellectual demands of their courses (ibid). In addition, where they are drawn from working-class backgrounds, this may act as a

further source of dislocation. For example, some of the female working-class students in Edwards' study felt that they were set apart by their accents and that they were less intelligent than their middle-class counterparts (Edwards, 1993: 88).

#### 1.5.1.4 *Social Class*

Feelings of isolation or alienation in higher education arising from a working-class background have been explored in relation to both young and mature entrants. In their study, Forsyth and Furlong (2000: 43) found that 'some interviewees, particularly the highest achievers, felt that they were now encountering barriers related to their social class'. Many had difficulties making friends and felt that they were regarded as inferior, becoming 'trapped in a "Catch-22" situation where they felt they could neither "fit in" at home nor at university' (ibid). Similarly, a third of the working-class, higher-education students interviewed by Lynch and O'Riordan (1998: 462) 'felt like outsiders because of their class origins' and reported feeling as if they were 'living between two worlds' (ibid: 463).

A caveat, however, must be entered at this point. As Mann (2001: 11) points out, the feeling of 'being a stranger in a foreign land' in higher education may not be confined to working-class entrants. Mann argues:

Most students entering the new world of the academy are in an equivalent position to those crossing the borders of a new country - they have to deal with the bureaucracy of checkpoints, or matriculation, they may have limited knowledge of the local language and customs, and are alone. Furthermore, the student's position is akin to the colonised or the migrant from the colonised land, where the experience of alienation arises from being in a place where those in power have the potential to impose their particular ways of perceiving and understanding the world - in other words, a kind of colonising process. (Mann, 2001: 11)

To all students, higher education must seem to be an alien environment, at least at first: as Mann notes, the organisational culture and processes are very different to those likely to have been experienced in schools or colleges. Interestingly, this feeling of being 'out of place' can affect students in the most prestigious of institutions, as Nussbaum describes in relation to Harvard students:

Harvard students are extremely well prepared and inclined to overconfidence. A strange combination of arrogance that they are at Harvard and fear that they don't really belong there makes them reluctant to expose their real thinking in class. Frequently, they cope with fear by adopting a brittle sophistication, which makes it difficult to find out what they really believe. (Nussbaum, 1997: 45)

However, it will be argued in Chapter 2, following Bourdieu, that working-class students are much less likely than their middle-class counterparts to feel 'at home' in this environment.

### 1.5.2 Academic Work

Many mature students have worries about their preparedness for higher education and fear that they lack the relevant study skills. Lodge et al (1992: 6), in their study of former Access students entering selected higher education institutions in Wales, note that two thirds of these students claimed to have difficulty in developing study techniques. Similarly, a number of respondents in Elsey's study of mature students in the University of Nottingham reported inefficiency in tracking down books and constructing and writing essays (Elsey, 1982: 76). In the Polytechnic of North London, the volume and difficulty of the work were seen as problems by some Access entrants (Rosen, 1990: 92). Fears about examinations are widely reported in the research. Most of the former Access students in the study by Lodge et al doubted that they would be able to demonstrate their true academic ability in their first-year examinations (1992: 12). Similarly, Roderick et al (1982: 83) note an 'obsessional fear of examinations' among some mature students and Langridge reports that, for a 'significant minority' of mature students in her survey, examinations were a major concern (1993: 256).

This perceived weakness in study skills may be linked to a general lack of confidence that many Access entrants to higher education (and mature students generally) seem to have in their ability to succeed (Langridge, 1993; Lodge, 1992). In the study by Lodge et al (1992: 13), this lack of confidence was cited most frequently by students as the major reason for considering withdrawal from the course. Both Langridge and Lodge note that the desire to succeed among Access students leads to great anxiety about progress, even when such anxiety appears to be groundless. For James, the reason for this is 'the immense significance of assignment grades...for the self-perception of these

students': assignment grades 'are reinterpreted as partially constitutive of personal worth' for mature students (James, 1995: 463). Young also reports in her study of students on Access courses that feedback on assessment was of huge importance: 'for some students, it was "only work"; for others, their whole sense of self was at stake' (Young, 2000: 409). If this is the case, the decision to study in higher education must be a huge personal risk for many mature students, but particularly so for those who feel that they have already 'failed' at school. As Weil notes, for those with a negative experience of schooling, 'certain experiences of higher education can easily reactivate previous anxieties, memories and feelings of inadequacy' (Weil, 1986: 224).

Mature students frequently comment that the 'ways of knowing' in the academic world are not the same as those in everyday life, where knowledge is experiential and revolves around the local and the particular (Edwards, 1993: 95). Academic knowledge, on the other hand, is perceived as objective and free from personal bias (ibid). Some research would seem to indicate that Access students - and probably mature students generally - have an equivocal attitude towards the experiential knowledge that they have acquired in life: whilst this kind of knowledge was often seen as illegitimate in the academic world (Edwards, 1993: 85), some students felt that life experience in some way compensated for any intellectual shortcomings they might have (Macdonald and Stratta, 1998: 71). Nevertheless, there is a clear tension between experiential and academic knowledge which undoubtedly has a class dimension. For example, when academic knowledge conflicted with personal experiences, the female, working-class students in Edwards' study tended to feel that they were wrong: middle-class knowledge **had** to be superior to working-class knowledge (Edwards, 1993: 88). This issue of working-class knowledge and its distinction from academic knowledge will be developed in Chapter 2.

### 1.5.3 Relationships with Significant Others

For mature students of both sexes there is a fear that intellectual growth will affect their relationships (Johnston and Bailey, 1984: 25). Although most of Access students in the study by Lodge et al felt that they were able to share their student life with their partners, over half felt that this relationship had been placed under strain because of their role as a student (1992: 16). Similarly, Roderick et al note that, in some cases, a mature student's relationship with his or her partner is 'irreparably damaged by the changing expectations

of one of them becoming a mature student' (1982: 95).

Being a mature student inevitably means changes and adjustments at home and some partners of mature students clearly resent this. For male students, the tension may arise as a result of the reduction in the family's income or the insecurity of their future job prospects (Roderick et al, 1982: 95; Lodge et al, 1992: 16). Female students are under pressure to show that their family commitments are not being undermined by the educational process and success in the public world of education may well be bought at the cost of accusations of neglected duties in the private domain of the family (Edwards, 1993: 63). Adams (1996: 207) notes 'a diffuse sense of guilt and confusion' as roles conflict. For such students, the strain of combining domestic and child care commitments with study may be eased by supportive partners but, as Maynard and Pearsall note, the male partners of mature students are often unwilling to make changes (1994: 238). In such cases, the return to education can lead to tension, arguments and, in some cases, divorce (Johnston and Bailey, 1984: 25; Edwards, 1993: 134; Maynard and Pearsall, 1994: 233).

Adams (1996: 209) and Maynard and Pearsall (1994: 231) indicate that the adjustment of family members to the return to study depends partially on gender. The families of male mature students may view education as potentially enhancing the male's breadwinner role and the disruption to family life may therefore be tolerated, in spite of the financial difficulties incurred. The family lives of these students may improve if the man involves himself more in the domestic routine and a new, more democratic ethos may emerge (Maynard and Pearsall, 1994: 233). For female students, however, things may be more difficult as studying is not as likely to be seen as fitting in with a woman's traditional role within the family (ibid). Their decision to enter higher education is likely to be contingent upon the responses of the family and partners and conditional on this course of action having little impact on the running of the home (Maynard and Pearsall, 1994: 233). Women returners may well see education as 'time for themselves' and essentially in conflict with their domestic role, creating 'role-strain, frustration, guilt [and] self-doubt' (Edwards, 1993: 209).

Underlying this tension may be resistance - covert or overt - to the perceived bid for



independence which a return to study represents for some women (Else, 1982: 74) and husbands or partners may feel threatened and excluded (Wilson, 1997: 358). Adams (1996: 210) notes that women returners tend to reassess their attitudes to their partners and to challenge their decision-making powers. Such women may become resentful of the breadwinning role of their partners, which enables them to develop careers in tandem with parenthood. In contrast, for these women, the sense of self is subordinated to domesticity, which remains their responsibility – even if their partners help more with domestic and childcare chores (Adams, 1996: 210).

Social class also has an impact on the relationships of mature students and exploring the relationship between social background and attitudes towards a return to education reveals the intricate ways in which class and gender interact. James (1995: 460), for example, notes that, for mature, middle-class women, gaining a degree may bring about greater social integration with significant others and represent a ‘class-related re-shaping of identity’ to fit in with them. Nevertheless, such women may still experience tension within the family as their return to education conflicts with expectations about gender roles (ibid). Mature working-class women, however, are in a different situation. As Lynch and O’Neil point out, success in the educational system means that working-class students ‘cease to be working class at least to some degree’ (Lynch and O’Neil, 1994: 307). Working-class women (and men) may therefore experience a separation from attitudes and values held by other family members and a growing divide, or ‘cultural gap’, between them and long-standing friends (ibid). Britton and Baxter (1994: 18) similarly note that some students gradually realise that differences are developing between them and their old friends and relatives and a number of students in the studies by Rosen (1990: 66) and Lynch and O’Riordan (1998: 463) reported feeling this way.

#### 1.5.4 Perceptions of Personal Change

##### 1.5.4.1 *Risks to Self-Esteem*

Many mature students entering higher education recognise the risks to self-image that this course of action involves. Macdonald and Stratta (1998: 76), for example, point out that these students have statuses derived from domestic or paid employment which have given them a sense of being able to control events in their lives. The transition to education threatens this sense of control: they essentially put themselves in a position

where others can pass judgement on them. It is reasonable to assume that those students with negative previous experiences of education are particularly likely to feel a threat to self-esteem. Wakeford (1994: 246), in interviews with Access entrants to higher education, found that students were well aware of the 'social risks' involved, such as the threat to existing social relationships.

Nevertheless, despite the recognition of risk, mature students anticipate a positive effect of education on the self and available research would seem to indicate that mature entrants to higher education - of both genders - experience an increase in confidence and self-esteem, widening horizons and a change in value systems (for example, Maynard and Pearsall, 1994; Adams, 1996). However, there is some indication that the impact on identity may, to some extent, be structured along gender lines.

#### 1.5.4.2 *Gender Differences*

Pascall and Cox (1993) argue that education and career offer a potential source of self-esteem for women which conflicts with that derived from domesticity and that the movement into education may therefore be problematic for mature women:

Born into a culture where worth and esteem was [sic] expected primarily in worlds beyond the evaluative scope of education and work, they were now attempting to change the configuration of their lives. In seeking legitimacy through explicit, external evaluation of the self, they also experienced some difficulty with such a 'male', instrumental, view of education.  
(Pascall and Cox, 1993: 79)

In a similar vein, Adams argues that, although both sexes may enter higher education with an unsatisfactory sense of self, women have more complex identity problems: they may have a number of conflicting social identities and a contradictory and confused sense of self (Adams, 1996: 205-6). Their entry to higher education may be seen as 'a search for a sense of self' (ibid: 214) in a context where self esteem, which had previously derived from ascribed worth within the family, could now be personally achieved (Pascall and Cox, 1993: 78). During this process, there is a re-evaluation of past experience which may be accompanied by a growing dissatisfaction with their lives as personal failures are re-interpreted as the outcome of women's structural position in society. The consequence can be the development of a 'strong sense of self' (Adams,

1996: 211). This is 'a "real" self that the contingencies of life had suppressed' (Pascall and Cox, 1993: 120). Nevertheless, Pascall and Cox note an ambivalent attitude towards the changing self on the part of some women, who wanted to change and be more confident, knowledgeable and appreciated but also wanted to retain an unchanging self, untouched by the experience (Pascall and Cox, 1993: 89).

A sense of the importance of education for self-realisation may be associated with the feeling, reported by mature women students, that by studying for a degree they are being 'self-centred' (Maynard and Pearsall, 1994: 235). Nevertheless, as Adams notes, in developing themselves beyond the domestic sphere, women returners may re-define their social identity of wife and mother in a positive way by, for example, arguing that although they gave their children less time they provided a good role model, making them 'better mothers' (Adams, 1996: 213).

Adams argues that the impact of higher education on men is rather different to its impact on women. She argues that men begin with a less fragmented and more positive sense of self which is grounded in the public sphere of work and in personal characteristics (Adams, 1996: 207). Any perceived incongruence between this stronger sense of self and the expectations of what a mature student should be like are, according to Adams, generally dealt with by men through a distancing of themselves from that role so that becoming mature students is not likely to undermine their core identities (*ibid*). This is not a view endorsed by all writers, however. Wakeford, for example, argues that both male and female Access entrants to higher education have complex and contradictory, or 'multi-dimensional' identities (Wakeford, 1994: 243).

#### 1.5.4.3 *Social-Class Identity*

The impact of the experience of higher education on social class identity is explored in a number of studies. As noted earlier, it is argued that working-class students may have to abandon some features of their class identity in order to succeed in higher education and, if they do so, are likely to perceive themselves (and be perceived by others) as upwardly mobile in the class structure (Lynch and O'Neill, 1994: 307). This may be viewed in either a positive or a negative way. The working-class students in Ainley's (1994) study, for example, appeared to feel that education would give them middle-class



status, with a consequent increase in confidence and power:

To student interviewees of working-class origin, the power which education conferred was more immediately apparent than to those who already took it for granted. (Ainley, 1994: 69)

However, the working-class interviewees in the study by Archer and Hutchings (2000), who were not participating in higher education, saw the change in class identity as a *negative* effect of higher education:

...respondents in our study seemed to engage in more intricate negotiations around identity, between the potential benefits in terms of affluence and potential costs of 'losing' one's working-class cultural identity. (Archer and Hutchings, 2000: 570)

Reay's (2001) study of nineteen working-class, mature students studying on an Access course in London revealed contradictory feelings which she sums up in the following way:

This ambivalence surrounding credentialism for the working classes arises from a crucial contradiction: on the one hand – desire for the material benefits increased credentialism brings; on the other hand – the alienation, cultural losses and subordination that continued domination within the educational field involves. (Reay, 2001: 336)

These students trod a fine line between 'finding themselves' through education and losing the coherent sense of self that was anchored in their working-class backgrounds (ibid: 337-8).

Working-class students may have difficulty maintaining a changed class identity when their time in higher education is finished. Adams, for example, argues that working-class women in particular may have problems in maintaining the 'strong sense of self' that they develop in higher education and fear that, unless the experience of higher education is followed by a career, they will lose everything that they have gained (Adams, 1996: 214-6). In post-graduation interviews, Adams discovered that this fear was well founded: for some women, the new sense of identity was frustrated by practical, material and structural factors and there was a return to the old life and a sense

of isolation, marginality and hopelessness (ibid: 214). Working-class women in particular find that their new self-concept is not easily reconciled with unchanging relationships and roles established prior to their return to education (ibid: 214).

Accounts of working-class men and women who have achieved success in the educational system to become academics in their own right are suffused with feelings of being out of place and of loss and betrayal of working-class roots (see, for example, Mahoney and Zmroczek, 1997; Charlesworth, 2000). Charlesworth (2000: ix) reports that 'university was an experiential black hole for me, sucking all of human value from all I had known and everything that I was' and Reay (1997: 21) notes a 'continuing sense of disloyalty and dislocation', arguing:

I suggest the female academic from a working-class background is unlikely ever to feel at home in academia. For many, socialisation, at least within the family, was into collective and community-based understandings of the social world, not the competitive individualism we now face in which social networks are about instrumentalism, not connection. (Reay, 1997: 21)

Along similar lines, Skeggs (1997b: 130) describes feeling that, at university, she had 'the wrong capitals and structures of feeling' and a pervasive feeling of 'not getting it right': 'You are never absolutely sure what "getting it right" would be but you know that you have not achieved it most of the time' (ibid: 130-1). After achieving an academic position, Skeggs notes:

My access to the middle class enabled me to construct an entirely different framework for understanding my position in social space: the possibilities opened out and I tried to start constructing entitlements. It was from this moment that I started having problems with my family and my working-class friends who saw my adoption of the dispositions of the middle class as a sign of 'getting above myself', of having pretensions. (Skeggs, 1997b: 133)

Accounts such as these raise the interesting question of the nature of identity and the ways in which it is shaped and transformed - an issue which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2 and explored in relation to the research data in Chapter 8.

As argued above, the positive gains from higher education in terms of increased confidence, upward social mobility, and a more positive view of the self which many Access entrants to higher education appear to anticipate, may be off-set by feelings of risk in the educational setting. Weil (1986, 1989) uses the term 'disjunction' to describe the sense of fragmentation which emerges when core aspects of personal and social identity are threatened in the educational environment. Disjunction produces 'feelings of alienation, anger, frustration and confusion' (1989: 112), threatening self-worth and creating disappointment and dislocation.

Disjunction may emerge at different levels. Weil notes that the 'culture' and 'ethos' of higher education 'embody traditions, values, history, and norms and are largely invisible features of a learning "context"' (Weil, 1986: 223). The realities of these institutional cultures, structures, processes and practices may be in sharp conflict with the avowed purposes of higher education or with the 'fantasy' picture of it created by the students. In Weil's study, for example, many students were shocked by 'the gross contradictions between espoused values (eg fairness, objectivity, the development of critical thinking, etc) and actual practices' (Weil, 1986: 226).

Mature students generally may experience disjunction in the higher education system. They may, for example, feel that their perspectives on 'learning' and 'knowledge' are at variance with those embedded within higher education and that tutors are not valuing them as adults or taking their experiences into account. This may be particularly true in the case of Access students. One of the core strategies used on Access courses to help develop the confidence of learners is to draw upon 'the meanings and perceptions arising from their life world' (Weil, 1989: 139). The transition to higher education may therefore be accompanied by the realisation that personal experiences are not as highly valued as they were on the Access course. The protected learning environment of the Access course and the value placed on previous life experience as the starting point of the learning process may therefore lead to a sharper experience of dislocation upon entry to higher education. In addition, it is possible that the extent of disjunction experienced by these students will be mediated by the type of higher-education institution that they

attend: higher educational institutions which have been more willing to target such students for admission and have a long history of equal opportunities policies may embody an ethos and culture which does not marginalise these students.

In addition, Weil argues that 'social class, gender and racial dimensions of identity seem to enhance the potential for more serious alienation and conflict' (1986: 232). The assumption here is that the culture underpinning higher education is predominantly white, male and middle class and that students who do not fit into these categories are likely to experience disjunction. There may, for example, be a sense of dislocation as the 'hidden curriculum' of higher education operates against non-traditional students and 'the conscious and unconscious operation of structural barriers and the formal and informal practices of teachers can perpetuate patterns of disadvantage and inequality of opportunity and outcome' (Weil, 1986: 227). More subtly, however, Weil argues that there is a tension between the 'learner identity' of working-class students - the characteristic ways of processing information and of feeling and behaving in the learning context - and the way in which learning in higher education is perceived and experienced (1986: 224).

### **1.7 Summary of Issues in Working-Class Participation**

The research indicates that multiple barriers lie behind the under-representation of working-class students in higher education. There is evidence both of a conscious calculation of the potential benefits and risks of higher education (including a penetration of the opportunities realistically open to them) and of a resistance which emerges from class-related attitudes towards 'knowledge' and education and a culture of non-participation. The return to education of all mature students appears to be related to significant life changes, although there is some evidence of gender-related differences here. The research shows that this return to education is not always a smooth process and that the anticipation of positive gains - both symbolic and material - may be offset by feelings of profound disjunction which arise in connection with age, gender, entry qualification and social class. Of particular importance to mature students appears to be the status of their experiential knowledge in the academic setting. The experience of higher education has been shown to have an impact both on relationships with

significant others and on identity and selfhood, although the nature of this impact, and the likelihood that it will extend beyond the end of the degree course, is dependent both on gender and social class.

## **1.8 The Research Project**

The aim of this research is to explore in detail the experiences of Access entrants in higher education and the changes in their lives, relationships and self perceptions as they progress through their courses. Access entrants have been chosen as the focus of the study for two main reasons. Firstly, there is evidence that they form a distinct grouping in higher education. For example, Macdonald and Stratta (1998: 68), in a qualitative study of undergraduate students entering via Access and Foundation courses, argue that these students constitute a 'distinct category' and possess 'a collective subjectivity'. Secondly, Access entrants are likely to be 'non-traditional' students on a number of dimensions - age, social class background and entry qualification.

Social class is prioritised as the focus of the thesis but this does not imply any denigration of the importance of dimensions of age, gender, or ethnicity in the experience of higher education – indeed, the available research points to a complex interplay of these dimensions in shaping the ways in which higher education is experienced. Nevertheless, the research indicates that working-class culture is a potential source of disjunction which operates *in addition to* the factors of age and gender and that, for working-class students, the experience of higher education may create acute relationship difficulties and issues of identity.

A longitudinal research design has allowed an exploration of the temporal dimension of the students' experiences - for example, their developing identities and relationships with significant others. As these experiences are likely to vary between institutions of higher education - and may be related to the degrees of 'prestige' attached to them - the respondents have been drawn from both a pre-1992 and post-1992 university and a college of further and higher education. Students studying on social science degree programmes have been targeted as there was evidence that many Access courses had been designed to prepare students for this area of study (CNAA/CVCP, 1992).



The primary focus of the research has been to identify exactly what it is about 'working classness' that may lead to the feelings of disjunction described above and how mature, working-class entrants to higher education manage these feelings and the disruptions to selfhood and relationships with significant others that accompany them. The concepts drawn upon in the analysis of the research data have been taken largely, although not uncritically, from Bourdieu, the significance of whose work became apparent only *after* the fieldwork had been completed. In the following chapter, these concepts are explored and applied to the research topic.

## Notes

1. The use of the (pre 1998) Registrar General's classificatory scheme is recognised as problematic. Specifically, it is noted that: the use of occupation as the sole determinant of social class membership is inadequate; there is disagreement about the criteria on which occupations are classified; and there is an absence of rigorous research to justify the placement of occupations in groups (Roberts, 2001: 24). Crucially, it is conceded that the scheme as a whole is flawed due to the 'absence of a plausible theoretical justification' (Reid, 1998: 24). Further, the debate about the relevance of the scale for women's occupations is noted (Heath and Britten, 1984). [Charles (1990), for example, found in her study of 200 women with children of pre-school age that the majority of women whose own occupations put them in class IIIN assigned themselves to the working class.] Arguments about the unacceptability of classifying women on the basis of the occupations of their husbands (eg Stanworth, 1984) are conceded, although, on the basis of her study, Charles argues that 'women's subjective class seems to be lined more closely to their partner's occupational class than to their own' (Charles, 1990: 56).

Despite these convincing criticisms of the Registrar General's scale, there are compelling reasons for using it: it is widely used, allowing comparability of data; it is accessible and relatively easy to use; and it correlates well with a range of inequalities in health, education and income (Crompton, 1998: 59). I have therefore used this scale throughout the research as a rough guide to social class membership. (A full discussion of the nature of social class and class identity is given in Chapter 2.)

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the nature of social class and class identity, drawing largely, but not uncritically, on concepts derived from Bourdieu. It is argued that these concepts, with revision, provide the basis of a theoretical framework which takes account of the dynamic interplay of ‘structure’, ‘culture’ and ‘action’ in social life and can usefully be applied to gain an understanding of the class-based processes at work in higher education. The chapter begins with an outline of the difficulties posed in an analysis of class processes. This is followed by a discussion of the nature of social identity in general before focussing on class identity. The chapter moves on to an outline and evaluation of Bourdieu’s model of social class and his analysis of the academic field and concludes with a summary of the conceptual framework adopted in this thesis.

### **2.2 The Irrelevance of Social Class?**

Although social class is now starting to reappear on the academic agenda, there has been little interest in it in recent years, many writers denying its relevance as a source of social cleavage or of identity and rejecting its centrality in social science analysis (see, for example, Lash, 1990; Bauman, 1992; Pakulski and Waters, 1996a, 1996b).

Paradoxically, this rejection of the relevance of class occurred at a time when the gap between rich and poor was widening, the levels of education, housing, health and lifestyle experienced by different social groups were being shown to correlate very strongly with measures of social class (Adonis and Pollard, 1998), and talk about the effects of class proliferated in the media. The debate about the ‘death’ of class is complex and cannot be fully explored here but a brief account, drawing largely on Crompton (1998), Devine (1998) and Savage (2000), is given.

Class analysis has always been dogged by semantic confusion about the meaning of the concept, with three main meanings in common use. Often, in everyday use, ‘class’ is linked to prestige, status, culture or ‘lifestyle’; alternatively, classes may be seen as comprising a system of structured inequality or, thirdly, as potential social and political

actors (Crompton, 1998: 11). Debates about the demise or continuing relevance of class in contemporary society have very often foundered as a consequence of this lack of clarity (ibid: 12). However, beneath the semantic confusion there lie real problems of both an empirical and conceptual nature.

### 2.2.1 The Empirical Case Against Class

Marshall et al (1988) summarise the changes that occurred, largely in the last half of the twentieth century, which were cited in several 'obituaries' for social class and class analysis in the 1980s:

...restructuring of capital and labour; the growing complexity and consequent opacity of class processes; emergence of instrumental collectivism as the epitome of increasingly sectional distributional struggles; privatization of individuals and families; and fatalistic acceptance of structural inequality allied to an inability to conceive of any alternative. (Marshall et al, 1988: 3)

Crucially, the process of rapid and large-scale economic and social change - such as the decline of mass production industries, the growth of new forms of production and 'flexible specialisation' - are argued to have contributed to a process of *individualisation* as workers are forced to negotiate paths through an increasingly unstable employment market, contributing to the decline of 'objective class interests' and therefore of collective class identities (Crompton, 1998: 18-19). As a consequence, individual biographies have come to be seen as more about *choice* than about class processes (see, for example, Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990) and sources of identity deriving from gender or ethnic origin, or arising from 'consumption-sector cleavages' (for example, Saunders, 1986) or 'new social movements' (for example, Offe, 1985), have been argued to be increasingly important.

Evidence from studies of class identity have revealed a complex picture. A national, large-scale survey in the 1980s showed that around sixty percent of the respondents thought of themselves as belonging to a particular social class and over ninety percent could place themselves in a specific class category (Marshall et al, 1988: 143). The conclusion of the survey was that 'class consciousness is rather widespread in British society and that social class is the most readily available and commonly employed



source for constructing social identities' (ibid: 156). However, the study has been criticised. Saunders (1990), for example, argues that the research was biased as the respondents were asked a number of questions about social class - so sensitising them to it - before they were asked about their class identity. In addition, Marshall et al (1988) themselves note an ambivalence in the class consciousness they found, which did not involve a consistent or rigorous interpretation of the world. Many of the respondents held conflicting views about society and their places within it and did not have a 'developed class consciousness comprising class identity, class opposition, class totality and the conception of an alternative society' (Marshall et al, 1988: 190). Marshall et al therefore conclude:

...the 'class consciousness' of the majority of people in our sample is characterised by its complexity, ambivalence and occasional contradictions. It does not reflect a rigorously consistent interpretation of the world with an underlying ideological rationale rooted in perceived class interest alone. (Marshall et al, 1988: 187)

Other studies have produced similar findings. Devine's (1992a, 1992b) study of thirty-two affluent, manual-working couples in Luton indicated that, although there was a high level of class awareness, including a view of society as polarised between 'us' and 'them', the respondents held a variety of identities which shaped the way they saw themselves, their beliefs and attitudes, and the ways in which they interacted with others. Devine concluded that 'a high level of class awareness can co-exist with other social identities' (1992b: 249). Interestingly, Devine found that most of the respondents identified themselves as being 'ordinary' or 'ordinary working people'. Savage (2000: 35) notes that this is consistent with results from the British Attitudes Survey, which show that people tend to avoid the 'extreme' classes at the top and bottom of the scales. Savage argues that this may explain the relatively high rate of identification with the working class found in Britain: the 'working class' may be seen as the 'mainstream category', lying between the 'poor' or 'lower working class' and the 'middle or upper middle class'. Identification in surveys with the working class may therefore constitute an indirect 'refusal' of class identity (ibid).

In-depth interviews by Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst (2001) of two hundred people

living in Manchester has revealed that, although two thirds could define themselves in class terms, this identification was 'usually ambivalent, defensive and hesitant' (reported in Savage, 2000: 36). Significant numbers said they had never thought about class before and others switched during the interview from one class to another. Savage et al conclude that, although people use the language of class when describing conflict in society, they do not really see this conflict in class terms but as conflict between management and workers, or rich and poor, or unemployed and employed: most did not think there was conflict between the 'middle class' and the 'working class' (Savage, 2000: 36-7). Savage therefore concludes:

...the term 'class' has considerable popular currency, and it seems that people use it both to identify themselves in class terms and also to make sense of political conflict. However, class does not seem to be a deeply held personal identity, nor does 'class belonging' appear to invoke strong senses of group or collective allegiance. In so far as class is significant, it is largely with respect to politics. (Savage, 2000: 37)

Reviewing other studies, Savage (2000) agrees with Marshall et al (1988) that, although there is some evidence that people can identify themselves in class terms, there is little evidence of a fully-fledged class consciousness encompassing a coherent world view organised along class lines (Savage, 2000: 37-38).

### 2.2.2 The Theoretical Case Against Class

This questioning of the importance of social class as a source of identity and value systems has been paralleled by a conceptual critique and rejection of class as a central concern in the social sciences today. The debate involves an engagement with the classical tradition and centres on a re-evaluation of, *inter alia*, the work of Marx and Weber. Space prohibits a full discussion of all the issues here but a brief summary of the arguments which impinge on this thesis is given.

Underlying much debate about class consciousness is the claim that social classes are more than statistical aggregates or potential sources of identity. Instead, they are viewed as structurally delineated groupings with distinct *cultural* features: in other words, a social class is a group of people sharing a system of symbolism, meaning and practices. Savage (2000) argues that three traditions in sociology have focused on these class

cultures and each in turn has been demonstrated to be theoretically flawed: the 'neo-Weberian industrial sociology' exemplified by the work of David Lockwood; the social history of writers such as E. P. Thompson; and the cultural studies of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. Each of these is considered below.

The relationship between value orientations and economic and social milieux was drawn out in early work by Lockwood (1958, 1966), who argued that images of society, forms of social consciousness and value orientations vary according to work and community relationships. Lockwood identified three distinct forms of working-class consciousness related to three ('ideal typical') structural positions: proletarian traditionalist (mining communities), deferential traditionalist (farming villages) and privatised (new industrial towns). A brief consideration of the first of these - which typifies the background of many of the respondents in this thesis - will serve to illustrate his argument.

Proletarian traditionalists are associated with industries such as mining, docking and ship-building, which concentrate workers in solidary communities and isolate them from the wider society. There is a high degree of job involvement and distinctive occupational culture involving feelings of comradeship and pride in doing 'men's work'. Such workers often spend their leisure time together and are neighbours or even relatives, living in traditional working-class communities with strong community ties, a mutual system of support, shared leisure time and feelings of belonging. Low rates of social and geographical mobility encourage such communities to be inward-looking and foster the sense of cohesion that arises from shared work experiences.

The model of society held by the proletarian worker tends to be a dichotomous power model flowing from a view of the class structure as polarised between two conflicting groups: 'us' and 'them' - the latter being the bosses, managers, white-collar workers and larger society in general. The power of 'them' is well understood and there is a feeling of being subject to a 'distant and incomprehensible authority' (Lockwood, 1966: 251-2). This social consciousness arises because workers are 'encapsulated in social systems which provide them with few alternative conceptions of what is possible, desirable, and legitimate' (ibid: 255). High integration in local communities means that attitudes and behaviours are controlled through face-to-face interaction; a sense of belonging to a

social group that is divided off from other groups gives a fixed point of reference for identity formation and a view of the class structure as consisting of 'active social formations' rather than 'amorphous aggregations of individuals' (ibid: 256).

Lockwood's work contributed to the emergence of the idea that structural position in society creates a value system and leads to certain types of social action (the 'structure-consciousness-action' argument). This argument was subsequently criticised for its inherent reductionism: how could these class images be grounded in social milieux without reducing them to social structures and endorsing a position of structural determinism (Savage, 2000: 26)?

Attempts to rescue cultural analyses of social class have been made through an appeal to social and labour history. Thompson (1963), in particular, argued strongly that the use of the 'historical method' could overcome the problem of structure versus agency by identifying class as a cultural process but one which was dynamic and historically specific, therefore managing to avoid structural determinism (Savage, 2000: 29). However, as Savage notes, critics of Thompson attacked his position from two vantage points: Marxist writers argued that Thompson failed to pay sufficient attention to the capitalist system in which social classes emerged, so giving culture too much autonomy, whilst more conservative critics argued that Thompson had given insufficient evidence to demonstrate the existence of the working-class culture he had identified (ibid).

The genesis of cultural studies in the 1960s, and the writings of Richard Hoggart (1957) and Raymond Williams (1958) in particular, at first offered a possible new grounding for class theory. These writers used autobiographical material to present a picture of working-class life and the values and beliefs, or 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1977: 128), that informed it. Hoggart (1957) wrote nostalgically of life in working-class communities in the middle of the twentieth century. With its roots in the concrete and the local, it produced a feeling of 'groupness' and identity with 'an all-pervading culture' (ibid: 32) which involved 'living intuitively, habitually, verbally, drawing on myth, aphorism, and ritual' (ibid: 33). As a consequence, there was suspicion of those who 'get above themselves' (ibid: 86) and of the value of education - a suspicion which arose from the feelings of group identity which discouraged any inclination of group members to make a change, to leave the group, to be different (ibid: 84). Hoggart noted

that, in the 1950s, increasing educational opportunities were beginning to promote a different attitude towards education (ibid: 38) but, nevertheless, suggested that members of the working class had 'little or no training in the handling of ideas or in analysis' and that they therefore had 'difficulty in meeting abstract or general questions' (ibid: 102). This was seen as a consequence of a way of life which was grounded in the concrete and the particular and which stressed that one's place is ascribed rather than achieved.

Accounts of working-class life, such as those of Hoggart and Williams, whilst revealing the emotional and intuitive dimensions of this life, have been criticised for a lack of 'objectivity' and an over-emphasis on solidarity and continuity (Savage, 2000: 33). It has been argued that the solidary working-class communities they identified represent an idealised view of the past. Bourke (1994), for example, in her social history of the working class in Britain, contends that the working-class community is a 'retrospective construction' which did not survive the individualism emerging in the period following the Second World War: 'A shared identity as "working class", even if rooted in a single geographical space, could not surmount the difficulties inherent in a competitive society' (Bourke, 1994: 169). The social networks in post-war working-class communities were, Bourke argues, discordant and ad hoc and did not provide either a unified outlook or consistent social identity (ibid). Nevertheless, the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies [CCCS] (1982), which built on the work of Hoggart and Williams, overcame this problem to some extent by viewing class cultures as 'historical residues': 'It was possible to see cultures as memories, as ghostly figures whose decline helped to place contemporary forms in relief' (Savage, 2000: 33).

Savage (2000) notes that the work of CCCS represented the high point in the study of working-class cultural forms but, by the 1980s, attention in cultural studies had turned away from social class to focus on issues around feminism and ethnicity. Later, in the work of Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992), the concept of working-class culture, historically-generated and based on notions of collectivism, was replaced by the idea of the rise of individualized cultures which were argued to work against the development of class identities (Savage, 2000: 33). The subsequent period has marked a low point in class analysis and it is only in recent years that attention has started to focus again on class.



Attempts to rescue class as a cultural phenomenon have led to an increased interest in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, whose ideas are considered below. What is needed is a model of social class which is sensitive to both economic and cultural processes, allowing each of these relative autonomy, and also captures the dynamic interplay of structural and cultural forms with purposive social action. Such a theory has to be grounded in an appropriate conception of identity, which has so far not been defined or elaborated. Before moving on to outline the model of class that underpins this thesis, therefore, there must be a discussion of the meaning of 'self' and 'identity'.

## **2.3 The Nature of Identity**

To discuss the nature of the self and identity is to risk becoming caught in a conceptual minefield and dragged into deep and complex philosophical debates which, although important, are beyond the scope of this thesis. What follows is therefore an outline of the position that has been adopted, developing ideas in Jenkins (1996).

### **2.3.1 Identity as Social**

Identity is about 'knowing who we are' (Jenkins, 1996: 1); it gives us the sense of self that we have (although identity and self are not the same thing and the distinction will be discussed later). Both self and identity are argued to be essentially *social* phenomena. Goffman, for example, draws attention to the social dimension of the self when he claims that it 'can be seen as something that resides in the arrangements prevailing in a social system for its members' (1961: 154) and Jenkins argues: 'All human identities are in some sense - and usually a stronger rather than a weaker sense - *social* identities' (Jenkins, 1996: 4). Our sense of who we are is essentially socially derived because it develops from early childhood onwards through the process of social interaction, as many writers have argued. In Erikson's (1968) theory of identity formation, for example, the child develops an identity through a process of exploration, affirmation and denial: as the child explores the environment, his or her explorations are made meaningful by the affirmations or denials of others and these, in turn, shape further explorations. In this way, as Abrams explains, 'community and individual identify one another in a process of mutual scrutiny and recognition' and 'a unity of meaning between self and others' is created (Abrams, 1982: 252). This is not to deny



the individuality of 'selfhood' but to recognise that it can never be separated from the social influences which help to form and sustain it. The implication of this is that, instead of conceptualising self and society as opposed entities, we must think instead of 'the unity of self and society' (Abrams, 1982: 228).

Identity can be seen as a product of social relationships through which we recognise our similarity to (and difference from) others. Weeks (1990: 88), for example, argues:

'Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others'. This does not, however, imply a static, unchanging identity: self and identity are characterised by reflexivity and change.

Jenkins (1996: 25), drawing on the work of George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman, argues that 'social identity is a practical accomplishment, a process' and that both individual and collective social identities are the product of 'an internal-external dialectic of identification' (ibid: 171). By this he means that both types of social identities can be conceptualised as processes during which the views of individuals or collectivities about 'who we are' exist in conjunction with - and are perhaps contested by - the views others have of us. According to this view, individual identity can be seen as 'an ongoing and, in practice simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others' (Jenkins, 1996: 20). Similarly, collective identity 'is constructed in transactions which occur at and across the boundary' during which 'a balance is struck between group identifications and categorisation by others' (ibid: 24). Power relations are therefore inherently implicated in the process of identity formation. Jenkins contends that this conceptualisation of identity as processual overcomes the distinction between 'structure' and 'agency' which has dogged so many accounts of social life (ibid: 26).

*Time* is implicated in this sense of personal location - both socially-organised time in the form of history and individually-organised time in the form of personal biography. This idea has a long heritage. Strauss, for example, argued:

Identities imply not merely personal histories but also social histories...individuals hold membership in groups that are themselves products of the past. If you wish to understand persons - their development and their relations with significant others - you must be prepared to view them as

Similarly Gramsci (1988: 526) commented that to know who you are is to recognise yourself 'as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory'. Jenkins (1996: 27) argues that time is an important resource for the construction of identity because continuity is a dimension of identity: the past is interpreted to make sense of the present and plan for the future. Individually, the past is memory, collectively it is history (ibid). The intersection of historical processes of change with individual biographies is implicated in the development of the self, which can therefore be seen as 'a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change' (Giddens, 1991: 33).

Space, as well as time, is implicated in the construction of identity because it gives a 'sense of place' (Jenkins, 1996: 27): individual identity is always embodied and collective identity is located in an actual or virtual territory or region (ibid). There is also a sense in which identity becomes crystallised in relation to different spaces. In his discussion of total institutions - and organisations generally in society - Goffman (1961: 280) argues that the self emerges *against something*; it develops from both our identification with, and opposition to, the organisation (although it must be noted that some writers, such as Ashworth [1985], claim that this structural provenance of selfhood is not the usual position taken by Goffman):

Without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks. (Goffman, 1961: 280)

This is an important insight. The implication is that identity and selfhood are developed in relation to the different spaces that we occupy in social life: we know who we are not only because we 'fit in' well in some spaces but also because we do not 'fit in' - or we resist 'fitting in' - to others.

The reflexive nature of social identity has been argued to be of increasing significance

today, when rapid social change and processes of globalization and technological innovation have undermined the spatial, temporal and cultural co-ordinates of our collective and personal histories (see, for example, Giddens 1990, 1991 and Beck 1992). We have the opportunity to construct different identities in this 'wide-open world' (Rutherford, 1990: 24) but this does not come without a cost. Giddens (1991), for example, argues that the waves of global transformation have produced a 'crisis' which threatens core aspects of self-identity. In the 'reflexive project of the self', identity becomes increasingly fragile and has to be constantly created and re-ordered as change occurs, creating a difficulty preserving a coherent narrative of self-identity (Giddens, 1991: 185-6). Similarly, Rutherford argues that rapid social change can promote feelings of being out of touch, of not belonging, and a sense of unreality and isolation; in this situation we have to struggle for 'personal coherence and intelligibility' (Rutherford, 1990: 24). Other accounts of disruptions to social identity in this period of rapid change have drawn upon a number of concepts: 'diaspora' (for example, Clifford, (1994: 308); 'hybridity' (Bhabha, 1994: 4); 'fragmentation' (for example, Haraway, 1991: 174). What all these accounts draw attention to is the way in which social change has disrupted identities, which have had to be reconfigured in complex - and not always satisfactory - ways. Hall, for example, describes himself as a 'diasporic intellectual' in Britain and reports his 'disaporic experience' in the following terms: '...far enough away to experience the sense of exile and loss, close enough to understand the enigma of an always-postponed "arrival"' (Hall, 1998: 87). Once identities are reconfigured in this way, as Hall notes: 'You can't "go home" again' (ibid: 88).

### 2.3.2 Identity and Selfhood

So far, 'identity' and 'self' have been used interchangeably and a brief discussion of the overlaps and differences between them is necessary. Both are social phenomena, both are constructed 'within an internal-external dialectic of social identification' (Jenkins, 1996: 45) and both are intertwined with relationships of power and authority. Like identity, self is not to be regarded as a 'thing' but a process and Jenkins argues that perhaps the term 'selfhood' rather than 'the self' should be used to draw attention to this processual quality (ibid). Selfhood is 'the embodied point of view of the human individual in her or his social context' (ibid: 52) and is 'constitutive of our knowledge of who and what we are' (ibid: 47). Selfhood is therefore an *individual* thing, unlike

identity which may be a *collective* one. Although it involves identification or dis-identification with others, selfhood constitutes a more fundamental aspect of individuality than identity, as Jenkins indicates when he comments that 'the self can be thought of as a *primary* (that is, basic) social identity' (ibid: 48). Reviewing the debate about the nature of the self as 'unitary' or 'divided' (which is, again, a topic bristling with philosophical import) Jenkins argues that the self is generally experienced as a unitary phenomenon, although it may have many facets and should therefore be viewed as a 'complex consistency' or 'consistent complexity' (ibid: 52). Extrapolating from this, it may be surmised that identity is not necessarily a unitary phenomenon: it may be possible for individuals to hold conflicting identities according to context (although the process of selfhood would imply a pressure to resolve these inconsistencies). Jenkins summarises his view of selfhood as:

...a rich repository of cultural resources: organised biographically as memory, experientially as knowledge; some conscious, some not; some of them in contradiction, some in agreement; some of them imperative, some filed under 'take it or leave it'; some of them pure in-flight entertainment; etc.  
(Jenkins, 1996: 46)

Identity, then, can be conceptualised as something which is actively constructed by social actors but in socially - and historically - constraining circumstances. It lies at the intersection of processes of historical change and the shorter trajectory of individual biography, where 'structure and contingency lock together' (Abrams, 1982: 272). It is therefore a product of our collective and individual past and our present relationships but this does not mean that it is fixed and immutable: it is a 'reflexive project' in which we have the opportunity to negotiate who we are. Rutherford summarises this argument in the following way:

Identity ....is never a static location; it contains traces of its past and what it is to become. It is contingent, a provisional full stop in the play of differences and the narrative of our own lives. But such an understanding, whilst recognising the change and displacement of identities, must also address the non-discursive factors of class formation and the logic of capital which play a powerful restraining role in determining where and how far anyone moves.  
(Rutherford, 1990: 24)

### 2.3.3 Moral Career and Social Becoming

The process of social becoming has been described by Goffman (1961: 119) as a 'moral career'. He argues that the trajectory through life, or 'career', of the individual has a *moral* dimension because it involves both changes in the self and in the 'framework of imagery' for judging oneself and other people (ibid). Harré (1993: 206) suggests that a moral career can be thought of as 'a life trajectory defined in terms of public esteem' because of the central importance of the attitudes of respect or contempt we receive from others. These attitudes are formed in relation to how well the individual copes with 'occasions of hazard', such as examinations, which we risk in order to gain respect (Harré, 1993: 205).

Conceptualising life trajectories as 'careers' is useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, it draws attention to the essential 'two-sidedness' of social becoming, which has both an 'internal' dimension of 'image of self and felt identity' and an external, 'public' dimension (Goffman, 1961: 119) involving, for example, 'career contingencies' (such as socio-economic status) which influence outcomes (ibid: 126). Secondly, the concept of 'career' implies an interest in the temporal and spatial dimensions of identity and selfhood, an interest in the process of social *becoming* in concrete, empirical contexts.

Abrams defines moral career as a 'historically-located history of self-construction' and 'the moving point of articulation' of the two types of time, social history and life history (Abrams, 1982: 280, 282). Progress in a moral career can be seen as a 'negotiation of contingencies' which are not random events but rather the outcomes of distinct patterns of interaction (Abrams, 1982: 272) such that social becoming is not a matter of chance but is:

...a negotiated passage to a possible identity, a *sequence* of action and reaction, labelling and learning in the face of both organized power and organized opportunity, probable constraint and probable contingency.  
(Abrams, 1982: 274).

In each historical period there is a given system of probabilities or life-chances and each individual, in the course of his or her biography, realises some of these but not others 'by progressively narrowing and specifying the meaning of self through sequential,

historically ordered interaction' (ibid: 280). In this way, we become only one of the people we could have been. Analysis of moral careers therefore involves an analysis of the conditions that enable those who embark on them to succeed (and to innovate) or to fail (and reproduce existing social arrangements (ibid: 282). This idea will be examined further in the remainder of the chapter, which turns to a discussion of class identity.

## **2.4 Bourdieu's Model of Social Class**

Bourdieu's writings on class represent an attempt to re-work the links between material conditions of existence, cultural forms and social action. In the remainder of the chapter, his ideas will be outlined and a critique offered. It will be argued that, although flawed, Bourdieu's analysis, with modifications and additions, provides a useful conceptual framework through which the interview data for this thesis can be explored. In this framework, analytical weight is given to both structural and cultural forms and to purposive social action and, following Savage (2000), social class is redefined as a relational process which works itself out at the level of the individual.

At first sight, Bourdieu does not appear to go beyond earlier, economically reductionist views of social classes, which he defines as:

..sets of agents who, by virtue of the fact that they occupy similar positions in the social space (that is, in the distribution of powers), are subject to similar conditions of existence and conditioning factors and, as a result, are endowed with similar dispositions which prompt them to develop similar practices.  
(Bourdieu, 1987: 6)

However, the 'social space' and 'powers' referred to here are not straightforwardly economic phenomena and are explained using the concepts of 'habitus', field and capital.

### **2.4.1 'Habitus'**

Central to Bourdieu's analysis of class is the concept of 'habitus', 'a structured and structuring structure' which functions as a bridge between the 'objective' realm of social structures and the 'subjective' realm of individual experience and action (Bourdieu,



1984: 171). Bourdieu claims that habitus comprises both ‘the social conditions of the production of agents and the durable effects that they exercise by inscribing themselves in disposition’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 47). He argues that common experiences of the social world will produce a collective habitus so that people sharing the same objective conditions will tend to have similar subjective experiences. ‘Bodily hexis’ describes the way in which habitus is ‘em-bodied’ and ‘turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*’ so that the content of a culture can be read from the body (Bourdieu, 1977a: 93-4). Through the workings of habitus, the contours of the social world appear as self-evident, a situation which Bourdieu describes as ‘doxa’, defined as:

...the coincidence of the objective structures and the internalized structures which provide the illusion of immediate understanding, characteristic of practical experience in the familiar universe, and which at the same time *excludes from that experience any inquiry as to its own conditions of existence.* (Bourdieu, 1990: 20 - italics added)

As indicated in this quotation, a doxic acceptance of the social world, whilst creating shared perceptions and attitudes, would not necessarily produce class identity, which Bourdieu argues ‘does not impose itself upon the agent in a self-evident manner’ (1987: 7-8). Instead, the ‘sense of one’s place’ in the social world is ‘closer to a class unconscious than to a “class consciousness” in the Marxist sense’ (1991: 235). In this way, Bourdieu explains the relative absence of class consciousness in a society which is characterised by class-based attitudes and actions.

Habitus can be seen as playing a central role in the reproduction of social relations; it is ‘a product of history [which] produces individual and collective practices - more history - in accordance with the schemes generated by history’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 54). At this stage, it would appear that the concept of habitus presents us with an unduly deterministic picture of social action - a point which is debated in the critique below. However, a deterministic view of social action is far from Bourdieu’s intention. Instead, he insists that the features, or ‘structures’, of the habitus, although ‘products of historical practices’, are ‘constantly reproduced and transformed by historical practices’ (1977a: 83). Bourdieu sees practice, which he defines as ‘the practical sense’ (1993:

46), as neither wholly constituted by society nor wholly constituting it (Calhoun, LiPuma and Postone, 1993: 4) and, although the habitus disposes people to act in certain ways, it does not totally constrain them:

Because the habitus is an endless capacity to engender products - thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions - whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings.  
(Bourdieu, 1977a: 95).

The argument here is that practices reflect the dispositions generated by the habitus but are also shaped by individual biographies and historical circumstances. The habitus can be thought of as ‘the capacity for structured improvisation’ (Calhoun, LiPuma and Postone, 1993: 4) because it ‘is constituted from a systematic set of simple and partially interchangeable principles, from which an infinity of solutions can be invented, solutions which cannot be deduced from its conditions of production’ (ibid: 87).

Does this get us any further than the (ultimately) determinist statement that ‘Men [sic] make their own history but, they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it in circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past’ (Marx, 1852: 10)? Arguably, yes. To understand the conditions under which these ‘solutions’ can lead to the transformation, rather than the reproduction, of social life, we need to consider two more of Bourdieu’s concepts - those of field and capital.

#### 2.4.2 Social Organization: Field and Capital

Bourdieu’s writings on social class must be understood in the context of his project to transcend the dualism between ‘objectivist’ and ‘subjectivist’ models of the social world. He rejects ‘the ontological priority of structure *or* agent, system *or* actor, the collective *or* the individual’ and, instead, ‘affirms the *primacy of relations*’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 15). He describes the social world as a multi-dimensional space made up of a number of ‘relatively autonomous social microcosms’ which he terms ‘fields’ (ibid: 97). Fields are not, however, to be conceptualised as concrete structures: to think of them in this way would be to follow ‘our primary inclination to think of the

social world in a substantialist manner' which Bourdieu urges us to 'resist by all means available' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 228). Instead, we must recognise that conceptualising the social world in terms of fields means thinking *relationally* (ibid: 96), by which Bourdieu means getting away from a 'substantialist' and 'realist' concern with objects in the social world and thinking instead of relationships. A field is therefore to be conceptualised as a network of power relations, as a 'field of forces' or a 'field of power' which comprises 'the relations of force that obtain between the social positions which guarantee their occupants a quantum of social force, or of capital, such that they are able to enter into the struggles over the monopoly of power' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 229-30).

Fields are therefore characterised by 'struggle and dialectic' as the 'dominated agents' resist the power of the 'dominant agents' to use the field for their own advantage (Bourdieu, 1993: 88). Struggles may be over control of the field itself or about the power to define fields (Calhoun, LiPuma and Postone, 1993: 6). In this search for distinction, some are advantaged and others disadvantaged according to their stocks of 'capital': economic capital (command over resources), cultural capital (legitimate knowledge, language use, manners, dispositions and orientations) or social capital (command over relationships: social networks of support which can be mobilised through, for example, family connections) (Calhoun, LiPuma and Postone, 1993:32). In addition to these, Bourdieu identifies symbolic capital, which is of a different order to the other forms and is defined as 'the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate' (Bourdieu, 1987: 4). Cultural capital in particular is easily converted into symbolic capital: the conditions under which it is transmitted and acquired are not very visible and, as a consequence, it may appear (and be inscribed in the habitus of dominated groups) as 'legitimate competence', thereby concealing the arbitrary nature of the distribution of economic capital through a process of (mis)recognition (Bourdieu, 1997: 49).

The concepts of field and capital draw attention to the inherently conflictual nature of social life, which Bourdieu explains using the metaphor of a 'game'. He sees a field as 'a space defined by a game offering certain prizes or stakes' and habitus as 'a system of dispositions attuned to that game' (Bourdieu, 1993: 18):

In a field, agents and institutions are engaged in struggle, with unequal strengths, and in accordance with the rules constituting that field of play, to appropriate the specific profits at stake in that game. (ibid: 88)

The conceptualisation of social life as a game is one which has been used by other theorists (for example, Goffman, 1972; Abrams, 1982). For Abrams, the picture of society as 'a game without rules' captures the dynamic relationship between individual and society (Abrams, 1982: 234). The image is of a game in which the prize to be played for, the rules of play, the players themselves - and even the sense of what the game is about - can all be altered. The only rule is that the players go on playing (ibid).

Habitus and individual biography largely shape a player's game strategy but neither habitus nor field is the sole determinant of action: it is the meeting of these two and the fit or misfit between them that generates practice (Wacquant, 1998: 222). Bourdieu therefore 'conceives of social practice in terms of the relationship between class habitus and current capital as realized within the specific logic of a given field' (Calhoun, LiPuma and Postone, 1993: 6). He applies this idea to his analysis of the academic field.

### 2.4.3 Social Class and the Academic Field

#### 2.4.3.1 *Education and Social Reproduction*

Using 'culture' in the anthropological sense to refer to systems of symbolism, meaning and practices common to groups of people, Bourdieu seeks to illuminate the cultural mechanisms which reproduce the power differences underpinning social organization. He uses the concept of the 'cultural arbitrary' to draw attention to the essentially arbitrary nature of cultural content: all cultures are arbitrary in terms of their content and the cultural form which dominates a society is doubly arbitrary in the sense that it dominates, not because of any innate superiority, but simply because of the 'pure de facto power' of the group (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: xi).

Bourdieu argues that cultural arbitraries are imposed through 'pedagogic action' in the family, social group or education system. He describes this process of imposition as 'symbolic violence', arguing: 'All pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power' (Bourdieu and

Passeron, 1977: 5). In society, Bourdieu claims, the dominant pedagogic authority is the one which corresponds to the objective interests of the dominant groups or classes and it is the imposition of this cultural arbitrary which ensures social order and the reproduction of existing power relations. In an argument which clearly draws on Marx's writings on ideology, Bourdieu and Passeron claim that it is through the imposition of this cultural arbitrary that power relations are perceived by subordinate groups as legitimate, a situation which they describe as 'misrecognition' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: xi).

Bourdieu sees the education system as a powerful site of social reproduction, serving to 'transmit a style, that is, a type of relation to language and culture' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 114) which is essentially class-based (although it is argued below that his analysis is rather polarised and needs reformulating). Through education, symbolic violence is exercised by one class over another as the 'cultural arbitrary' of the dominant class is historically reproduced (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 32 and 41). In the education system, the dominant pedagogic action operates to transmit, not the information constituting the dominant culture, but a sense of the legitimacy of this culture and the *fait accompli* of the exclusion of other groups, who 'internalize the legitimacy of their exclusion':

One of the least noticed effects of compulsory schooling is that it succeeds in obtaining from the dominated classes a recognition of legitimate knowledge and know-how....entailing the devaluation of the knowledge and know-how they effectively command. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 41, 42)

Luttrell (1989: 38) endorses this point in her analysis of interviews with two hundred working-class women studying on basic educational programmes in the US when she argues that, by making a distinction between 'commonsense' and 'schoolwise intelligence', the women 'came to believe that a certain type of intelligence, rather than class, determines a person's position in the social structure'.

#### 2.4.3.2 *Linguistic Capital*

Central to Bourdieu's argument is the idea that the use of language (linguistic capital) is centrally implicated in the degree of success that members of different social classes have in the education system. Any speech act reflects the encounter between a



‘linguistic habitus’ - a set of socially-derived dispositions which affect the way people speak and what they speak about - and a ‘linguistic market’ which determines the market value of linguistic products (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 145). There may be congruence or dissonance between linguistic markets (for example, the academic field) and the abilities of participants to speak in an appropriate way: where there is congruence between the linguistic habitus of speakers and the demands of the market, they will gain symbolic benefits.

Language use differs between social groups because it reflects a socially-constructed relationship between people and their position in the social world. Its use ‘betrays, in the very utterance, a relation to language which is common to a whole category of speakers because it is the product of the social conditions of the acquisition and use of language’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 117). Bourdieu and Passeron summarise the differences between bourgeois and working-class language in the following way:

What has often been described as the tendency of bourgeois language to abstraction, formalism, intellectualism and euphemistic moderation, should be seen primarily as the expression of a socially constituted disposition towards language, i.e. towards the interlocutor and even the object of conversation. The distinguished distance, prudent ease and contrived naturalness which are the foundations of every code of society manners, are opposed to the expressiveness or expressionism of working-class language, which manifests itself in the tendency to move from particular case to particular case, from illustration to parable, or to shun the bombast of fine words and the turgidity of grand emotions through banter, rudeness and ribaldry, manners of being and doing characteristic of classes who are never fully given the social conditions for the severance between objective denotation and subjective connotation, between the things seen and all they owe to the viewpoint from which they are seen. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 116-7)

The argument here is that working-class speech reflects an experience of life gained from hard labour and material deprivation: it is ‘embedded in the urgencies of a world whose solicitations demand a constant readiness which impinges upon consciousness and the way the world is constituted, felt, lived’ (Charlesworth, 2000: 214). A crucial factor shaping language use is therefore distance from the exigencies of manual labour and therefore from the ‘common’, ‘ordinary’ and ‘vulgar’ usages that are associated with this: ‘Value always arises from deviation, *deliberate or not*, with respect to the



most widespread usage' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 60). Legitimate language is therefore a 'semi-artificial' language and, as such, requires constant effort and correction - a task which falls to the education system (ibid).

#### 2.4.3.3 *Academic Language*

Bourdieu and Passeron argue that academic language is an extreme form of the 'literary' style used by the privileged classes as 'a means of excluding the vulgar and thereby affirming their distinction' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 118). It is characterised by a subversion of ordinary language: words and linguistic structures are transformed and distorted so that what appears to be straightforward in ordinary language becomes more subtle and qualified and hidden meanings emerge (Jenkins, 1992: 159). It draws upon 'the traditional language of ideas' and is concerned with 'the manipulation of words' (Bourdieu et al, 1994: 4). As such, Bourdieu et al argue that academic language is a 'dead language' for the great majority of students (ibid: 8) and is 'designed to dazzle rather than to enlighten' (ibid: 3).

Many students have difficulty with academic language and never fully understand it:

Constrained to write in a badly understood and poorly mastered language, many students are condemned to using a *rhetoric of despair* whose logic lies in the reassurance that it offers through a kind of incantatory or sacrificial rite, they try to call up and reinstate the tropes, schemes or words which to them distinguish professorial language. (Bourdieu et al, 1994: 4)

However, it is harder for working-class students to modify their speech to suit the academic context than it is for middle-class students, whose habitus gives some preparation for the academic style. Educational success relies on 'symbolic mastery' which is part of a middle-class habitus but largely absent from that of the working class. For working-class students, the appropriate style of language to succeed in education has to be acquired within the education system itself, as Bourdieu and Passeron note:

There is a world of difference between the experience of school that is prepared for by a childhood spent in a family circle where words define the reality of things, and the experience of unreality given to working-class children by the scholastic acquisition of a language which tends to make unreal the things it speaks of because it makes up their whole reality... (1977: 119)

The education system demands a familiarity with a cultural and linguistic style that it does not explicitly teach: 'it gives training and information which can be fully received only by those who have the training it does not give' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 128). The lack of congruence between the linguistic style of working-class students and that demanded in education is an example of 'the distance that words create' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 110) and is likely to produce a situation in which these students 'may not know how to act and may literally be lost for words' (Thompson, 1991: 17). In addition, they probably share, through the operation of symbolic violence, the system of evaluation which privileges this cultural and linguistic style and which works against them; hence they tend to eliminate themselves from the education system or resign themselves to vocational training (ibid: 22-3).

Working-class students may therefore have a 'laboured relation to language' in the academic sphere which is very different to the 'well-mastered mastery of language' and self-assurance of those from more privileged classes (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 119). Those working-class students who manage to succeed in the education system tend to develop 'overly-scholastic manners' which are disparaged by those whose mastery of the academic style has been acquired 'naturally' and therefore functions as a form of distinction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 128, 130).

Bourdieu's conceptual framework has, in recent years, been drawn upon in research into class processes and educational disadvantage. Skeggs (1997a), for example, has focussed on the symbolic struggles that contribute to the process of class formation; James (1995) has discussed the ways in which Bourdieu's ideas might be applied to explore the experiences of mature student in higher education; and Reay (1997, 1998a, 1998b) has applied Bourdieu's insights to gain an understanding of class-based influences on educational choices. However, the growing use of Bourdieu's concepts, has been accompanied by analyses of the flaws in his general position.

## **2.5 A Critique and Reformulation of Bourdieu's Ideas**

Despite the insights provided by Bourdieu, it might be argued that his analysis of the social class processes at work in the academic field is rather over-drawn, that it

essentialises and polarises the experiences of working-class (and middle-class) students, makes no distinction between different academic disciplines or types of higher education institution, and is more relevant to the French context than it is to Britain (see, for example, Savage and Witz, 1992). Crucially, however, commentators have drawn attention to an essential reductionism in Bourdieu's account, which is argued to give analytical priority to material structures in social class processes.

### 2.5.1 Structural Determinism

A persistent criticism of Bourdieu derives from what is seen as his 'essentially structuralist' approach (Harker and May, 1993: 170). Chaney, for example, comments on the 'prescriptive determinism' of the concept of habitus which undermines the dialectical conception of social action that is found in his accounts of lifestyle formation (Chaney, 1997: 66). Along similar lines, Jenkins points to a circularity in the idea that history produces a habitus which, in turn, shapes the social action (practices) which produce more history (Jenkins, 1992: 80).

Indeed, Bourdieu does focus heavily on the reproduction of social forms, especially in his earlier (more structuralist?) writings, saying little about the possibility of their transformation. At the level of the individual, the stress is on the durable effects of habitus on dispositions, expectations and lines of action; at the level of the system, Bourdieu's model implies a set of power relations which reproduce themselves mechanically and predictably. It may be argued that, despite the insights Bourdieu provides - and the obvious potential of the concepts he develops - his model of social life is inadequate both at the level of the social system and at the level of social action.

### 2.5.2 Cultural Reductionism

Devine and Savage (2000) note that there is a problematic theorisation of the relationship between culture and class in Bourdieu's work and a tendency to reduce cultural forms to specific material bases. Although he argues that struggles in the social world are both material and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1987: 9), the latter are viewed as dependent on the former because objective differences between people (for example, differences in economic or cultural capital) are inscribed in the habitus and reflected in representations of the social world, which provide a vocabulary 'to name and think the

social' (Bourdieu, 1987: 10).

Bourdieu attempts to give some autonomy to 'symbolic' struggles by arguing that there is only a loose fit between the 'objective space' people occupy and the 'symbolic space' in which they operate and that the 'fuzziness of the relationship between practices and positions' creates an opportunity for 'all sorts of semantic jamming' (Bourdieu, 1987: 11, 12). He argues that these symbolic struggles are about 'the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions' (ibid:13) and that they have more than symbolic importance: they contribute not just to the vision of the social world but also 'to the very construction of the social world' (ibid: 10). However, there is a caveat: the power to impose a vision of the social world derives ultimately from material structures of power, as the quotation below implies:

In the struggle to make a vision of the world universally known and recognized, the balance of power depends on the symbolic capital accumulated by those who aim at imposing the various visions in contention, *and on the extent to which these visions are themselves grounded in reality.*  
(Bourdieu, 1987: 15, italics added)

It is argued, therefore, that Bourdieu's model as it stands does not allow us to break away from an essentially reductive account of both cultural practices and social action. What is needed is a conceptual framework which captures the *dynamic* and, potentially, transformational class processes at work in social life. The application of a *realist* framework (which will be explained and discussed in the following chapter) is a potentially fruitful way forward (see, for example, Savage et al, 1992). The focus of realist approaches is on class formation, during which process the 'causal powers' of social classes are 'realised' in the struggle with other classes (Crompton, 1998: 48-9).

### 2.5.3 An Adaptation of Bourdieu's Model

A recent example of this kind of approach is work by Savage (2000) which draws on, but modifies, Bourdieu's framework, re-working the model of class formation to take account of the processes of individualization at work in social life and giving culture a relatively autonomous position. Savage defines social class as 'a "relational" process, in which social groups differentiate themselves from others in various "fields"' (ibid: 102).

He argues that the distinction made by Bourdieu between different kinds of capital - economic, cultural, social etc - is crucial for a non-reductive conceptualisation of culture as it implies that class formation occurs along more than one axis (ibid: 106). Savage therefore argues:

Culture is not a product of class relations but is itself a field in which class relations operate. Cultural battles are therefore recursively involved in class formation. (Savage, 2000: 106)

This is a much more fluid notion of culture than critics of Bourdieu generally assume and does hold out the prospect of a move away from economic and structural determination. It does, however, beg the question of the nature of the link between economic and cultural capital - a point to which I return below.

Savage agrees with many critics of social class that there has been a decline of classes as self-conscious collectivities and a growth of individualism in contemporary society. Nevertheless, he argues that individualization is 'a cultural process involving differentiation from others' (ibid: 104) and that class cultures are inevitably implicated in this, although they now operate as 'modes of differentiation' rather than 'types of collectivity' (ibid: 102). Class processes, therefore, 'work through the individual' (ibid: 95). This argument rests on a conception of identities as 'relational constructs in which individuals develop a sense of their own selves by comparing themselves with "meaningful others"' (ibid: 117). Savage argues that class is a 'benchmark' against which people interpret their lives: 'class is salient in terms of constructing an idea of difference, not in terms of defining a class which one belongs to' (ibid: 113). This explains why research consistently shows that knowledge of social class is well developed among respondents but that personal identification with it is much more qualified and ambivalent. Savage concludes:

If we recognize the individualized role of class formation, and see class formation as related to the identification of trajectories rather than as an attachment to fixed positions, then a rather different perspective on class formation and social mobility is suggested.... (Savage, 2000: 95)

Savage criticizes Bourdieu for underestimating the extent to which aspects of working-

class culture are positively evaluated and provide resources with which to claim distinction (ibid: 110). Further, he argues that social and cultural boundaries are 'porous', allowing movement between cultural practices (ibid).

Savage's work represents an attempt to reconstruct class formation as a cultural process which operates, at least to some extent, independently of economic factors or group processes. In this way, he tries to escape the pitfall of earlier, culturally-based models of class which tended to reduce class consciousness and class cultures to capitalist economic relations. However, claiming the relative autonomy of [individualised] cultural processes raises the question of the relationship between the economic and cultural dimensions of class and the articulation of contextual constraint and purposive action in the social trajectories of [class] actors.

Savage contends that 'culture and class are inextricably bound together in specific material practices' (Savage, 2000: 193-4): they are clearly linked in some way and 'cultural outlooks are implicated in modes of exclusion and/or domination' (Devine and Savage, 2000: 195). To acknowledge that there is a link between cultural and structural forms does not have to imply a reductionist account of culture, as Archer notes when she remarks that 'structural and cultural dynamics are indeed interrelated in determinate ways, without one of them ultimately determining the other' (Archer, 1996: 282). Archer argues that, at some times, cultural and structural forms coalesce and 'the very stability of....societies is precisely due to the mutual reinforcement of structure and culture which is realised through power in interaction' (Archer, 1996: 310). The direction of the influence, however, can vary: differential material rewards may flow from 'ideational interaction' between groups with different types of cultural capital; alternatively, the direction of influence may be the other way round (ibid: 283). Nevertheless, Archer insists on the relative autonomy of structural and cultural domains (ibid: xi).

Crucially, for Archer, there is a 'two-way relationship' between social action and **both** structure and culture (ibid: 276). In this thesis, structure, culture and agency have been assumed to be analytically separate domains of social life (*pace* Giddens, 1984). (This does not, however, mean that they are unrelated. For example, following Giddens



[1984: 291], it is argued that purposive social action may have unintended consequences which serve to reproduce structural forms.) In distinction to Archer, however, it is contended that the relationship between structure, culture and agency is a contingent, not a necessary one shaped, *inter alia*, by contextual and temporal features of social life and by processes of interaction. As such, it is argued that it is impossible to specify this relationship at a theoretical level and that it can only be determined in concrete empirical contexts - such as the context of higher education examined in this thesis.

## 2.6 Summary

The thesis rests on the following assumptions which emerged through a consideration of the literature in the field:

- The claim that social class is no longer of empirical or theoretical importance is rejected. Nevertheless, it is argued that the conceptualisation of class has to be reworked and that the work of Pierre Bourdieu provides a useful starting point.
- Class is a relational process but not a straightforwardly economic phenomenon. A focus on the processes of class formation reveals the economic, cultural and symbolic dimensions of class-based struggles and the possibility that class processes may be working themselves out at an individual level.
- Although there is little evidence of a collective class consciousness, it is clear that people identify with class in complex and ambivalent ways: the evidence suggests that class is part of the 'conceptual map' held by many people and plays a part in the search for distinction and the interpretation of individual trajectories in social life.
- In higher education, middle-class students have cultural and social capital which give them an advantage. In contrast, working-class students are likely to feel out of place and lacking the linguistic and conceptual skills on which higher education is premised. However, aspects of working-class culture may generate resources to cope with this.
- Social identity is a 'reflexive project' but one which occurs within the context of social relationships which are themselves temporally and spatially patterned. Social identity can be changed but not without social support, not without cost to the individual, and not beyond certain limits. 'Moral career' is a useful way of

conceptualising the process of social becoming.

- There is a link between education and class identity: being educated will change working-class identity in some way and this is likely to have an impact both on individual trajectories and on relationships with significant others.

In interrogating the data for this thesis, I have explored the ‘negotiation of contingencies’ that led to the return to education of the (largely working-class) respondents and their subsequent moral careers. I have been particularly interested in: the ways in which these students have perceived and adapted to the academic style and culture of higher education; the precise nature of any disjunction between ‘working classness’ and the values, assumptions and processes that underpin higher education; and the ways in which they negotiated their paths through the system. Importantly, I wanted to know if the ‘sense of one’s place’ was altered by the experience and, if so, what effects this had on relationships with family and friends - and how any negative effects were managed. Before moving on to an exploration of the data, however, it is necessary to outline the methodological considerations and research methods on which the study is based. These are the foci of the following two chapters.

### 3.1 Introduction

A central assumption in this thesis is that accounts of social action which take the perceptions and meanings of individual social actors as the beginning and end of sociological explanation are inadequate for a full understanding of the nature of social life. Following the logic of Bourdieu's argument, it is claimed that a study of the perceptions and experiences of Access students in higher education must also take account of the habitus which provides the background of values, dispositions and resources which these students bring with them, which shape their experiences of it but of which they may only be partially aware - if at all. Yet these students are, at the same time, purposive social actors who seek to carve out paths for themselves through higher education and to change their life trajectories, drawing creatively on resources from their cultural repertoires to do so.

The ontological grounding for this thesis is therefore a position which attempts to transcend the dualism of structural determinism and voluntarism in sociological explanation - which gives equal weight to contextual constraints and individual motivations in an explanation of social action - and a methodology which allows the research to tap into both of these aspects of social life. This implies at least a partial rejection of positivist and empiricist approaches as giving insufficient weight to the human agent in accounts of social life, to the meanings they attach to it and the creativity and purpose they display in dealing with it. Meanings are argued to be, in some degree, constitutive of social life, implying an interpretive or hermeneutic approach to its study. Nevertheless, interpretive or hermeneutic approaches alone are argued to be insufficient because, as Bourdieu notes, although social life is about meanings, these meanings are not free-floating: they are, at least to some extent, *materially* grounded because social life has a non-discursive, material dimension (Sayer, 2000: 18). This material grounding of meanings implies that although the social world is at least partially constructed through the meanings we give it, it is not wholly so constructed (ibid: 17).

### 3.2 Critical Realism

The ontology which, arguably, best fits this position is critical realism, an approach developed, *inter alia*, by Bhaskar (1975, 1979). Bhaskar describes critical realism as ‘a commonsense ontology, in the sense that it takes seriously the existence of the things, structures and mechanisms revealed by the sciences at different levels of reality’ (Outhwaite, 1987: 19). For the natural sciences, it is an ontology which assumes the existence of a physical world which is independent of our knowledge of it. Yet Bhaskar argues that the knowledge revealed by positivist and empiricist methods of study is knowledge of only one dimension of the physical world: underlying the surface appearances studied by empiricists are real, generative mechanisms which may not be immediately apparent to the observer. Bhaskar therefore proposes ‘a conception of the physical world as stratified and differentiated’ (1975: 9), identifying the different strata as: the domain of the real (structures, mechanisms, powers); the domain of the actual (events, states of affairs); and the domain of the empirical (perceptions, impressions, sensations) (Bhaskar, 1975: 13). The relationship between these levels is argued to be a contingent, not a necessary, one:

...real structures exist independently of and are often out of phase with the actual patterns of events.....Similarly....events occur independently of experiences. And experiences are often (epistemically speaking) ‘out of phase’ with events - eg when they are misidentified. (Bhaskar, 1975: 13)

#### 3.2.1 A ‘Duality of Structure’ or Analytical Dualism?

Bhaskar applies his conception of the natural world as ‘stratified and differentiated’ to the social world. Citing the work of Giddens (1976), he refers to the ‘duality of structure’, arguing that society is both the constraining context within which our activities take place and, at the same time, the outcome of human agency. He also refers to the ‘duality of praxis’: ‘human praxis’ is a conscious production but also a (largely unconscious) reproduction of society (Bhaskar, 1979: 43-3):

The model of the society/person connection I am proposing could be summarised as follows: people do not create society. For it always pre-exists them and is a necessary condition for their activity. Rather, society must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which

individuals reproduce or transform, but would not exist unless they did so.  
Society does not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification).  
But it is not the product of it (the error of voluntarism).  
(Bhaskar, 1979: 45-6).

Bhaskar argues that notions of 'society' have to be based on three important premises: firstly, social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the activities they govern; secondly, social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the agents' conceptions of what they are doing in their activity; and, thirdly, social structures, unlike natural structures, may be only relatively enduring. (Bhaskar, 1979: 48-9). A similar view is taken by Giddens when he states: 'Structure has no existence independent of the knowledge agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activities' (Giddens, 1984: 26). The implication of this definition of social structure as grounded at the level of social action is that macro and micro levels of society are collapsed into a meso level of 'social practices' - recurring social actions - where agency and structure meet:

The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across time and space. (Giddens, 1984: 2)

However, this view is not shared by all critical realists and is not the position adopted in this thesis. Here, it is argued that the dimensions of social action and social structure are *analytically* distinct although, in practice, they inter-relate in complex ways. This view is held by a number of theorists. Keat and Urry (1982: 243), for example, argue: '...*contra* Bhaskar, it would seem quite possible for certain structures to exist independent of the agents' conceptions of what they are doing'. They further contend that '...certain social structures possess powers to constitute or to transform "persons", not merely to provide the context *within* which people engage in purposive human action' (ibid). This argument is taken up by Layder, who notes that the structural features of social life may remain undiscovered by social agents: 'There is certainly no reason for researchers to *assume* that people know, or *should* know about (or could be expected to analyse) the institutional circumstances of their activities' (Layder, 1993: 65-66). Similarly, Sayer argues:

Much of what happens does not depend on or correspond to actors' understandings; there are unintended consequences and unacknowledged conditions and things can happen to people regardless of their understandings. (Sayer, 2000: 20)

### 3.2.2 A Stratified Social World

Layder presents a view of the social world as 'stratified' into a number of distinct but interdependent 'social domains': psychobiography (the individual's subjectivity, formed through an amalgam of psychological and social factors); situated activity (face-to-face encounters); social settings (the immediate environment of social encounters); and contextual resources (the macro level of power and domination and the forms of inequality and hierarchy that emerge from them) (Layder, 1993: 7; 1997: 2). Layder emphasises that, although each of these social domains has its own distinctive features, the domains are closely interwoven: '...structural features are inextricably interlocked with social activities and...we cannot understand the one without the other' (1993: 56).

Layder argues that 'the domains are related to each other not only as "layers" of social life within the same time unit, but also as stretched-out over time and space' (1997: 2). This argument is similar to that presented by classical theorists such as Marx and other contemporary theorists such as Giddens (1984, 1987): objective features of social life emerge over time and provide the background context within which social encounters take place and subjective careers develop. The social domains therefore operate along different timescales: situated activity has a relatively short timescale whilst psychobiography unfolds over a longer period of time. Changes at the level of social institutions and structures may take place only over long historical periods. At the level of the individual, social action may be shaped by other times and places to the ones in which it is enacted, as Sayer notes:

What actors do at a given time is likely to be affected by dispositions which were 'sedimented' at some earlier stage, often in different places. In this sense, the past and other places (now absent) are present in the here and now. (Sayer, 2000: 16)



### 3.2.3 The Role of Contingency

Sayer (2000) stresses that the multi-dimensional nature of social life ensures that what actually happens is *contingent* rather than determined in a straight-forward fashion. He describes the stratified nature of the social world in the following way: the 'real' is what exists, whether or not we perceive it - the world of objects, such as bureaucracies, with their structures and powers; the 'actual' comprises what actually happens, which structures and powers are activated and which are not; and the 'empirical' is the domain of experience (Sayer, 2000: 11-12). The relationship between these three dimensions of social reality is a *contingent* one because the powers of real objects may exist but not be brought into play, or these powers, if activated, may produce different outcomes in different contexts. Alternatively, different structures and powers may produce similar events and experiences (ibid: 15-16). Examples of this in the present study would be found if the potential disjunction between a working-class habitus and higher education was activated in some institutions of higher education but not in others; alternatively, similar experiences of disjunction could be produced by the different structures of gender, age or social class; and it is not inconceivable that some students for whom disjunction would appear to be inevitable, given the structural context, may not experience this due to other contingent factors.

The implication of a critical realist ontology is that events are not pre-determined but contingent - as Sayer argues, the future is open (Sayer, 2000: 15). Further, the social world is characterised by *emergence* as a contingent conjunction of features gives rise to new phenomena which are irreducible to their constituent parts (ibid: 12). This possibility of *novelty* in social life extends to social identity in that we have the power to become the people we want to become (but only within certain structural constraints), as Sayer notes:

The nature of real objects present at a given time constrains and enables what can happen but does not pre-determine what will happen. Realist ontology therefore makes it possible to understand how we could be or become many things which currently we are not.... (Sayer, 2000: 12)

### 3.3 Research Implications of a Realist Perspective

#### 3.3.1 The Centrality of Theory

Keat and Urry (1982: 240) note that the implications of realism for knowledge and research in the social sciences are open to debate. In particular, the status of empirical study is unclear. One reason for this is the insistence that our observation of the social world is never impartial. Sayer (1992: 65), for example, argues that ‘theory-neutral observation’ is impossible: observation of social life is always coloured by our concepts’. Similarly, Bhaskar concedes:

...whenever we speak of things or of events etc in science we must always speak of them and know them under particular descriptions, descriptions which will always be to a greater or lesser extent theoretically determined, which are not neutral reflections of a given world. (Bhaskar, 1975: 249)

In addition to this, the existence of social mechanisms (‘the domain of the real’) which are not directly observable and are only contingently related to the other two domains (‘the actual’ and ‘the empirical’) creates a problem for empirical study. For this reason, Bhaskar argues:

Society, as an object of inquiry, is necessarily ‘theoretical’, in the sense that, like a magnetic field, it is necessarily unperceivable. As such, it cannot be empirically identified independently of its effects; so that it can only be known, not shown, to exist. (Bhaskar, 1979: 57)

The implication is that we can gain knowledge of unobservable structures only by means of the effects they have when activated: we *infer* the structures or entities from these effects (Sayer, 2000: 12). Yet, as Sayer and others imply, social life is a messy affair: different underlying mechanisms and structures at the ‘real’ level may produce similar outcomes at the level of actuality; conversely, the same mechanisms may produce different outcomes, according to context. For example, as noted earlier, it is possible that students in higher education may experience similar feelings of disjunction which arise from different underlying structures - such as age, social class or gender. How can we be sure that our inferences are accurate?

Firstly, a critical realist stance does not imply the *rejection* of empirical investigation but rather the recognition that such investigation does not tell the whole story . Outhwaite (1987: 60), for example, argues: ‘The realist emphasis on the legitimacy and importance of theoretical argument should not be understood to imply the depreciation of empirical research’. Similarly, Sayer (1992: 5) claims that ‘knowledge is not immune to empirical check’. Bhaskar himself argues that ‘..even if social scientific theories can only be compared and tested en bloc, they can still be tested empirically’ (1979: 96: n53). The assumption must be that there is at least some correspondence between surface appearances and underlying structures and mechanisms (and that our observation of them is not irredeemably coloured by our concepts).

Secondly, the impossibility of ‘theory-neutral observation’, or observation coloured by the meanings that social life holds for us, does not imply a slide into relativism and a position that any interpretation of events and processes in the social world is as good as any other. In a reference to the work of Bhaskar, Sayer argues:

Critical realism *accepts* ‘epistemic relativism’, that is the view that the world can only be known in terms of available descriptions or discourses, but it rejects ‘judgmental relativism’ - the view that one cannot judge between different discourses and decide that some accounts are better than others.  
(Sayer, 2000: 47)

Although there is no absolute truth, this does not mean that some ideas are not better than others (ibid: 48). How, then, do we make judgements? Judgements have to be based on ‘evidence’; alternative explanations must be considered and logical argument engaged in. Layder (1993, 1997) indicates how this might take place in practice.

### 3.3.2 The Research Strategy

In concrete terms, as Layder argues, a realist starting point involves a model of the social world as stratified - as containing different but inter-related social entities - and, as empirical knowledge of this world is deemed possible, it would seem logical to argue that more than one kind of research method is required to gather it. This is why Layder suggests a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, so as to make as many methodological and analytical ‘cuts’ into the data as possible (1993: 128). In

addition, Layder stresses that equal attention must be given to micro domains of social life (psychobiography/self and situated activity) and macro domains (setting and context). This can be accomplished, he argues, through the use of an elaborated version of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory which takes into account macro as well as micro dimensions: 'a major problem focus of an emended grounded theory approach would centre on the ligatures which bind macro and micro together in the continuous flow of social life' (Layder, 1993: 69).

In grounded theory, primacy is given to gaining knowledge about the lived experience of social actors through qualitative data and, using techniques such as the 'constant comparative method' and 'theoretical sampling', theory is generated which is 'grounded' in the research data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, Layder (1993: 70) suggests that researchers need to go beyond grounded theory: they need 'perceptual skills that allow them to enquire beyond the surface happenings of social life in order to detect the influence of structural factors'. This means drawing on 'formal' theory - or even 'metatheory' - in the research process. Metatheory, according to Layder, is not totally divorced from the empirical world - it simply stands in a different relationship to it from that of grounded theory (ibid: 70) and can be used to order fieldwork or to stimulate ideas. The theories that emerge from research 'should be guided rather than limited by empirical evidence' - without this, research is 'impoverished' (ibid: 63).

Finally, Layder stresses the importance in the research process of a sensitivity to issues of power and the social relations and practices that flow from it; these are the 'ligatures' and 'connective tissue' which bind social life together (Layder, 1997: 77). The concept of power bridges the macro-micro divide because it can be seen both as a feature of interpersonal, face-to-face relationships and as a more 'indirect, impersonal and remote' characteristic of structured and reproduced social relationships (Layder, 1997: 58). Power in the latter sense clearly has a historical dimension as a product, for example, of 'relations of domination and subordination of a class nature which have been fashioned through a historical process of struggle' (ibid: 157). Nevertheless, the reproduced configuration of power relations should not be seen in an unduly deterministic way and Layder draws upon Giddens's concept of the 'dialectic of control' (Giddens, 1984) to argue that groups and individuals are never totally powerless and that there is a dynamic

relationship between structurally-based and interactionally-based power relationships (Layder, 1997: 160). The implication of this is that the researcher has to be sensitive to the interplay of power relations at both a micro and a macro level, as Layder notes:

It is important to incorporate the effects of phenomena such as occupation, class, power, status and gender (as well as the effects of ideology in the legitimation of power relations) when we are analysing subjective experiences and types of social involvement. (Layder, 1997: 168)

### **3.4 Application of the Realist Perspective**

In this thesis, an attempt is made to apply the insights of the realist approach and, in particular, the practical applications suggested by Layder, to the study of mature, working-class students progressing through higher education. A central concern is to describe the ways in which micro and macro factors interweave as these students navigate their way through what is, for many of them, perceived as an alien culture; their doubts and uncertainties, triumphs and disappointments, the developing perceptions of selfhood and changing relationships with significant others, are the focus of the research.

#### **3.4.1 The Use of 'Sensitizing Concepts'**

A key strategy for making the link between the individual and wider historical processes has been the use of 'sensitizing concepts' (Layder, 1993: 49) which refer to both objective and subjective aspects of social life and provide a useful starting point for theory.

##### **3.4.1.1 *'Disjunction'***

As discussed in Chapter 1, a sensitizing concept drawn upon in the present study is 'disjunction', which describes the sense of fragmentation which emerges when core aspects of personal and social identity are threatened in the educational environment, producing 'feelings of alienation, anger, frustration and confusion' (Weil, 1989: 112 ). It is also a concept that can be used to describe objective features of an individual's life history. However, the concept of 'disjunction' has been used with care, especially in the early stages of data analysis, as it tends to impose a meaning on the data which could not



be assumed at the outset.

#### 3.4.1.2 *'Moral Career'*

More neutral is Goffman's concept of 'moral career' (discussed in 2.3.3). This concept implies a focus on the self, self-identity and change (with the temporal and spatial implications of this) and a sensitivity to the contextual and structural features of social life. Like 'disjunction', 'career' has both objective and subjective dimensions, effectively bridging the macro-micro divide, as Goffman notes when he comments:

One value of the concept of career is its two-sidedness. One side is linked to internal matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt identity; the other side concerns official position, jural relations, and style of life, and is part of a publicly accessible institutional complex. The concept of career, then, allows one to move back and forth between the personal and the public, between the self and its significant society, without having to rely for data upon what the person says he [sic] thinks he imagines himself to be.  
(Goffman, 1961: 119)

In this thesis, the experiences of the interviewees as they moved through their courses have been conceptualised in terms of 'moral career'.

#### 3.4.2 The Status of Interview Data

The 'evidence' on which the thesis is based has primarily been drawn from interview data. A discussion of the research methods that were used takes place in the following chapter but it is appropriate at this stage to explain, given the ontological and epistemological stance adopted, how the interview data are used. Ashworth (2000) argues that the ontological stance of the researcher shapes the perception of the status of verbal data collected, for example, from interviews. As noted above, critical realists accept that social life is, at least partially, about the construction of meanings by knowledgeable social actors. Research conducted within a realist framework must therefore pay attention to these meanings and data collected from in-depth, qualitative interviews may be argued to uncover these. However, we cannot assume that verbal data tell us everything that we need to know about the interviewee's experiences. The recognition of real, underlying but hidden structures and mechanisms in society - such as those related to social class - must be accompanied by the conviction that what



people say and how they interpret their experiences only tells us part of the story. This is not an unimportant part: knowledgeable and intentional social actors engaged reflexively in social life are clearly able to explain what it is they are doing, why they are doing it and what they feel about it - and these explanations are central to the research process. Nevertheless, people are not necessarily fully aware of the underlying structures and mechanisms within which they operate and the impact of these on their interpretations of social life. Sayer emphasises this point when he says:

While the concepts used by actors, whether implicitly or explicitly, are necessary for an explanation of their situation, they are not sufficient, for they are likely not only to be flawed but to mask or misrepresent certain aspects of what happens. (Sayer, 2000: 34)

For example, the experiences of students of higher education may be shaped by social class in subtle ways which may not be apparent to the students themselves, who may interpret feelings of disjunction in other ways. How, then, can the researcher gain 'true' knowledge of what is going on?

As argued earlier, there is no 'true' knowledge of the social world, untainted by available descriptions or discourses - but this does not mean that all accounts are equally sound (Sayer, 2000: 47). Sayer argues that we need to look at the problem in a different way:

A different way of thinking about interpretive understanding is to regard it not as a matter of finding more or less true or adequate or authoritative interpretations, but as a matter of adding to the range of interpretations, thereby enriching an ongoing creative conversation. (Sayer, 2000: 46)

The approach taken in this thesis is one of critical reflection on the data which draws on existing research and available theoretical frameworks to make *informed* judgements. Such judgements, as Sayer (2000: 7) notes, 'are fallible of course....but then no philosophy of science can promise "a royal road to truth" and critical realism is no exception'. Others coming to the data from different ontological or epistemological positions, or different theoretical standpoints, might very well interpret it differently. For this reason, in writing up the data, a decision has been taken to let the interviewees

speak for themselves wherever possible by including as many quotations as are necessary to substantiate the analysis. In this way, it is hoped that the basis of the analysis is clear and, therefore, contestable.

### **4.1 Introduction**

In an attempt to make a number of analytical ‘cuts’ into the data, both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been used, although the former played a minor role and were used exclusively to provide background data for the qualitative research. The findings of the quantitative research will therefore be reported only briefly.

### **4.2 The Quantitative Phase of the Research**

In the first phase of the research (1992/3), I tried to gain an insight into the population of Access students in the region, reasoning that it would be from this pool of students that my interview subjects would largely be drawn. (This assumption proved to be correct: all but one of the 27 former Access students interviewed in the three institutions of higher education had studied on local Access courses.) This phase of the research involved a questionnaire survey of all Access students and their tutors on courses validated by South Yorkshire Open College Federation (SYOCF) - the Authorised Validating Agency for Access course in the region.

This quantitative material was gathered for the academic year 1992/3. Questionnaires were sent to the Access tutors teaching on thirty validated courses during the second half of the academic year (See Appendix 1). Replies were received from twenty-four of these thirty tutors. In addition, around eight hundred questionnaires were sent out to students studying on these courses (See Appendix 2). Twenty-seven of these courses returned student questionnaires. The student response rate was difficult to calculate with certainty because some tutors appeared to be unclear about exactly how many students were on their courses as a significant number had withdrawn during the Autumn and Spring terms. Response rates varied enormously between courses: many of the smaller courses achieved a response of approaching 100% but the rate for the larger courses was lower - in one case, only 30%. The response rate overall was 57%, which is consistent with similar studies. (Woodley and Wagner et al [1987] achieved a response rate of 50% and, in a study conducted on behalf of CNAA/UDACE [1991], the

response rate was 60%.)

#### 4.2.1 Results

Analysis of the Access tutors' questionnaires revealed the diverse nature of Access provision for adults in the region. At the time the research was conducted, there were thirty validated Access giving access to a wide range of subject areas and degree courses. The majority of these courses (83%) targeted groups of students who had traditionally been under-represented in higher education - women (targeted by 71% of courses), ethnic minority groups (51%), manual working groups (50%), the unemployed (33%) and those with disabilities (29%).

Course monitoring procedures at this time did not always involve keeping a record of the proportion of student intakes from these groups of students. A majority of courses (79%) recorded the gender balance of intakes but only 58% recorded the number of students with disabilities and 54% the number from ethnic minority groups. The figure for social class intake was the smallest with only 25% of courses noting the socio-economic characteristics of each student cohort. The few course tutors that did keep such records tended to use indirect indices such as home address, previous occupation, domestic situation, employment status and whether state benefits were being received. The small proportion of courses monitoring recruitment from manual working groups was hardly surprising, given the sensitive nature of this area and the problems of establishing a valid measure, yet the absence of reliable data in this area made it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the strategy to widen participation for working-class groups. Of course, this situation may well have changed since the fieldwork for this thesis took place.

All Access courses kept a record of withdrawal rates and all but one (96%) a record of the reasons for withdrawal. Of the Access students studying on courses in 1992/3, 29% failed to complete their courses. Domestic or personal reasons were given in the case of 34% of withdrawals; academic reasons accounted for 19% and financial reasons for 17%. The characteristics of these exiting students - their gender and ethnic balance and the proportion from manual working groups - were unknown.

Data from the Access Students' Questionnaire data revealed that the majority of students were female (66%) and white (91%). A sizeable proportion (31%) had been unemployed before enrolling on the course and a further 14% had been involved in full-time home duties. Only 16% had full-time jobs before enrolling. In order to establish the social class background of the students, they were asked for details about both the occupation of the main wage earner in their family of origin and their own previous occupation. Occupations were coded using the Registrar General's classificatory scheme (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys: 1990a, 1990b, and 1991). Table 1 summarises the results.

**Table 1**

**Social Class Background of Access Students in South Yorkshire 1992/3**

<b>Social Class</b>	<b>Family of Origin (%)</b>	<b>Own Class Position (%)</b>
I	4	1
II	23	23
IIIN	7	32
IIIM	47	22
IV	16	20
V	4	2

Considering first family of origin, the data revealed that 67% of students could be considered to have working class backgrounds (social classes IIIM, IV and V). When those students who recorded having a paid occupation prior to enrolling on the Access course were classified, 44% were from working-class backgrounds. The largest single group, however, was class IIIN, with 32% of the students being drawn from this class.

The figures from the 1991 Census showed that the proportion of the population which could be described as working class at this time was 45%; the working-class Access students in the survey were therefore represented in direct proportion to their numbers in the general population. This is not typical of undergraduates in universities, where middle-class students have consistently been over-represented and working-class

students under-represented (see 1.2.1). The conclusion drawn from the quantitative data was that Access courses - certainly those in the South Yorkshire region - were at least partially successful in attracting working-class students and this gave me some grounds for thinking that local Access entrants to higher education were likely to be 'non-traditional' on a number of dimensions: in addition to entering with a non-traditional qualification and being, by definition, mature students, they were also more likely to be female and working-class. This assumption proved to be correct.

### **4.3 The Qualitative Phase of the Research**

Of central importance is the longitudinal, qualitative study of former access students as they progressed through their courses in three higher education institutions. Students studying on social science courses were targeted as the quantitative stage of the research had indicated that Access students were heavily concentrated in this area of study. The research was longitudinal to allow the opportunity to tap into the experiences of these students at various stages of their educational 'careers' and to assess the impact of these on the self and relationships with significant others.

Gaining access to potential interviewees in the three higher-education institutions targeted for the research proved to be a more lengthy process than anticipated as the relevant 'gate-keepers' had to be identified, access negotiated and the students found and contacted.

#### **4.3.1 Old University**

Access to students was effected through the Access Officer, who managed an administrative department within the university which dealt with access matters. Of those students enrolling on all courses for the academic year for 1993/4, only forty-eight were recorded as former Access students. Those studying on social science courses - Sociology, Psychology, Social History and Politics - were targeted and written to by the Access Officer. Thirteen replies were received and eight of these students eventually interviewed. Of the remainder, four did not arrive for interview and could not be contacted and one proved to be so severely disabled with mobility problems and a speech impairment that interviewing appeared to be ruled out. Written communication



was offered but not taken up by this student. Seven students were interviewed three times during the course of the study. The eighth student was interviewed once and subsequently could not be contacted.

#### 4.3.2 New University

As a lecturer at New University, it was easy for me to gain access to the enrolment data here. Thirteen of the students enrolling on social science degrees were former Access students. These students were contacted and eleven of them agreed to be interviewed. However, two withdrew from the course before interviews could be arranged and could not be contacted. In all, nine students were interviewed during their first year but only five of these completed their degree courses during the time the field work was being carried out. Two students withdrew during the first year and one of these was interviewed following the withdrawal. Two further students withdrew at the end of the second year and one of these was subsequently interviewed; the second withdrew temporarily but did not return before the completion of the field work and was not therefore interviewed in her final year. However, the interviewees who did not complete their courses (and therefore the interviews) nevertheless provided very valuable data which brought into focus the difficulties encountered in higher education.

#### 4.3.3 College

At the college, I was given permission to trawl through the enrolment forms. Seventeen former Access students were identified and written to. Of these, eleven agreed to be interviewed (although one of these could not be contacted for interview). Of the remaining ten, seven completed the degree, one moved house at the end of the first year and took no further part in the research and two withdrew at the end of the first year (but were subsequently re-interviewed).

### 4.4 **The Interviewees**

Details of the interviewees are given in Appendix 3. At the start of the fieldwork there were twenty-seven interviewees - nineteen women and eight men. The majority - seventeen in total - were aged between thirty and forty-four years at the time of their admission to higher education; five were aged between twenty-five and twenty-nine

years and only three – all of whom were studying for degrees at the college of further and higher education – were aged fifty or over. The majority of the interviewees – twenty one – were married or co-habiting at the start of the fieldwork; three were single and three divorced.

In terms of class of origin, the vast majority of interviewees (twenty one) were drawn from the manual working class (skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers), as measured by the Registrar General's classificatory scheme (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1990a, 1990b, 1991). Included in the 'working class' category are three interviewees who grew up in single-parent, unemployed households and one who spent much of his early life in a children's home; in these cases, other indicators of social class gleaned from the interviews - such as details about family circumstances, previous jobs of parents, neighbourhood and levels of education - were used as classificatory mechanisms. The largest single grouping was skilled manual (fourteen interviewees), with only two being drawn from the semi-skilled manual group and none at all from the unskilled manual group. The remaining six interviewees had middle-class families of origin (Registrar General's classes I, II or IIIN), although one of these was precluded by the Official Secrets Act from giving the details of his father's occupation, which involved working for the Ministry of Defence. Again, using other indicators of social class, a decision was made to categorise this interviewee as middle class.

A slightly different picture emerges when the interviewees' own previous occupations are taken into account: fifteen had been employed in middle-class occupations and fourteen in working-class ones. However, seven of these 'middle-class' interviewees (six women and one man) were routine non-manual workers drawn from social class IIIN. Charles (1990: 58) argues that many routine, non-manual jobs should really be classified as working class, noting that, especially for female workers, low-grade clerical, secretarial or shop work is often viewed as the feminine equivalent of masculine manual work.

It was apparent that, for some of the interviewees, social class was not seen as a significant source of identity. Fifteen either saw themselves as working-class or

identified their origins in these terms; one explicitly referred to a middle-class identity and one saw himself as having both middle-class and working-class roots. However, for ten of the interviewees, the issue of social class either did not arise explicitly during the interviews or was dismissed as irrelevant to social identity. (This does not, however, mean that these interviewees eschewed class-related attitudes and distinctions: the question of class identification and *disidentification* will be explored in 8.5.2.)

#### 4.5 The Interviews

All but one of the interviews were conducted between November 1993 and August 1996; the final interview – that of a student who had temporarily withdrawn from her course – took place in June 1997. There was an unforeseen and unavoidable delay between the period of data collection and the writing up of the thesis. However, the results of recent studies into the experiences of working-class students in higher education (for example, Reay 2001; Reay, David and Ball, 2001) indicate that the issues identified in the present study are still relevant in today's situation. In addition, having taken place in the period just prior to the abolition of student grants and the introduction of course fees, the interviews now have a specific contextual relevance.

Interviews were semi-structured and ranged in duration from forty minutes to well over an hour. The interview schedule was initially open-ended: I was concerned, within the broad remit of the research topic, to allow the concerns and interests of the interviewees to come to the fore. As the intention was to interview each student three times - once each year during their period of study - it was possible for me to reflect on what had been said so that interesting areas could be probed in subsequent interviews. Second and third interviews were prepared through careful reading and re-reading of the earlier transcripts, identifying themes, noting 'silences' and anguishing over leads that had not been followed up.

Twenty of the respondents were interviewed three times, three were interviewed twice and four were interviewed once. All but one of the seventy interviews were taped; the remaining interview was lost as the tape recorder was accidentally switched on to the 'play' rather than the 'record' setting. However, notes of this interview were written up

immediately so that as much detail as possible could be recorded. One interview was transcribed by the researcher and the remaining interviews by an experienced audio typist. Unfortunately, the majority of one interview was lost during the transcription process as the typist inadvertently recorded music over one side of the tape. By the time this situation was known to me, months had elapsed since the interview had taken place and I could not recall a great deal of its content.

#### 4.5.1 A Questioning of Presuppositions

Before I began the interviewing I thought through any presuppositions I was likely to bring with me to the research. I was concerned that my own working-class background would introduce a potential source of bias into the interpretation of the interview data and that I would perceive issues as being class-based when there might be other, equally convincing, interpretations. The early educational experiences of the students I would be interviewing were, I felt, familiar to me: I had grown up in a working-class area of a large industrial city in South Yorkshire and many of my friends had failed the Eleven Plus, moving on to the local secondary modern school whilst I went to a secondary technical school at the other side of the city. These friendships remained intact until I moved on to higher education and, even now, I am still in contact with some of these people. My research involved interviewing people who, I assumed, would have much in common with these friends and I was concerned that my judgement would be impaired. After consideration, however, I decided that this was not necessarily as great a problem as I had imagined: I am different to these people; my long experience as a sociologist and the continued effort to judge impartially and recognise the problem of personal bias had to count for something. In fact, the recognition of (potentially) shared meanings with the interviewees could, I reasoned, even be of advantage in interpreting the data – as long as I maintained a critical perspective. As Weber (1978) notes, interpretive understanding is more difficult if there is no shared meaning system:

...many ultimate ends or values toward which experience shows that human action may be oriented, often cannot be understood completely, though sometimes we are able to grasp them intellectually. *The more radically they differ from our own ultimate values, however, the more difficult it is for us to understand them empathically.* (Weber, 1978: 5-6, italics added)

As argued above, all judgements are fallible, but by recognising the direction in which my particular fallibility may lie, presenting as much evidence as possible to substantiate my judgements, and explaining my reasoning, I hope that I have gone as far as I can to present a balanced analysis.

#### 4.5.2 A Declaration of Interests

In the process of interviewing I resolved to give no indication that I was primarily interested in the area of social class: the danger of ‘leading’ interviewees had been impressed on me during my undergraduate years and postgraduate research training. I attempted to make no assumptions during the interviews and to just to listen and probe; if I did not fully understand what was being said I checked my interpretation with the interviewee: ‘Are you saying, then...?’ I hoped that class-related topics would emerge naturally during the course of the interviews and tried to guard against the danger of interpreting as ‘class’ effects statements which might more accurately be described as effects of gender, age or even of student life itself. However, as the interviews progressed I realised that a stance of extreme neutrality could not always be maintained and this created a dilemma. For example, I interviewed a male student who had entered education as a result of losing his job during the period of pit closures in the coal mining industry and who felt keenly aware of his working-class origins and rather out of place in a university setting. This was, in fact, one of the main areas of concern raised by him during his first interview. By the time I interviewed him in his second year at Old University he had adopted a position of extreme intellectualisation of the concept of ‘class’: class was argued to be an ‘ambiguous’ term and people should not be categorised in this way. In attempting to discover what lay behind this change of heart, I indicated that social class was a major area of interest to me. ‘I’ve noticed!’, he chuckled. I decided that it was much better to declare my interests to those I was interviewing but to indicate that I was not assuming that social class was of any importance to them or of any relevance in contemporary social life; this was something that I hoped that they could help me to establish.

#### 4.5.3 The Emergence of Reciprocity

Interviewing the students over a long period of time made it impossible for me to maintain a distanced, ‘neutral’ stance with regard to the problems they were



experiencing. Knowing that I was a university lecturer, they clearly expected me to understand what they were going through and, on a number of occasions, asked me for advice and guidance. Like Oakley, I realised that there would be 'no intimacy without reciprocity' (1981: 49). In her longitudinal study of motherhood, which involved a number of in-depth interviews with women, Oakley found that she had to offer something to make sure that the interviewees were prepared to continue to participate in the research (ibid). She also noted that finding out about people in interviews was best achieved when the relationship between researcher and researched was 'non-hierarchical' and when the researcher invested some of his or her identity in it (ibid: 41). I adopted a reciprocal relationship with the interviewees when called to do so, giving them advice about study techniques, possible career paths and university procedures.

#### 4.5.4 A Commitment to Open-Endedness

In the majority of cases there was little difficulty in sustaining an interview of between forty minutes to an hour; a few of the respondents were, in fact, were so eager to talk that, when transcribed, their interviews looked rather like dramatic monologues. In hindsight, I wondered whether I should have been more directive than I had been about the topics of conversation, particularly in the later interviews when I had, to a large extent, identified the areas of maximum importance to my research. However, at the time, I adopted a strategy of allowing the interviewees to explore in depth the areas that were of the most importance to them (although I made sure that I probed fully the areas that I wanted to know about). The result was that I accumulated a great bank of biographical material covering broken homes, child abuse and, in one case, a history of high-class prostitution which, although poignant, could not be fully used in my thesis.

#### 4.5.5 Reluctant Interviewees

Some interviewees seemed far happier to talk about themselves and their hopes and feelings as they progressed through the course than others and a few of the male interviewees seemed reluctant to reveal their thoughts and feelings. These were generally older men with a history of manual work which, I thought, may have encouraged a 'macho' male exterior incongruent with displays of emotion. I persevered with these interviews - which were, at times, rather hard to sustain - gaining a few insights but feeling, on the whole, that I was only scratching the surface. One



interviewee, for example, withdrew from the course and I interviewed him at his home. Fellow students had commented on his alcoholism and failure to cope with the academic demands of the course but none of this was explicitly revealed during the interview, although oblique references to problems with the course were made. The case of this student made me aware of the need to pay great attention to the data and to follow up leads and ambiguous comments made by the interviewees. However, not all the male interviewees were reluctant to talk about their problems and one insisted in each interview in detailing the sexual frustration he had experienced since breaking up with his partner, which was rather disturbing at the time but did highlight some of the problems that mature students may have in integrating fully with the student culture.

#### **4.6 Interview Analysis**

Each interview transcript was read a number of times during the course of the study and notes were made to inform subsequent interviews. However, formal, systematic analysis did not begin until all interviews had been completed.

##### **4.6.1 The Problem of Quantity**

This was, in hindsight, not an ideal situation; the processes of interviewing and analysis should have occurred in tandem but time constraints had not allowed this. The outcome was that, at the completion of interviewing, there was a vast quantity of transcribed material to deal with. By this stage, Kvale's advice about what to do with a thousand pages of transcripts (which I exceeded by a good margin) had a hollow ring to it: 'Never conduct interview research in such a way that you find yourself in a situation where you ask such a question' (1996: 176). Kvale gives the reason for this in the following terms:

One thousand pages of transcripts is generally too much to handle. The material is too extensive to overview and to work out the depth of the meaning of what was said. The analysis is too time-consuming and is likely to lead to a superficial product, unfinished due to external time constraints.  
(Kvale, 1996: 179)

Undoubtedly Kvale is right but it is really not too difficult to accumulate this number of transcribed pages in a longitudinal study. Needless to say, the analysis of this amount of

material did initially pose a huge problem and the principles and practical strategies on which the analysis was based needed to be thought through carefully. The interview analysis took place in a number of stages:

#### 4.6.2 Stage One: experimenting with methods of analysis

The first interview was analysed through detailed reading of the transcript and listening to the tape, after which eighteen broad themes were identified and recorded through a cut-and-paste method. However, this proved to be far too blunt an instrument, lacking analysis and depth. The second interview was analysed using phenomenologically-based techniques (Ashworth, 1987, 1996). The interview was broken down into meaning units which were then interpreted and themes and sub-themes identified. Using this method, the data were closely scrutinised and reflection and analysis embedded at a minute level. Sixty themes emerged from the interview. However, I became concerned about the problem of bias: themes and sub-themes were identified **after** analysis of meaning units had taken place and I felt the necessity at all stages of referring back to the original transcript to ensure that I was not misinterpreting or reading things in that were not really there. The process seemed to be unnecessarily elaborate and time-consuming for my purposes.

For the third interview I considered discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1995) but rejected it as possibly inappropriate for an approach which aimed at combining macro and micro levels of analysis. I began to analyse the interview from a grounded theory perspective (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), using open coding, axial coding and selective coding. This seemed to have the benefits of close textual scrutiny, careful reflection and analysis at all stages, and theoretical sensitivity. However, it again appeared to be over-elaborate and, I felt, rather artificial. For example, I had asked the interviewee about her experiences of the first few weeks of University. The initial concepts arising from this included: enrolling; attending; information-gathering; making friends; becoming familiar with the campus, and so on. The category identified for these concepts was 'settling in'. Taking one of the concepts - 'information gathering' - it was possible to identify properties and dimensions as suggested by Strauss and Corbin: the properties would include frequency, volume and whether or not the information gathering was self-initiated or other-initiated; the

dimensions would range from 'high' to 'low' for the first two of these properties and from 'always' to 'never' for the third. I coded the first two pages or so of the interview in this way but became concerned about the seeming artificiality of the process. In addition, some of the data were hard to categorise in this way and I began to question whether I had pitched the concepts at the right level: perhaps the concepts should be more general, in which case 'settling in' would be a concept rather than a category. I decided that this method of analysis was not appropriate for the open-ended and wide-ranging nature of the interviews I was analysing.

#### 4.6.3 Stage Two: drawing up a coding scheme

After consideration of exactly what it was I was trying to do and how I could best do it, and drawing upon Wolcott's succinct definition of the process of interview analysis as 'the identification of essential features and the systematic description of interrelationships among them' (Wolcott, 1994: 12), I drew up a schedule for the analysis based upon:

- A close reading of the text - reading through each transcript at least three times before making any detailed analysis and reflecting on what had been said. At this stage, I would try not to make assumptions but just to **notice**.
- Annotation of the transcripts: recording detailed comments, and identifying potential themes and links.
- Development of typologies and tentative hypotheses to be verified, disconfirmed or modified by subsequent data. For example, interactional typologies, grounded in the data, related to the interviewees' responses to the culture of higher education (conversion, compartmentalisation or rejection) and responses to the experience of disjunction in higher education (denial, rationalization, adjustment or rejection). Structural typologies included institutional strategies for dealing with mature students (integration or special provision). An initial hypothesis, again grounded in the data, was that the greater the commitment of mature, working-class students to higher education as a means to self-fulfilment and personal development, the greater the degree of potential degree of disjunction between past and present self concepts and between past and present familial and social relationships. Additionally, the greater the commitment of the institution to the traditional university culture, the greater may be the degree of disjunction experienced by mature, working-class students - so that

students at the college may have fewer experiences of disjunction than those at the old university.

I still needed to devise a practical strategy for managing the volume of data I had and organising it in a methodical way. By this stage I had read and 'picked apart' five interviews, making detailed notes and observations on each, but had difficulty integrating the insights gained. I decided to develop a detailed coding scheme to begin imposing some order on the data .

On the basis of a careful examination of five interviews, seven thematic categories, distinguishing between student experiences at each level of their degree courses, were identified (see Appendix 4). These categories comprised an initial attempt to build in a consideration of the temporal dimensions of the students' educational 'careers', although I recognised that the categories were externally imposed and might not coincide with the subjective time trajectories experienced by the students themselves. The themes, which emerged from both the concerns of the students and my judgement about other possible themes that I might encounter in the remaining interviews, were as follows:

- a) Pre-Access Biography
- b) The Access Course
- c) Application to Higher Education
- d) Transfer to Higher Education: the First Year
- e) Experience of Higher Education: the Second Year
- f) Experience of Higher Education: the Third Year
- g) Leaving Higher Education: the Future

These seven categories were further divided into eighty-four subcategories following the method proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994).

The transcripts of nine interviews (the interviews of three students at different institutions of higher education over the three years of their degree courses) were organized into these eighty-four subcategories. The subcategories were amended and added to as the interview analysis progressed. Commentaries, drawing out the major findings in each set of interviews, were written and a comparison of the three sets of

interviews undertaken.

The organisation of the material in this way helped to impose some order of what was beginning to feel like an unmanageably large amount of raw data and made the identification of relevant (and not so relevant) themes much easier. For example, the transcripts for one of the interviewees totalled fifty-three pages. It proved impossible to deal with the information contained in these pages without organising it in some way and the use of pre-determined categories under which the information could be grouped proved extremely useful. The visual impact of the material organized in this way allowed me to see at a glance, from the volume of material in each category, how important each of the themes was for the interviewees.

The procedure facilitated both a detailed analysis of the transcripts of each interviewee and a comparison and contrast of interviewees in terms of areas of common interest and similarities and differences of experience. It allowed for the identification of themes that had not previously been noticed and for those which were of little significance to the interviewees themselves. In addition, themes which for one interviewee were highly significant - for example, social class - could be seen as 'silences' in the coded transcripts of the other interviewees and this in itself posed interesting questions.

Nevertheless, I became increasingly aware of a tension in the analytical process between, on the one hand, taking the student's perspective, analysing each interview in terms of his or her concerns and topics of interest and, on the other hand, identifying themes around which the information could be organized. The latter procedure would involve ignoring areas of concern to the students themselves if these did not appear, at first sight, to be relevant to the research focus. Such an approach would, I feel, have been an unacceptable procedure if carried out early in the analysis.

#### 4.6.4 Stage Three: streamlining the scheme

Having analysed ten interviews in their entirety - some more than once and using different techniques - I felt justified in identifying the areas of most relevance to my research and pursuing these in the remaining transcripts. Accordingly, eighteen further interviews were analysed by concentrating specifically on a number of key themes,

identified through the intensive analysis already carried out of the earlier interviews (see Appendix 5). The identification of these themes represented a move beyond the simple, chronological organisation of the data that had been used in Stage Two and the new thematic categories were more sensitive to the interviewee's perceptions of self-development over the three years, drawing out the changes in self identity and strategies for dealing with discontinuity and disjunction. This new coding scheme did not preclude the identification of new themes and perspectives on the data as the analysis proceeded and sensitivity to this possibility was maintained throughout.

To check the validity of the themes identified above, I compared them with those which emerged from the analyses of the first interviews of 'Margaret' and 'Julie' in order to make sure that these themes could all be incorporated within the new scheme and found that they could. This new, streamlined coding scheme facilitated a more speedy analysis. Material which did not appear to be relevant to the research area was left out. However, an awareness of the possibility that 'irrelevant' material may, on reflection, prove to be of importance was always maintained.

#### 4.6.5 Stage Four: adding a quantitative dimension

By the end of stage three I was finding that the analysis of new interviews was not revealing much that had not already been discovered. Twenty-seven interviews had been analysed in depth (some of them more than once, using different techniques) and I decided that I needed to deal with the remaining interviews in a more summary fashion. In addition, I was beginning to realise that, if I were to be able to make any claim about what 'most students' or 'few students' felt or said, I needed to have an additional method of recording my findings.

I drew up a grid. Respondents were identified by pseudonym down the side and, along the top, were recorded key categories of information to be looked for. Six categories of information were identified: respondent details (twelve sub-categories); the return to education (eight sub-categories); difficulties in higher education (seven sub-categories); feelings of disjunction (eleven sub-categories); changes in the self (eleven sub-categories); and reasons for withdrawal (six sub-categories). I added the information about the interviews already analysed to this grid and then moved on to analyse the



remaining forty-three interviews, ticking the relevant boxes on the grid and writing a commentary detailing the major features of each set of interviews as I progressed. Having completed this stage, I felt reasonably confident that no themes had emerged that had not already been identified by the end of stage three: I had discovered only variations on these themes and additional ‘evidence’ to support my earlier ideas. In addition, I felt that I was able to make some quantitative statements about my findings.

#### **4.7 Writing up the Data**

As argued in Chapter 3, there is no absolute truth and the data reported here could potentially be interpreted in a number of ways, depending on the focus of interest. As a consequence, wherever possible I include quotations from the interviewees, to let them tell their own stories, so that my interpretations stand side-by-side with the ‘evidence’. The data is reported in an order which is partly chronological and partly thematic. The early educational experiences and attitudes of the interviewees are considered in the next chapter and this is followed, in Chapter 6, by a discussion of their reasons for returning to education and their accounts of the transition to higher education. In Chapter 7 there is an account of the difficulties they experienced in adapting to the ‘academic stance’ and this is followed, in Chapter 8, by a discussion of the changes in selfhood and the relationships with significant others that emerged over the three years of the research.

Chapter 9 is a case study of one of the students who withdrew during the research. The reasons for choosing a case study as the primary vehicle for this chapter are as follows:

- A case study provides the opportunity to explore the ways in which various factors inter-relate over time to culminate in the decision to withdraw.
- The thesis up until this chapter is concerned primarily with the examination of general trends and the conceptual framework through which these can be analysed. As such, it misses some of the detail and the subtle ways in which the student experience changes over the course of the degree. A case study is able to address these areas.
- A case study presents the opportunity to explore, refine and extend the conceptual framework that has been developed earlier in the thesis.

### **5.1 Introduction**

The majority of the interviewees had left school with few or no educational qualifications. Of the six interviewees with middle-class origins - Jenny (32)<sup>1</sup>, Sarah (39), Paula (30), Brian (46), Shirley (42) and Ben (26) - three had stayed at school long enough to take A Levels but had not done well enough to get into University (Jenny, Paula and Brian); the fourth (Ben) had obtained three A Levels but decided not to go further. The remaining two middle-class interviewees (Sarah and Shirley) had left school with few qualifications. Only three of the twenty-one interviewees from working-class backgrounds had achieved five or more O Levels at school. Of these, one - Maureen (34) - went on to study A Levels but failed them. The remaining two - Rose (34) and Paul (40) - did not consider staying on at school.

The return to education for the majority of the interviewees was a highly significant life event which was frequently accompanied by conflicting emotions so that aspirations for the future and expectations of personal growth and development were often offset by perceptions of risk and fears of failure. This chapter examines the early educational experiences of the interviewees, their reasons for returning to education and their experiences in applying and transferring to higher education, drawing out the relevance of the concepts explored in the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2.

### **5.2 Unsettled Early Lives**

A number of interviewees (four middle-class and five working-class students) reported that, as children, they had had unsettled family or school backgrounds characterised by parental divorce or illness, domestic violence or sexual abuse which had disrupted their schooling. Paula, for example, had grown up in a middle-class family characterised by marital breakdown and the mental instability of one of her parents and Ben, also from a middle-class background, had attended a public school but disliked it and 'rebelled'. Two other middle-class students similarly spoke of disruption to their schooling, Sarah identifying a 'hectic' home life and moving house twice as reasons for lack of progress

at school and Shirley, who had passed the Eleven Plus to attend a secondary technical school, reporting that she had hated school and ultimately been expelled. However, it is in the accounts of some of the working-class interviewees that the most graphic details of unsettled early lives can be found. A brief description of two of these will illustrate this point.

### 5.2.1 Peter

Peter, born in 1944 and fifty at the time of entry to higher education in 1993, had spent most of his early life in a children's home where, he claimed, child abuse was common:

...there was one particular woman who was quite vicious and she was actually charged and she would pick kids up and throw them across the room in to the bath, and she didn't last very long because one of the other staff saw her.

As Peter grew older he was periodically fostered out, with the consequence that he never stayed very long in any one school and became a persistent truant. At the age of eleven or twelve he ran away from the children's home with two other boys and the head of the children's home, whom he described as a 'strict disciplinarian', wreaked a terrible revenge on them when they eventually returned:

He played hell with us and then he says: 'You're going to get the cane'. So we had the cane but it was the way it was inflicted that was detrimental. He lined us up and his wife was in the room. He took us into the toilets; when I say 'toilets', they were stalls and then there was a door where you walked in.....And he lined [us] up in front of him and then his wife came in and she went and stood by this stall and said: 'Right, first one'. And he got this - he got [one of the other boys] and he removed his trousers and his wife held him and then he took a flying leap up with this cane. Six - and he did it to all of us and, when it was over, we couldn't sit down for about a month, you know. But we didn't run away again, you know. Now, at the time, I thought: 'Bloody hell fire', you know. And it affected the other staff because I could see, this is what happened at the time, they couldn't look at you, you know....So why they didn't do anything, I don't know.

After this incident, Peter was placed in the 'Remove' at school - a class for children with 'problems'. He recalls that he thoroughly enjoyed this: 'I had such a relationship with the people there - you know, the other kids. I really enjoyed it, you know - you weren't stretched; you just turned up and did your work'. This period, however, marked

the end of any chance of educational achievement: whilst other children had concerned parents who put pressure on the school to 'promote' them out of the Remove when their work improved, Peter remained a permanent fixture. Despite being at the top of the class, he stayed there until he was transferred to another school and, by this time, any motivation he had to study had evaporated:

I mean, there's no incentive there. I mean, if somebody gave me the option of either sitting at the back of the classroom with people I didn't know or going for a walk, I'm afraid I'll go for a walk. And I didn't do it just once - I was away all the time, actually and I used to spend my time round the park, you know, the lake. And I used to know the guy who stoked the boilers; he stoked the boilers up at [the] home and he also stoked the boilers at the park. And I used to go down and smoke cigarettes and we used to have a good time.

The effects of these early life experiences were not recognised by Peter at the time and he remained ambivalent about them, claiming that they had broadened his outlook and enabled him to take care of himself. He commented: 'You don't feel deprived or anything - perhaps love, yes, but, then again, you don't appreciate that you're missing it'. Nevertheless, the emotional scars inflicted on him, together with later life experiences, culminated in a long-standing mental illness which was the major factor in his withdrawal from the higher education course that he had struggled to attain.

### 5.2.2 Bella

Bella, born in 1962 and aged thirty at the time of the first interview, grew up in what she describes as a 'dysfunctional' working-class family, living with a violent father whom her mother subsequently divorced. She then moved into a council house to be 'brought up on Benefit' with a step-father who sexually-abused her:

...my home life was dreadful. I mean, I'll be straight with you, my mother battered me; my step-father sexually abused me; my own father abandoned me. Right from being very, very small, we were all abused children, all of us. And so I found living in reality terribly painful and what I would do to take myself away from what was really a horrifying situation was I would, I would transport myself into daydreams.

Books fuelled these daydreams and Bella became an avid reader; by the age of ten her reading age was well above the average but, nevertheless, she was 'having real problems

at school'. At home, she was forced to take on her mother's role, cooking and looking after her brothers and sisters when her mother was absent. Bella recalled the consequences of this:

...I matured very early and I didn't really have very much to say to children of my own age and I stood apart from them. And so when you're different and you stand apart, you end up being bullied. And so there was all that, you know, as well. So going to school was a nightmare. I mean, I just remember those years with such pain. There wasn't anywhere that I regarded as being safe when I was a kid. I didn't want to be at home. I mean, I call him [names her step-father] now but I used to call him 'daddy' because I was in his sort of clutches and I couldn't escape from him. And I didn't want to go to school because I was afraid of other children. And, actually, it's quite painful thinking about it. And the only peace I had was walking home - between the two.

After a violent argument with her mother when she was seventeen, Bella decided to leave home and go to London where she initially worked as a cashier and then, with a friend, moved into prostitution:

I kind of knew I was going to, from being about twelve. I used to read in the newspapers about high-class call girls and I really thought that that was the only thing that I would be able to do. I thought: 'I'll be able to do that' and they made a lot of money and I thought that that would be something I would be well qualified for. And so when she [her friend] mentioned this, I said 'I think we should'. And that's what we did, except she wasn't very good at it and I made a lot of money....I was able to make a very, very large amount of money which sort of turned my head and I also mixed in company that wasn't very sane - the other girls I was working with weren't very sane. And we all kind of thought we were rich, you know, because we were spending a lot of time with very rich men. So it got to the point where I would walk into sort of very expensive restaurants and spend a hundred pounds a head on a meal, you know, or that I would be shopping in designer shops...

Ten years as a high-class prostitute in London brought Bella sufficient financial rewards to enable her to buy a house when she moved back to South Yorkshire but also took its toll on her mental health. When I first interviewed Bella she was undergoing psychotherapy for depression and recovering from alcohol and drug abuse, although this did not prevent her from finishing her degree course.

These two biographies stand out from the rest, marked by a degree of human misery that does not characterise the early lives of the other interviewees. Nevertheless, stories of broken homes and disrupted schooling - of a less dramatic but nevertheless significant nature - were referred to by a third of the interviewees and must have had a negative impact on early educational progress. In addition, however, and in line with the findings of other studies reported in Chapter 1, the working-class interviewees drew attention to a value system and expected life trajectory in which higher education had no place.

### 5.3 Class-Based Attitudes Towards Education

Many of the working-class respondents expressed attitudes and values in relation to their early educational experiences which were not present in the interviews of their middle-class counterparts, for whom educational success and transfer to higher education had been an expected trajectory which, for one reason or another, had not been realised. In distinction, for the vast majority of the working-class students, a life trajectory premised on educational qualifications had not been expected or even desired.

#### 5.3.1 University is 'not for the likes of us'

A feeling which was generally expressed by the working-class interviewees was that, for them, university was not an option - it was 'not even in the equation' (Kevin, 30). This was partially a consequence of failure in the Eleven Plus examinations but even those who had attended grammar schools or achieved some measure of success in O Levels expressed the same view. Many spoke of the sheer impossibility of even *thinking* about university - bearing out the criticisms of the Rational Action perspective discussed in 1.3.1. June (27), for example, said, 'I'd never considered going to university: it didn't even - it never entered my head at school' and Margaret elaborated on this:

... I don't know anyone that went to university...I mean, all the people I knew at school, even the girl who we knew, every exam, would always come top, never went to university. So, to me, it never seemed attainable. It was never mentioned at school; it was never talked about. I mean, you were encouraged to stay on [into Year 11] but that seemed to be the end of it. And then you were sort of - when you talked about careers, it was, 'Well, you've got factories, you've got shops, you've got offices'. And, really, that was about it: there was



Some interviewees made an explicit connection between social class background and the possibility - or impossibility - of a university education. Pam (37), for example, had thought that only 'elite types' went to university. Others commented that they had felt that a university education was not for working-class people: 'I don't think that I ever thought that university was for the working class' (Margaret, 41). Bella (30) pointed out: 'People in my family just don't go to university' and even Tina, who had attended a secondary technical school, expressed a similar view. Also of note in this quotation is Tina's adoption of Lockwood's concept of 'us and them':

I passed my eleven Plus, went on to a Grammar school, but it was never mentioned about university. I just thought that people like us, from...where our family live, don't go to university....So I did think it was like 'us and them', you know – not for the likes of us to go. (Tina, 38)

A common perception was that those who went to university were exceptionally bright. This perception is understandable for those, such as Joe, who went to secondary school just after the Second World War when a university education was the privilege of a small elite:

Certainly, in my younger days, more was expected to go and get a job and earn money, although opportunities were available for people to go on the higher education trail, if you like. But not many did and it was considered a privilege if people did, and they were the really, really bright ones; they'd be the brighter ones. And the others, it was accepted that they were consigned to leaving school and getting a job, and that was the thing to do. (Joe, 54)

However, younger students expressed a similar feeling. Sally, for example, commented:

And university – place what I thought boffins went to. You'd got to be really brainy – almost professor-ish – to go to university. No-one at school ever talked about it; even the teachers never talked about going to university. (Sally, 26)

Occasionally, working-class interviewees explicitly associated qualities such as 'brainy', 'really intelligent' or 'academic' with 'middle class', denying the existence of these qualities in 'ordinary' people. This indicates that, for many of them, 'intelligence' - at

least, the kind of intelligence associated with educational success - was seen as class-based. Tina (38), for example, said, 'I always thought you'd got to be really intelligent and, I don't know, academic and, I don't know, *not ordinary people like me*' and Susan, born in 1971, voiced a similar sentiment:

I thought the people who went to university were really *brainy and middle class* and everything and I didn't realise that it weren't so until I came here myself.....you feel as though you're not brainy enough to come to university or that your experiences aren't relevant to university. (Susan, 23)

Quotations such as these can be used to illustrate the process of *misrecognition*, discussed in Chapter 2, which gives legitimacy to power relationships by making them appear just and inevitable. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the working-class denigration of academic knowledge and educational institutions also arises from a world view which involves an alternative set of priorities and values.

### 5.3.2 The Importance of Practical Intelligence

A general sentiment expressed, explicitly or implicitly, by some of the working-class interviewees was the idea that school had not been important to them and had been a 'waste of time'. Tina (38), for example, said: 'It were just something you'd got to do' and Sally (26) summarised her view of school in the following terms: 'It didn't matter to me; it didn't seem relevant to have any qualifications. I always thought: "Well, what does it matter?"'. One of the reasons for this was that academic knowledge was seen as essentially *irrelevant* to everyday life for working-class people. June, for example, graphically illustrated the working-class attitude to education displayed by her father:

...like, my dad's views – I suppose they're working class sort-of views on education. It's not, it's not a total waste of money, but I don't think – he wouldn't really see something like sociology as being that useful because it's not, it's not really applicable to anything straightforward; it's not like learning a trade. I mean, if you're learning a trade, you're learning how to make some[thing]. He's very practical, you know. And, I'd say, working-class people think more, they think more in those kind of terms than just thinking for the sake of thinking, or just for the sort of pleasure of thinking or reading books just to, like, you know, exercise your brain a bit....I think they think that money put into those kind of subjects, or like philosophy and things like that, it's like: 'What can you bloody do with it at the end of the day?', you know. You can't work anything out. There's no proof at the end of the day. Whereas, if you learnt

about a piece of - [putting] a nail into a piece of wood and you make a chair, then you've got something out, you know, to show. And I'd say that is a working-class view. (June, 27)

This view of academic knowledge as not 'useful', practical' or 'applicable', as 'thinking for the sake of thinking', at least partially explains the lack of importance attributed to school by the majority of the working-class interviewees. For some, particularly the older students in the study, this attitude appeared to be extremely entrenched. Joe, for example, having retired from a long and successful working life and having no need to buttress his income with part-time work, felt entirely justified in pursuing an academic interest that had eluded him during his time at a grammar school. Nevertheless, his first thought had been that this study should be of 'something useful' in the field of engineering, in which he had worked, although he subsequently decided to do something completely different to this in order to 'broaden his horizons'.

The emphasis on 'useful' learning lends support to the argument, discussed in Chapter 2, that, for working-class people, value is invested in practical rather than symbolic mastery and that they therefore invest in 'commonsense' rather than 'schoolwise intelligence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 119; Luttrell, 1989: 37). Susan (23), for example, argued that 'working-class people and people who aren't academics have *practical intelligence*' and commented unfavourably on academics such as Bertrand Russell who 'didn't even know how to make a cup of tea'.

### 5.3.3 The Centrality of Life Experience

When speaking of their early educational experiences, many of the working-class interviewees indicated that academic success was of less value than life experience, which allowed a 'different' kind of learning (Pam, 37). The perceived cloistered existence of children who moved from school to higher education was looked upon with disapproval. Pam, for example, spoke disparagingly of a proposal to shift A Level education in the city from colleges into the local schools, commenting:

You could get some kids that, up to eighteen, they've never been off the estate because all they've been is to the school at the end of the road...They won't be prepared to see the outside world. (Pam, 37)

The centrality of life experience may partially account for the emphasis on going out and having a good time whilst you are young, which most of the working-class students referred to. Tina, for example, described how school had been a social, rather than academic, experience:

It were my social life, going to school. And I didn't try: I just did what basic work [I had to do] and didn't, really, didn't push myself at all. Too busy enjoying myself and going out and everything at night, and smoking and drinking – just being a typical teenager! And, sort of, if we got any homework, just did the minimum homework, and that were it. (Tina, 38)

This fits well with other research, such as that by Willis, who found that the working-class boys in his study spent their time avoiding school and 'having a laff' whenever they could (Willis, 1977: 29). On a related point, Susan displayed surprise at what she perceived to be a 'delay' in growing up of young people who went to university straight from school:

I remember when people I knew come back from university, when they were eighteen, after their first semester, come back for Christmas, and then they'd started doing what I was doing at fourteen and they thought it was great. And I thought: 'Oh God, I did that, like, four years ago!' But, I don't know, *it just seemed like a delay in their living experience*. (Susan, 23)

This attitude towards those who took education seriously at school is very similar to that expressed by the working-class 'lads' in Willis's study, who felt a sense of superiority to the 'ear'oles' because they spent their school days working rather than 'having a laff' (Willis, 1977: 29). Yet the preoccupation with pleasure, with going out and having a good time in your youth, was not necessarily based on heedlessness of the future but on culturally-based preferences and a rational calculation of future employment prospects.

#### 5.3.4 A Preference for Gainful Work over Study

Many of the working-class interviewees - even the younger ones born in the late 1960s - spoke of a buoyant job market at the time that they left school which had reinforced their view that educational qualifications were not necessary, commenting on the ease with which jobs could be obtained and the comparatively high level of remuneration. Tom (55), for example, who became a miner, described how 'you could just walk into

jobs' when he left school and Tina (38) and Pam (37), who both entered office work, recalled: 'Oh, there were jobs a-plenty then. You got an interview for every job you applied for' and 'the money was there for you to enjoy yourselves'. Even Barbara, who was rather younger and grew up in the South of England, had a similar experience: 'I had a job before I left school and then I just went from one job to another and, I mean, it was good money at sixteen' (Barbara, 24). Qualifications gained at school were therefore seen as unnecessary:

...the majority of my friends, like, left school at sixteen. Nobody went [to higher education]. You got a job, you got money, you know – it was great! No-one regretted what we did. You got paid, you had lots of money, you know – you all got jobs. You'd no need for it, you know – you hadn't the need for qualifications. (Pam, 37)

This attitude was endorsed by working-class interviewees of all ages. Joe (54), for example, had 'just wanted to earn money and enjoy life'; Sally (26) had 'just wanted a life and some money and just to go out' and Susan (23) had similarly rejected school because, at the time, she had felt that 'life were more interesting than bloody maths and stuff like that'. This perspective on life was reinforced by the influence of others - peers, parents and, occasionally, teachers.

#### 5.3.5 The Influence of Others

Bearing out the classic studies of the influence of family and friends on schooling (for example, Douglas, 1964), many interviewees referred to the influence of friends and family on their attitudes towards education in their youth. Anne (42), for example, although in the 'A' class at school, described being influenced by her friends in the 'C' class, for whom education 'wasn't important'. Sally reported a similar experience:

....I got in with a group who lived round here and we were playing truant and, you know, I was just not bothered. I mean, I knew that I'd got a job waiting for me when I came out, so I wasn't bothered. (Sally, 26)

There also appeared to be a general lack of encouragement from parents and, in some instances, teachers. The parents of many of the interviewees had clearly concurred with the view that education was not very important:

There wasn't really much talk about education in the house, you know. I mean, I suppose I was quite brainy...but there just wasn't the encouragement, you know. (Anne, 42)

For some of the female interviewees, there was a gender as well as a class dimension at work as parents saw education as even more of a waste of time for girls than it was for boys:

And, you know, my mother, she was saying: 'Well, it's not such a big deal because you're a girl and girls, you know, don't have to do well academically - it's more important for brothers: they're the ones that have got to go to university; they're the ones that are going to get married and bring up a family. You'll grow up and you'll meet a man and you'll get married and you'll have kids and, you know, what's the point of it all? You know, why bother working so hard?' So, in a way, she's, like - well, both my parents are, like, a disincentive. (Maureen, 34)

Other parents appeared to be more positive about the benefits of education but, nevertheless, had aspirations other than academic success for their children and little knowledge of the education system. Particularly notable was their lack of involvement in their children's schooling :

My parents don't know, really, much about the educational system...I think they were just thrilled that we both passed the Eleven Plus because living...where my dad does, not a lot of kids passed their Eleven Plus. So that, to them, were enough; it were just we passed the Eleven Plus and they were happy with that. Only careers advice I got from my mum was: 'You don't want to be a hairdresser with your skin complaint'. That was it, that was. And my dad didn't even know what school I went to, I don't think. He never went to the school and, you know, it were just like a separate part of our lives, school work. He never looked at our school books or anything. So we didn't have encouragement, no. (Tina, 38)

In some cases, teachers also appeared to have had low expectations of their working-class pupils. Tom, born in 1938, noted that teachers had expected him to become a miner and therefore had not bothered much with his education:

...my father was a miner; his father was a miner; so I don't think they paid much attention to your education. So they had you marked down as a miner; so they just give you a basic education and that was that. (Tom, 55)



However, a few younger students also reported similar experiences. Rose (34), for example, who left school with six O Levels, said that her teachers had tried to dissuade her from taking them:

...all the teachers hadn't encouraged me. It was: 'Well, you'd better be going for your CSE' and all that; 'you won't get your grades'. And I didn't really get the encouragement from them, I think. (Rose, 34)

Other interviewees reported similar attitudes on the part of teachers, whom they perceived as 'giving up on them' at an early age. As the quotations above illustrate, there was an expectation of life trajectories which did not involve academic success.

#### **5.4 Expected Life Trajectories**

Commonly described by students from working-class backgrounds were cultural expectations about acceptable life trajectories which had clearly influenced their attitudes to school. The acceptable trajectory for males was a job - preferably an apprenticeship - sometimes followed by training through day release and college courses. As Kevin (30) put it: 'you just sort of survive going through secondary school, then you get a job'. This trajectory was followed even where a degree of success had been achieved at school. Paul (40), for example, enjoyed school and achieved five O Levels (despite a lack of encouragement from his parents, whose ambitions for him rose no higher than an apprenticeship) but chose to leave to go into the army. Similarly, Joe, despite passing the Eleven Plus and attending a grammar school just after the Second World War, left at fifteen with no qualifications to become a general mining apprentice. He commented:

I suppose it was part of the culture, really, that you'd leave school and you got a job. You had a good time, then you met a girl, you got married, settled down and raised a family, and that was your life mapped out for you. I suppose that's the culture, yes. (Joe, 54)

For females, the expected trajectory was: 'leave school, go out to work, get married, have your kids and so on and so forth' (Diane, 42). A return to the paid employment when the children were older was not necessarily anticipated:

...when mine [children] were little, you packed up work and you didn't go back. And you didn't really think – do you know, it never crossed your mind! – that you might go back one day. I don't think that thought ever entered your head...(Pam, 37)

Some - but by all means not all - of the interviewees later came to regret their failure to take up the educational opportunities offered to them in their youth.

## 5.5 Reflections on School

Many of the working-class interviewees expressed no regret for wasted educational opportunities in their youth:

..I've had a really happy time, so I might not have been a happy person if I'd, you know [gone to university]. I might not have met my husband if I'd gone to university or something and I might have been a totally different person and I'm quite happy as I am.... (Tina, 38)

For others, such as Jack (42), there was an attitude of pragmatic resignation or fatalism: 'I tend to be a bit fatalistic - it's gone and happened, so why regret it?'. But regret was the feeling uppermost in the reflections of some of the interviewees. One of the reasons for this regret was the difficulties involved in studying as a mature student, as June remarked:

Sometimes I think: 'God, I wish I'd done my A' levels straight from school', you know, and just done it. When I see these younger ones who've come straight from school and they're getting it over and done with, and it's so easy, they're just doing it, and I'm thinking: 'God, I've just done every difficult path there is to take; I've bloody took it', you know. But then, in some ways, I'm not, you know - I had a lot of good times, a lot of good experiences, you know. (June, 27)

For some, the feeling of lost opportunities was acute. Anne, for example, had felt this since leaving school:

...I've always had this terrible regret inside me that I'd thrown away this chance, you know, to get some qualifications, especially when filling in application forms and things, you know. I really regretted what I had done but, of course, when you're young, and at the time, you don't think about these

Similarly, after ‘wasting’ her educational opportunities in early life, Margaret had had a pervasive feeling of ‘something missing’:

I just knew that from leaving school there was something missing and in the back of my mind I always knew it was education; I knew what it was. I stayed on at school but then wasted it because friends at school had left and they were earning money and so I thought: ‘Well’, you know, ‘I’m not really bothered about staying on at school’. So I wasted it. And so, then, once I’d left school, there was always this thing missing. (Margaret, 41)

Some of the working-class interviewees, particularly the female ones, had spent many years at ‘night school’ trying to make up for this ‘missing’ element in their lives and a number of male interviewees had continued their education in the form of ‘day release’ training that had been arranged as part of their employment. Nevertheless, enrolment on an Access course was generally viewed as qualitatively different to previous educational experiences and marked a turning point in the lives of most of the interviewees.

## **5.6 The Return to Education**

### **5.6.1 A ‘Turning Point’**

In line with previous studies, discussed in Chapter 1, enrolment on the Access route was, in hindsight, attributed to a significant life change that had acted as a catalyst. This significant life change was often, in the case of the male students in particular, redundancy, the threat of redundancy, or retirement; only one male student gave up a job to pursue a route into higher education. This was Ben (26), a middle-class student who had attended a public school but had not gone to university, despite gaining three A Levels. Ben had had a number of well-paid jobs since leaving school but realised that he was insecure without qualifications as he grew older. It was this insecurity that gave him the impetus to leave his employment and seek entry to higher education. Some males commented that they would not have given up paid employment to go back to education. However, four female interviewees had given up jobs: Julie (31, post-woman), Susan (23, sewing machinist), Bella (30, shop assistant) and Wendy (40, casual part-time work).

For female students, a major catalyst for the return to education was children growing up and an increasing recognition that entry to a reasonably well-paid and satisfying job in the 1990s was not easy without educational qualifications. Relationship problems were also explicitly mentioned by one student as a reason for pursuing a degree: 'I'll be perfectly honest - the total aim for me is to be in a position to go and make a life for myself and my son' (Anne, 42). Anne also illustrated how important life changes, and the opportunity to reflect upon these, could provide a catalyst for a return to education:

For many years, I had the regrets [about wasted educational opportunities] but I didn't particularly think about going back because I was in employment and, you know, busy. As I say, it was really after I had my little boy and, really, when I was forced to be at home and really had a chance to sort of have a look at my life that I thought, 'I want to do something about this'. (Anne, 42)

For some students, higher education was a goal from the outset. Julie (31), for example, trapped in a job she hated (delivering post) and married to a man who could not father children, made a decision to become a social worker and pursued an Access course that was tailored to this kind of profession. Sarah (39), returning to work as her children grew up and having spent some years in voluntary work, pursued a similar directed course of action, as did Jenny (32), who wanted to teach. Others had less clear employment goals but, nevertheless, still enrolled on the Access course with higher education in mind. For example, Sally (26) said, 'I wanted to go to higher education but I wasn't really sure what'. For many interviewees, however, despite returning to education (often with a view to enhancing their job prospects), the enrolment on an Access course and subsequent transfer to higher education was unplanned and contingent upon chance events or the advice of other people.

#### 5.6.2 The Role of Contingency

Being in the right place at the right time was of enormous significance in the decision to enrol on an Access course. Many of the interviewees had not thought about - or even heard of - Access courses before receiving advice to enrol on them. Kevin (30), for example, when faced with redundancy from the pit, where he had worked as a miner for many years, knew that he had little chance of other employment without qualifications.

He went to a 'guidance department' and said that he was not interested in a trade but that he had enjoyed history at school; they recommended an Access course. Similarly, when Jack (42) was made redundant from a local factory and went to 'sign on' he was advised to attend for occupational assessment. After a series of tests he was told that he was very bright and had 'wasted his life' - he should have done a degree. He then went to see an Education Adviser, who suggested that he enrol on an Access course.

Many of the female interviewees had also drifted into Access courses following chance events - such as advertising campaigns by the local colleges - or advice from others. Wendy (40), for example, came across a leaflet about the local Access course which had been brought home from school by her niece. Pam (37), having taken GCSEs most academic years whilst her children were young, finally ran out of subjects to take at her local centre. She rang the local college to ask what else she could do and they said that she sounded like the ideal candidate for an Access course. Tina (38) was also advised to enrol on an Access course in similar circumstances. After ten years at home looking after children, she felt the need for change: 'I just wanted to do a course; I just wanted to be out among people'. She got in touch with her local college and explained that she wanted to do a course just for pleasure; they told her how interesting the Access course was and encouraged her to enrol on it. She commented:

They must have thought: 'Oh, a typical Access candidate' and, because I was fee paying, whether that made a difference or not, I don't know. So I weren't sure. When I found out how much it were going to cost, I weren't sure whether to do it or not. So I sort of left it, rang my husband and said: 'Oh, I think I'm on a course and I don't know if we can afford to pay for it all now', you know. I just didn't realise. I paid nearly £300 for it. So, and I thought I'd got to pay for it all then and I didn't have a chequebook or anything. So I said: 'What do you think?' And he said: 'Well, if you want to do it, you know, go for it'. So I got back to them and just said: 'Oh, I'll go ahead with it'. And I just ended up on this course. (Tina, 38)

In Margaret's case, the chain of events leading up to enrolment on the Access course started when a letter came home from school outlining the opportunities at the local college and she went to discuss these:

So I went over and they must have thought I was mad, because I walked in and they said, you know: 'What would you like to try?' and I said: 'I don't know: I like French, I like maths, I like history, I like – .' So I spoke to everybody, you know, and they all said, 'Well, we don't know what to put you on to'. And then this letter came about this 'Be a Student for a Week'. And it was this friend of mine who had started an Access course and then packed it in....She said, 'Oh, I fancy doing that'. And I think, if she hadn't have done it, I would have said, 'Well, I'd like to but I'll not bother'. And I went on this 'Be a Student for a Week' and, as I say, it was wonderful. You know, a little taste of Spanish and a bit of history and some assertiveness. And it was just great - like a proper timetable, like being back at school. And, from then on, I just thought, 'Yeah'. And then, when I had a chat and I said, 'Well, I really don't know what I want to do at the end', and they said, 'Well, think about the Access course because it is a general thing which you can use to move on... (Margaret, 41)

There is an indication, then, that advice and guidance are extremely important in the decision to enrol on an Access course: without this, many of the interviewees would not even have been in a position to think about, let alone apply to, higher education. The expansion of Access courses in the 1980s and early 1990s and the active recruitment strategies put in place to fill the places on them were therefore clearly of major significance in the extension of higher educational opportunities to mature, working-class students. Without these, such students might never have considered higher education to be a realistic goal. Indeed, even when studying on the Access courses, many still saw higher education as beyond their reach.

## **5.7 Applying to Higher Education Institutions**

Only twelve interviewees claimed that they enrolled on the Access course with higher education in mind and a common reported experience was of enrolling out of interest or a general desire to increase credentials for the job market. Rose (34), for example, who was encouraged by friends to enrol on an Access course after the relationship with her husband broke down, remarked, 'I really only wanted a decent job'. Tina claimed that she was unaware of the link between the Access course and higher education:

...if they'd said: 'But it leads on – it's Access on to higher education', I would definitely not have enrolled. I can be really confident and say that. So I'm glad that they didn't let me know that, otherwise I wouldn't have been here.  
(Tina, 38)

Similarly, Pam (37) claimed, 'I knew it was access to higher education as well but I



more or less saw it at that time as access maybe to - well, access back into education'. However, once enrolled on the Access course, some of the interviewees felt that they were channelled into higher education - whether or not this was what they wanted.

#### 5.7.1 'I think it was decided for me'

Wendy (40) described how, once on the Access course, 'things escalated' and Susan (23) reported a feeling of being 'swept away' in the process of applying to higher education. For some students, this had clearly not been the intention when they enrolled on the course. Rose (34), for example, who withdrew from her higher education course after the first year, complained: 'I don't think I ever did decide what to do - I think it was decided for me!'. Others echoed this feeling:

I think when you're on Access you tend to get carried along in the sort of - you just get into Access and, the next thing, it's 'Oh, UCCA cards: just fill in these forms', you know...you don't really realise what is happening. (Anne, 42)

Tina's case graphically illustrates the panic engendered by the thought of going to higher education and the deeply-held feeling that this course of action was impossible:

I'd been there a few weeks and they started producing PCAS forms and I just flipped. I freaked out and said: 'Oh, I don't think I need one of those!', thinking, you know, 'You're giving them to the wrong group, aren't you?' And they said, 'No. This is, you know, people who are going to university'. And I said, 'I'm on the wrong course'. I'd no idea at all and I was just absolutely - you could have knocked me down with a feather. And they gave me one and I went home and I started crying and I said to my husband, 'I don't want to go to university'. I were in a real state; I were absolutely petrified. I filled the form in and he said, 'Oh, just fill the form in and forget about it'. And I filled it in and then I thought, 'Oh, I'll just see how I go'. It had sort of sowed the seed in my mind and, you know, my work's on a par with theirs and they really are going to university - they've filled the form in and want to go and everything. (Tina, 38)

This feeling was expressed by many of the interviewees, who may be thought to have been either completely unaware that Access courses were a route into higher education or ambivalent about committing themselves to this until they were confident that they could cope with it. There is clearly a recognition that an 'occasion of hazard' had been reached in the moral careers of these interviewees, a point of potential risk to identity and selfhood (Harré, 1993: 205 - see 2.3.3). For Margaret, for example, the goal of

higher education was present but appeared to be such a risk that she could not acknowledge it, as the following quotation illustrates:

When I got back to college....I didn't know about university and I still, at that point, I think, thought it wasn't for me. But, I mean, that was one funny thing – [the Access tutor] did an interview for the radio on this 'Be a Student for a Week' and he came on and just said to everybody... 'What are you doing? What would you like it to lead to?' And why I said it then, I don't know - I said, 'Well, if I pass the Access course, I would like to go to university'. And, I say, it was never – it wasn't in my head then. I don't even know why I said it. (Margaret, 41)

Many of the interviewees described how they needed a great deal of convincing that they were capable of coping with higher education. Kevin, for example did not apply until the end of the academic year on the Access course, until high marks 'justified' this:

...all through that course they were suggesting - I mean, there were people saying, 'Well, you'll apply for university at such and such a date' and I thought, 'Well, **they** might but I don't think **I'll** be applying'. But I got decent sort of marks; I thought, 'Why not try it?' So that's how I thought - I made the decision towards the end of the Access course to apply. And I'd got, I'd sort of got my distinction, so I were able to send the results off. (Kevin, 30)

For some, the persuasion of others was required before the application to higher education could be entertained as an appropriate course of action:

We had somebody come from the Careers and this woman's saying all [about] how you go on [to apply to higher education] and I'm sat there thinking, 'This is a waste of time', you know....I think it were, you know, 'If you can get on with this course [Access], you'll get on with a course there [higher education]'. I think we still thought it were something unobtainable, you know.... (Pam, 37)

It was only after discussions with the Access tutors later that Pam began to think that higher education might be a possibility for her:

I wasn't confident in my mind before I started the [higher education] course that I could [do it], you know - it was only the tutors on the Access course said, 'Well, of course you can do it', you know. And that was the first time anybody in your life had said to you, 'Of course!', you know....So I think that, doing the Access course, it like led you into it and [you] believed that you could do it, that you were capable of doing it, which sort of nobody had really - nobody had actually said before. (Pam, 37)

Quotations such as these illustrate the feeling that many of the interviewees had that applying to higher education was a momentous event and something which was suffused with risk. Without the help and encouragement of the Access tutors - and the confidence engendered by success on the courses themselves - there is a strong indication that many of the interviewees would not have applied to study on degree courses.

### 5.7.2 Reasons for Applying

The motivations to apply to higher education can be broadly divided into two categories: affective and instrumental. Self-fulfilment or interest were the most commonly-cited goals being pursued in higher education, with seventeen of the interviewees mentioning these as significant. Typical comments were: 'I'm just doing it for pleasure' (Tina, 38); 'to expand my knowledge and broaden my horizons' (Joe, 54). Many spoke of the love of learning that was kindled by the Access course: 'it's like a drug - you want more of it' (Joe, 54); 'I'd got, like, an education sort of fever - I wanted to learn' (Kevin, 30); 'I suppose we're like rockets, really - we just need the paper touching and away you go!' (Jack, 42). In addition, some students relished the challenge of higher education or felt that they had been discredited in their early lives and needed to 'prove something':

I suppose it's a bit silly, really, but why do you climb a mountain? Not just because it's there, but because you want to get to the top and it's the achievement of looking back and thinking, 'Well, I really stretched myself to do that'. I think that's what I'm trying to do. I'm really trying to stretch myself. (Jack, 42)

This need to 'prove something' was not confined to the working-class interviewees and Jenny (32), an interviewee from a middle-class background who had left school with few qualifications, commented: 'The other thing is that a lot of it is proving to myself that I can do this, after years of being told, "Oh, Jenny can't do those kind of things"' (Jenny, 32).

Unlike some of the studies reported in Chapter 1 (for example, Green and Webb 1997) clear gender differences in the reasons for applying to higher education were generally

not apparent although, for women, a facet of the application could be the idea of doing something for yourself after years of caring for others, as Jenny noted:

I'm doing this because I want to do it...I'm not doing it because I'm a mum and I'm a wife and I'm somebody's daughter; I do it because it's **me** and I want to do it, and I don't care who thinks...whatever of me. (Jenny, 32)

At an instrumental level, enhancing job prospects was cited as a reason for applying to higher education by fourteen of the interviewees. Many of these expressed dissatisfaction with what was perceived as boring and mind-numbing work and a recognition that qualifications were necessary for anything better: 'I mean, I don't want to be in Sainsbury's stacking shelves. I mean, there's them jobs around but they're, you know, they're boring, aren't they?' (Pam, 37).

In addition, however, some interviewees explicitly made a connection between higher education and increased social status, although, as in the research by Pascall and Cox (1993), this was often hesitantly expressed. Pam (37), for example, said: 'Well, you've sort of got...I suppose, the status of it, really...' and Sally (26) wanted 'a degree and everything that goes with that degree, which is prestige, if you like, cap and gown and everything, and it leads you on to be able to get better jobs, more money'. For Kevin (30), the 'status' of a degree was associated with the removal of what he considered to be the 'stigma' of a working-class background:

...partly, it's a status thing because what else would I have done if I hadn't done this? Unskilled, manual, bottom bracket and all that sort of stigma. (Kevin, 30)

In general, most of the interviewees demonstrated a mixture of motivations for applying to higher education:

I mean, a lot of people have asked me, 'Why are you doing that?' And I've said, 'Well, I just want, really, to prove myself', you know. I do want a good job and I do want to get some money out of it in the end. And I don't know what I want to do but I enjoy this – I enjoy the subjects what I'm doing and I want to do it. (Sally, 26)

### 5.7.3 Choice of Higher Education Institution

The choice of higher-education institution was shaped partially by a combination of practical factors - such as ease of travel or familiarity with the location - and academic and job-related factors, such as interest in the course and its relevance for employment. Most of those applying to the college of further and higher education had attended Access courses in that college and many saw the degree course there as a natural continuation of their studies, pointing to the ease of travel and familiarity with the campus and tutors. In addition, however, a few students commented on perceptions of differences between higher education institutions which had influenced their choice.

An important consideration for some was whether the institution catered for mature students. For those applying to the College in particular there was a perception that this offered them more support. Diane, for example, said:

I wanted to go to a place where I could fit in, particularly with being older; where I could feel at ease and where I could get that bit of a morale booster if I needed it, whereas there [Old University] I was fearful that I wouldn't.  
(Diane, 42, College)

On the other hand, some reported that mature students were very much in the minority at Old University and that they had not felt comfortable there when attending open days. Tina, for example, was offered places at both universities but decided against the Old University after attending an open day:

They gave us a brief talk.....and saying we'd got to decide [which higher education institution to attend]. Obviously, other people had got places offered from other universities. And I was ...definitely the oldest in the room by far – all the others in the room were school leavers, the majority. So eighty, ninety percent were school leavers and [only] a couple of older ones. And they were saying, 'If you're living away from home for the first time....' He was just addressing the majority, obviously. (Tina, 38, New University)

A few students reported feeling that Old University did not welcome Access entrants:

...the Admissions Tutor is hostile to people who've done Access courses. And it comes across very clearly in the interviews that he does; he has a whole set of very stereotypical ideas about the sorts of people who run them. And it's not just my personal experience - it's the experience of others.  
(Bella, 30, Old University)

Also a consideration for some of the working-class interviewees was the class composition of the higher education institution. The idea of a ranking of higher education institutions in terms of social class intake was raised by a few. For Susan, for example, it was the perceived class difference in ethos, together with the assumed lower levels of student support, which influenced her decision not to apply for courses in the 'old' universities:

I went to [two 'old' universities] for interviews. I think that's what put me off because I got the impression that you had to be, like, sort of more intelligent, preferably middle class. But also you don't get that much help in some part, which I think's important, especially if you come from a working-class background. (Susan, 23)

In contrast, Susan saw the 'new' universities as 'more supportive; more accepting the working class'. Interestingly, Margaret (41), despite enrolling on a course at Old University, commented that people like her were more suited to the new universities which had a 'working-class image'. For Margaret, New University represented a space in which she would 'fit in' - '*That* was the one that ought to be for me' - but was rejected because it was not the 'proper' university:

I mean, [New University] is still the Polytechnic to a lot of people and, although you were getting...exactly the same things - you could come out with a degree at the end of that - the [old] University was the 'proper' one...And...a lot of people...still perceive it that way. (Margaret, 41, Old University)

This raises the question of perceived differences in status between the three education institutions which were mentioned by a number of interviewees, especially those from College, who voiced the suspicion that there was a hierarchy of institutions of higher education with colleges at the bottom. Paul, for example, commented: 'I mean, there's the proper [Old] university, then there's [New University], and then there's a franchise out here [College]...a franchise of a second-generation university' (Paul, 40, College). Paul went on to express the fear that what he would get at College would be a 'working-class degree'. This perception of differences between the three types of higher-education institution, of a hierarchical prestige ranking, remained a concern for some of the interviewees throughout their courses, engendering concerns, especially among the



College students, about future employment prospects. These are discussed further in 8.6.

## 5.8 Summary

The data, then, gives some evidence for the view that class-based value systems and expected life trajectories ruled out academic progress for many of the working-class students in this study, who showed a doxic acceptance of a life trajectory grounded in manual work, a 'subjective expectation of objective probabilities' which consigned successive generations of working-class children to the kinds of work undertaken by their parents and grand parents. Relatedly, a process of *misrecognition* marked out higher education as not for them because 'ordinary' people, unlike those from the middle class, were 'not brainy' and did not have the appropriate 'experiences'. These expected life trajectories reflect the inter-subjectively defined horizon of a shared world in which university was 'not for the likes of us' and a culturally-inscribed resistance to academic knowledge as largely *irrelevant*, as 'thinking for the sake of thinking' which produced no tangible or useful result. There is a juxtaposition of contrasting concepts: 'ordinary' as opposed to 'academic'; 'practical' intelligence as opposed to academic intelligence; useful knowledge as opposed to useless knowledge; 'us' as opposed to 'them'. Yet the decision to leave school and gain employment was also partially a pragmatic one based on a calculation of the likelihood of getting reasonably well-paid work and a corresponding value system which centred on the importance of life experience, gainful employment and 'practical' intelligence. From this point of view, qualifications were simply *unnecessary*.

Although, in hindsight, some of the interviewees appeared to be slightly resentful that they had not received the kind of encouragement from parents or teachers that they might have done, there was also a tacit acceptance that they wasted educational opportunities and therefore colluded in their fate. In addition, emerging strongly from the interviews, is a feeling that the decision to leave school as soon as possible was a rational choice and one which, for some interviewees, was not a source of regret (although there may well be an element here of rationalization).

Contingency characterised the entry of many of the interviewees to higher education as adults. For some of them, a feeling had grown that there was 'something missing' from their lives; for others, the need for qualifications in an increasingly credentialised society became pressing when they were made redundant or contemplated a return to employment after a number of years in full-time child care. However, these changes at the micro level of individual biographies coincided, in the 1980s and 1990s, with macro-level changes in employment patterns, the expansion of higher education and the drive to widen access and being in the right place at the right time to take advantage of these changes was crucial. Some of the interviewees enrolled on an Access course with higher education in mind. For many, however, a largely unfocused desire to return to education was channelled by the intervention of chance events - advertising campaigns by the local colleges, careers guidance following redundancy, the advice of friends, or a 'hard sell' by education advisers - into enrolment on an Access course. Once there, higher education became a possibility which could not be ignored and there is a feeling, certainly on the part of some of the interviewees, that they were swept along with the flood of applications within weeks of enrolling on the Access course.

Nevertheless, despite gaining in confidence on the Access course, some of the interviewees were still not convinced that higher education was an achievable goal; it was perceived as a *risk*, a potential *hazard* which had to be negotiated in the moral career and carried with it the possibility of the rejection and contempt of others. This is clearly indicated by the way in which many of the interviewees positioned themselves in relation to the different types of higher education institution, with colleges and former polytechnics being viewed as more accessible for mature, working-class (and less academically gifted?) students than traditional universities. Whether or not this perception was accurate will be the topic for investigation in the following chapter.

#### Notes

1. Throughout the thesis, the ages attributed to the interviewees are those at enrolment.

### 6.1 Introduction

All but one of the students interviewed at College had transferred to the degree programme from an Access course at the same college and on the same campus. For these students, the immediate transition appeared to be relatively unproblematic: they were familiar with the campus and some of the tutors and the degree programme seemed to be simply a continuation of the Access course. Jack (42) summed up this feeling succinctly when he commented: 'Just come here and it's like coming home'. Similarly, for Julie (31), the transition was not an 'overwhelming feat'. However, for students attending the two universities, the transition was not always so easy. This chapter will examine the reasons for the initial feelings of dislocation experienced by many of the students and the 'hazards' which threatened selfhood in the transition to higher education.

### 6.2 Feeling 'Out of Place'

The initial reaction of Kevin (30) as he transferred to Old University was that he was a 'fraud' and an 'impostor'. Similar feelings were expressed by many of the interviewees at the two universities, but especially at Old University. A selection of quotations illustrates these feelings:

And it's as if we, you know, we don't really deserve to be here....you know, they had a spare place and we've done okay on the Access course so, 'Go on, let her have it. She'll fail in the first year but let her have it anyway'.  
(Margaret, 41, Old University)

...I started thinking that maybe I wasn't very clever at all....I think we were all feeling that maybe this was an awful mistake; maybe they were going to say, you know, 'We've secretly IQ tested you and we've found that you're really thick so you've got to go'. So I felt like an intruder, do you know what I mean?  
(Bella, 30, Old University)

It felt really daunting and I felt panic-stricken: 'What am I doing here?' I felt really lacking in confidence, that there were all these bright young students here

and, you know, what on earth was I doing here? ‘I shouldn’t be here - it’s all a mistake!’, you know. (Anne, 42, Old University)

As these quotations indicate, the initial reaction of some of the interviewees to the transfer to university was almost one of disbelief at being there: people like them were not intelligent enough to be at university and did not *deserve* a place; they had got there through an easy Access route and been accepted because there were spare places; they were being set up to fail. Many felt that they were not authentic students and were *pretending* to be something that they could never be. Tina, for example, said, ‘I can’t believe I’m here because it’s just not me at all....I’m, you know, like “Mum” and at home all the time and nothing to do’ (Tina, 38, New University) and Rose commented:

It was very frightening....You think: ‘What am I doing here? I don’t belong here’, you know....you feel as if you’re an interloper and you pretend - or this is how I felt - I felt as if I’m pretending to be clever being here and getting all the books and that. And you used to see these people, like - students - with all these big textbooks. Well, it’s like you imagine that they read them all from cover to cover, don’t they, until you’re studying yourself. But I’d come home with all these books....all these psychology books on the shelf, and people think you’re clever and you think: ‘Well, I’m not!’ you know. You think - I don’t know - you felt as if you shouldn’t really be there. And the first few days I did think: ‘What am I doing here?’ (Rose, 34, New University)

It may be that the origins of these feelings lie in the *habitus* and past educational experiences of these students: they had identified themselves as ‘not clever’ and not the kind of people who went to university, which was therefore initially perceived as a place in which they did not fit. Certainly, none of the middle-class interviewees in the two universities reported feeling this way. Yet caution must be exercised here: as noted earlier (1.5.1.4), university may seem like an alien environment to many, if not most, of the students who enter it, although the reasons for this alienation may be very diverse. It is argued in this chapter that the students in this study experienced a number of sources of dislocation deriving from the learning environment and from perceptions of other students and tutors as different to themselves. Each of these is considered in turn and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the risks to selfhood reported by the interviewees in their first year of higher education.

### 6.3.1 'Mass' Higher Education

A common initial perception was that the educational experience was no longer on a human scale and had become, instead, a mass, impersonal and potentially *alienating* process taking place in large and often incomprehensible institutions. The wide geographical dispersal of the learning context in the two universities had not necessarily been anticipated by many students. Kevin (30), for example, at Old University, remarked: 'it were a biggish place and just massive numbers; you feel a bit disoriented' and others made similar comments:

I was really so naive....I never realised how spread out the campus was, for one thing. I expected to be in one building and one classroom for everything and what have you, as you had at college, instead of being spread out over a couple of miles, kind of thing, and running up and down the road with only five minutes to spare in between lectures and everything. (Wendy, 40, Old University)

In addition, students at all three institutions felt that the learning context was very different to the small-scale, more *personal* contexts with which they were familiar. At College, Diane's (42) first reaction was one of 'fright' as she sat in a large hall which was 'absolutely full of people'. Similarly, at Old University, Margaret (41) recalled the experience of being one of three hundred and forty people sitting in the lecture theatre: 'It's quite daunting when you first walk in and there are all these people'. Many drew a comparison between this and the more 'cosy' environment of the college in which they had taken their Access course.

It can be argued, then, that initial feelings of dislocation arose, at least in part, from a perceived disjunction between previous educational experiences and the new learning context - a disjunction which must surely be experienced by students of all ages and educational backgrounds, who may be unprepared for the sheer physical scale of the institution or the more distanced and formal teaching context. In addition, however, a number of the interviewees had entered higher education with preconceived ideas about the nature of the educational experience and rapidly came to feel that these were inaccurate.

### 6.3.2 'Lofty aims of learning'?

Before the transfer to higher education, some students had an idealised view of university life, often gleaned from the media. This was particularly the case for students at Old University. Wendy, for example, admitted that she had over-dosed on 'Educating Rita' and had an image of university life as 'a kind of ivory tower where, you know, [there is] academic debate, as in "Educating Rita" where they're standing in the quadrangle and they're debating' (Wendy, 40, Old University). Before he enrolled, Kevin imagined there would be small seminar groups, one-to-one tutoring and 'chats' with tutors on subjects in depth. In short, he expected that the University experience would centre upon 'lofty aims of learning' (Kevin, 30, Old University). This idealised view of higher education was shared by other students at Old University. Bella (30), for example, had 'envisaged meeting lots of people and sharing ideas', whilst Margaret (41) said: 'I thought it was this magical place; I expected this aura and magic when you walked in'.

The reality was thought to be very different: university was a 'production line' in which learning was superficial rather than in depth and students were not required to analyse and think but simply to 'read and regurgitate' (Kevin, 30, Old University). Kevin commented: 'There isn't enough time to get into, like, a thing that you're interested in and spend time on it because there's pressure to get things done' (Kevin, 30, Old University). Other students experienced the learning process as dominated by concerns about assessment which took away much of the pleasure of learning:

I feel that exams are upon me all the time.....because we get examined at the end of each.....module, so it's taken a lot of the fun out of learning for me - in fact, it's taken **all** the fun out of learning. (Bella, 30, Old University)

I did expect....that I would have sort of one or two subjects that I would know in depth....and not, as it's turned out, with five different modules and everything, which I feel that we've only sort of skimmed across.  
(Wendy, 40, Old University)

This disjunction between the dream of higher education and the reality appeared to be far more intense for students in Old University, who appeared to have much higher expectations of the learning process than those in College or New University, lending



support to the argument developed in the last chapter (5.7.3) that potential students have preconceived ideas about the differences between higher education institutions.

### 6.3.3 The Social Dimension

In addition to the disappointment, voiced by some students at Old University in particular, about the academic dimension of life in higher education, many at the two universities expressed disappointment about the social dimension. For Kevin (30), the long journey each day to Old University and the domestic commitments at home meant that university could only be a 'nine to five sort of thing' and this was a source of great disappointment to him: he had expected to be 'encapsulated' in university life but had, in fact, remained 'separate from it':

I did have these visions of it being like a wonderful, all-round experience but I think that can't really happen because I've got to travel back....I've got to get home, you see....so you do miss out on a lot of the social scene.  
(Kevin, 30, Old University)

Many other students at the two universities made similar comments. Social activities for most were confined to chats over coffee between lectures as the demands of domestic and childcare arrangements, especially for mature female students, generally precluded any more serious socialising. However, this was not necessarily a source of regret. Pam (37), for example, at New University, commented that her social life continued to centre on family and old friends and many of the mature female students reported in positive terms a similar unbroken pattern of social engagements.

Although those at the two universities who had hoped for an 'all-round' experience were, in general, disappointed, for the College students, social activities were routinely organised and some reported attending karaoke sessions and discos organised on campus. In distinction to the social events at the two universities, these were attended largely by the mature students: as Jenny (32) noted, the younger students 'aren't really bothered - they go off to town' (Jenny, 32).

Although the reality of higher education did not always live up to the idealised preconceptions of those attending the two universities, some negative expectations held

by them before they transferred were, to their relief, also not realised. Many found that their fears about levels of difficulty and lack of support were groundless and that they were able to cope better than they had anticipated: 'I thought that the lectures were going to be in words that I didn't understand and they've been wonderful' (Margaret, 41, Old University). However, problems in relating to the younger students and the tutors were commonly reported.

## **6.4 Other Students**

Many interviewees reported feeling different from other students on a number of dimensions: age, qualifications and social class background. Each of these is considered in turn.

### **6.4.1 Age**

#### **6.4.1.1 *The Importance of Numbers***

In general, there appeared to be an inverse relationship between the number of mature students in the learning context and feelings of being out of place as a consequence of age: the more mature students, the less intense the feelings of dislocation. Being mature did not appear to be a problem for students at College, where young students were seen as very much in the minority. Here, the majority were reported to be either women with older children who were returning to education to gain qualifications for re-entry into the labour market or men who had retired or been made redundant. One College student remarked: 'I tend to feel a bit sorry for the younger students, actually, because they're quite outnumbered by the mature students and I feel it's more a mature students' course' (Sarah, 39). There was a perception, held by many of the students, that the College catered specifically for mature students like themselves and had a mature 'feel' to it:

...the atmosphere's like - it's not like a working-men's club, you know, but it's like an adult-type feel to the buildings. And, basically...there's a majority of mature students on the course, or it looks like it at times. The library, the whole place, just gives me the feeling that, you know, I'm not out of place. Whereas, perhaps in a bigger university, you know, [with] younger people, I'd feel a little bit old. But I don't feel like that at all [here]. It's no detriment to be old here. (Paul, 40, College)

At College, there was a general feeling of a close-knit community, although not as close-knit as the Access course had been. Barbara (24), for example, felt that the degree course at the college was 'not as friendly as the Access' and Paul (40) noted that the Access group had 'clicked' a lot more than the groups on the degree course.

In distinction, confirming the fears of many of the interviewees reported in the last chapter, the students at Old University frequently reported feeling isolated as a consequence of age: 'I felt lost and I felt *old*' (Margaret, 41); 'I ...felt...really quite different in amongst people who were very much younger than me, you know; I felt out of place' (Bella, 30). Similarly, at New University, one or two students spoke about not 'blending in', which made the transition to university more difficult: 'Most people can get lost in a crowd; I just feel old' (Shirley, 42). At both universities, the age difference between mature students and school leavers was seen to be associated with different degrees of 'fit' with the university, which appeared to cater primarily for younger students who were, in turn, thought to be more 'tuned in' to university life. For example, living in halls of residence (as many new, young students did) was assumed to create early feelings of identity between young students at Old University and it seemed to Kevin (30) at the start of the degree course that the other students already knew (or were in the process of getting to know) each other as a consequence. He, on the other hand, living in a neighbouring town and travelling to and from the university each day, knew no-one and felt a 'solitary soul'.

#### 6.4.1.2 *Attitudes to Study*

The age gap at the two universities was also associated with different attitudes towards study. Young students were thought to be less committed and less 'serious' about their studies; their arrival at university was a natural progression from school and they looked upon it as an 'adventure' - as part and parcel of growing up, as Anne pointed out:

I think the younger students just feel that, you know, it's just a continuation of school for them, except they've got a bit more freedom, you know - they don't have Mummy and Daddy there telling them when they've to be in and, you know, it's a bit of an adventure really for them. Whereas I think mature students, it's a bit more serious. I'm not saying that all young people don't think it's serious, but it's just a natural progression for them with a bit more freedom. (Anne, 42, Old University)

This 'natural progression' of young students was associated with a different set of motivations to study. A number of interviewees identified an 'instrumentalism' on the part of younger students in their first year at university and linked this to motivations which, unlike those of mature students, were largely financial:

...you're here very much because you want to be here and not because of financial benefits - or, at least, not initially....When I contrast sort of my feeling about study and theirs, they couldn't be more different. To them, it's just a stepping stone to get them a job that they want and there's an absence of *joy*.....(Bella, 30, Old University)

Like the students in Wilsons' (1997) study, many of the interviewees argued that mature students had more authentic reasons for study and more personal commitment to education for its own sake: 'I think the older people have more....commitments at home but they also have more commitment within themselves' (Anne, 42, Old University).

The perceived instrumentalism of younger students was associated with a tendency for them to become 'free-loaders' in the learning context. A frequent comment was that they did not contribute in small-group teaching situations, leaving the task of interacting with the tutors to the mature students. Kevin described young students as having a 'classroom mentality' and commented:

I find in tutorial groups that the younger end are a bit quieter and....if the tutor asks a question they mainly just sit back....If I've any thing to say, I'll sort of interact a bit; and I like putting my point of view across.  
(Kevin, 30, Old University)

Others echoed this view. Pam (37), at New University, felt that, in the first year, mature students attended classes and did the work required of them whilst the younger students took advantage of this, borrowing their work and sharing it around. This was a source of resentment:

...in the first year....the younger students tried to take advantage of us doing the work: 'Can I borrow your notes?'. And they weren't just for their personal self - then they'd share them out with all their group of friends....I mean, we're doing all the work; they float in once a term and borrow your notes and you don't see them, you know. And it made us very wary and that. (Pam, 37)

At Old University, Bella voiced a similar complaint:

...we have very different attitudes to working, or at least this is my experience of mature students. I go to tutorials where we're supposed to work in groups but people don't turn up; people won't do the work. They want to hang on to everybody else's coat tails; they don't want to stand up and give presentations. Basically, if I was prepared to do all the work they would let me and then they would add their name to it. (Bella, 30, Old University)

There was an underlying feeling that young students were enjoying themselves and making the most of the social dimension of university life. Mature students, on the other hand, often felt that they had little time to spare and resented what they saw as a casual attitude on the part of younger students:

Some of them I find a bit irritating; I think I find them irritating in respect of the way I'm sat in the library and I'm wanting to work and I can hear them giggling and, you know, just talking. And I sort of think: 'Well, they might have got all the time in the world, but I've not'...The time that I have here is really important to me - it's the only time I can really get into my study.....  
(Sally, 26, New University)

#### 6.4.1.3 '*Us*' and '*Them*'

A common perception in the first year of degree study was therefore of a divide between young and mature students. The responsibility for this situation was felt to lie primarily with the young students. Brian (46), at Old University, commented: 'I would like to disregard this age gap but, unfortunately, the younger students don't seem to disregard it so much'. Similarly, at New University, Tina described how the hand of friendship was offered to, and rejected by, the younger students:

The young ones in our small group tend to want to keep themselves apart from us. And we've tried - just asked them now - do they want a game of badminton later on? 'Oh no, don't want to do that'. They go out and, you know, they definitely just keep themselves to themselves; the sort of eighteen-year-olds just can't relate to us at all. And we've tried including them, you know - sit down for a coffee and choose a big table and they'll go and find a small table at the other side of the room. They don't want to know, unfortunately....The young ones all get on really well. They speak to us and everything - they talk and we work together in the workshops, the seminars. There's no animosity or anything but, other than that, *it's just us and them...we're poles apart*. (Tina, 38, New University)

The feeling of distance between young and mature students was generally put down to the 'generation gap': mature students were argued to 'like to sit and have a coffee, talk about right boring things' and to be 'on a sort of different wavelength to the younger ones' (Tina, 38, New University). Probably connected with this, some interviewees described how the younger students tended to treat them like 'Mum' or 'Dad'. Anne, for example, noted that 'some sort of take you as a parent figure, being away from home' (Anne, 42, Old University). The response of the mature students to this was generally negative, as Pam described: 'One of the boys said: "Can you find me a button for my jacket?" And she [a mature student] says: "I've come away from all that!"' (Pam, 37, New University).

#### 6.4.1.4 *'I really don't feel like I fit in anywhere'*

However, the perception of 'us' and 'them' is not a wholly accurate description of the situation as mature students themselves did not form a homogeneous grouping, as Wilson (1997) also noted in his study. Bella, for example, argued that 'being a mature student doesn't mean that I'm the same as other mature students' (Bella, 30, Old University). It is possible to identify a number of lines of cleavage within the mature student category. Firstly, there were the younger mature students whose life experiences set them apart from school leavers and their leisure activities but also separated them from older mature students. Ben, for example, a middle-class student at Old University, felt that, although he was little older than the young students in terms of years, he had grown out of the kinds of leisure activities that they engaged in:

I think I'm some older man at 26, you know....I did have the opportunity to live in hall but I turned it down. I'm glad now because, you know, they're all running around the halls, you know, drunk at two o'clock in the morning. I just don't want to do that any more; I've done that; I don't care about that now.  
(Ben, 26, Old University)

Similarly, Barbara, although only twenty-four, said that she had life experiences and responsibilities which set her apart from the younger students:

I'm virtually married; I've got two children and so I've a lot of responsibilities. They don't have any responsibilities - they live with their parents; they're out all the time. Now, I can't do that, you know. (Barbara, 24, College)



On the other hand, these 'young' mature students often had little in common with older ones. Ben did not identify with the older mature students, arguing: 'most of them are middle aged - very much like my Access course, really - middle-aged women' (Ben, 26, Old University). Similarly, Bella decided that the social activities of the older mature students were not for her: 'As soon as they started talking about the social activities, you know, like rambling things and "real ale" pubs, I just knew that wasn't going to be my scene either' (Bella, 30, Old University). This experience of falling between two groups was common in all three institutions and June summarised the feeling graphically:

In my group there's four eighteen-year-olds...they're not sort of, like, young and immature but there's definitely an age difference, you know....a difference that I wouldn't have that much in common with them. They're nice, you know, but nothing - we haven't got that much in common...they seem to keep themselves separate from the older ones, you know. And then there's quite a few in their, like, round the forty mark....they're nice but a bit too 'housewifey' for me because I still - I've got kids but I'm into, like, going out and having a good time as well and...I don't want to come and talk about what I cooked for dinner last night...And there's only a couple of people who are my age, like twenty-seven - well, there's only one, actually. We're in like the middle. And there's only a couple of blokes and they keep theirself to theirself. (June, 27, New University)

The consequence was a feeling, articulated by a number of students and also noted by West (1995) in his study, of not fitting in anywhere: 'So...I really don't feel like I fit in anywhere, to be honest with you now; I mean, it's been quite isolating' (Bella, 30, Old University).

At the other end of the mature age range, a few students felt different because they were *older* than most of the other mature students. At College, Tom, for example, at the age of fifty-five, felt older than the other mature students: 'I'm the old man of the party'. At Old University, Brian also felt different to most of the other mature students: 'I found that the first time I went into the mature students' lounge the oldest other student was about thirty-five, which is, you know, ten years younger than I was' (Brian, 46, Old University).

It is over-simplistic, then, to speak of a young/mature divide after the transfer to higher education. Perceptions of an age divide between 'us' and 'them' are certainly present

but mature students themselves do not form a homogeneous grouping. For some, the first year in higher education is an isolating and alienating experience. This is particularly likely to be the case for mature students on courses which draw their numbers primarily from the ranks of young school-leavers and - related to this - for those whose learning context does not include others of the same sex, age or life situation to themselves. Yet for those who are in the company of mature students like themselves, the support network which develops may be viewed as one of the most positive aspects of the learning process.

#### *6.4.1.5 Mature Support Networks*

Despite the problems associated with the age difference between themselves and other students, for many, the mature students' support network was identified as one of the most positive aspects of the higher education experience and one which was invaluable when times were hard. These networks were most likely to develop among mature female students who had a common experience of studying whilst carrying the 'baggage' of family and domestic duties. Younger students, in contrast, did not have these problems (although they may have had work or financial difficulties). Tina, for example, claimed:

We've got more in common because we've got children and a home life. So if anybody's stressed out at home, we can relate to that. You help each other - back each other up a bit more, which is nice. (Tina, 38, New University)

The mature students' network was a valuable source of support at times when confidence (always precarious in the case of mature students) was knocked by some minor academic set-back:

...there was one mature student who got a poor mark.....and she says, 'Oh! I've just failed! What am I doing? Oh, it's all a waste!' And we all sort of rallied [round] and said, 'Don't be silly; you don't need to worry about that'. And we do help each other, yes. (Anne, 42, Old University)

Many interviewees stressed the importance of the mature students' network, claiming that, without it, they may not have survived the first few months of the course. Tina, for

example, described this support network as 'crucial': 'If you were the only mature student, I think you'd just be out on a limb; you'd be very lonely'. She explained:

If you're struggling with something....we sort it out between us...And if anybody's been off sick, you lend your notes and they photocopy your notes, get handouts for each other. So we look after each other in that way.  
(Tina, 38, New University)

Nevertheless, a number of mature students believed that their relationships with other mature students were not as close as they had been on the Access course and that an element of competition had developed between them. Sarah (39) and Barbara (24) at College both noted this development and, at New University, Sally made a similar observation:

I don't know if there's an element of competition still between the mature students; I don't know. I mean, we're always saying we want everyone to get on - we **do** want everyone to get on - but I think there's always that thing where: 'Am I going to have the lowest results?' and things.  
(Sally, 26, New University)

A mature support network was far more likely to develop when the numbers of mature students were relatively large; in Old University, where these numbers were generally small, mature students could feel very isolated indeed. Kevin (30) spoke of being a 'solitary soul' and Bella of being 'isolated': 'I go in [to lectures] and I've got no-one to sit with. In between, if I go for coffee, I'm on my own; at lunch time, I haven't got anyone to meet' (Bella, 30, Old University). Similarly, Mary commented, 'the younger ones stick together and I'm left on my own and sometimes it's really hard' (Mary, 45, Old University). In situations such as these, awareness of dislocation and disjunction and the feelings of isolation in the higher education context have to be countered by a very high level of motivation if students are to complete the degree course. Indeed, some do not manage to do so and the experiences of these students are discussed in Chapter 9. However, in situations where mature students find others in similar circumstances to themselves in higher education, the development of a mutual support network is likely and this is viewed in very positive terms by mature students.

#### 6.4.2 Qualifications

A further potential source of dislocation and disjunction is the Access qualification.

The interviewees expressed very different views about the 'worth' of this qualification in relation to other modes of entry - particularly the A Level 'gold standard'.

##### 6.4.2.1 *Preparation for Higher Education*

There appeared to be a general consensus that the Access courses attended by the students had been excellent preparation for undergraduate study, fostering confidence and helping them to acquire the skills necessary for higher education. However, some students at the two universities seemed to have a feeling that their entry qualifications did not compare favourably with those of younger students entering with A Levels. Kevin, for example, at Old University, felt that he lacked the 'formal qualifications' necessary for entry to higher education and that younger students had a 'superior' A Level background. For Kevin, the source of this superiority was greater *knowledge* - in this case, knowledge of historical detail. His perception of A Level entrants students was that they:

...are up on some of the History subject because they've done it at A Level [whereas] I've never done History.....they can relate all these facts back about 1848, Revolution, or whatever. Whereas I'm thinking: 'Was there a revolution in 1848?' And I'm only just realising that there were these things going on.  
(Kevin, 30, Old University)

Similarly, Sally (26), at New University, commented: 'I feel....I'm not as good as the sort of A Level, 19 year olds and I feel like they know the answers a little bit more - they probably don't, but it's just a feeling'. Some interviewees expressed a feeling that, as mature students, they *ought* to have at least as great a knowledge base as the young students:

I do feel sometimes that, because I'm older, you should know these things, you know - it should be there; it's something that's come with experience. I mean, why Columbus discovering America should come with experience of my life, I don't know! (Wendy, 40, Old University)

However, in distinction, interviewees at College felt that, as Access entrants, they had a *better* preparation for undergraduate study than other students. Jack, for example, reported:

I don't feel stretched at all at the moment. I think I would have done if I'd not done the Access course. But you learn how to write essays; you learn how to structure your arguments....First year degree level is certainly not a lot harder than the Access course....There are people.....that come straight off the streets or whatever on to the degree. They don't know how to present an essay.  
(Jack, 42, College)

Insecurity of the university interviewees about the comparability of Access and A Level preparation was exacerbated in a few cases by perceptions that others in the higher education setting did not place the same value on these qualifications.

#### 6.4.2.2 *The Views of Others*

A few students, especially those at Old University, felt that tutors had a negative view of Access students, believing that they did not have the right preparation for higher education. Anne, for example, recounted a conversation with her tutor after handing in an essay:

I handed in my first Sociology essay and went to get it back and she [the tutor] said: 'It was really bitty and fragmented and you really need to do something about your essay writing', you know. And I said: 'Well, I haven't had any problems with essay writing on Access.' 'Well, Access tutors don't really know about how to go about this.' .....I was really dumbfounded.....I mean, I can take criticism of an essay but I felt that it wasn't particularly criticism of the essay; I felt it was criticism of Access. (Anne, 42, Old University)

At New University, Sally (26) noted a similar negative attitude to Access entrants on the part of some tutors: 'It's as if...a lot of people thought that Access wasn't as good as A Level'. Ageism - implicit or explicit - may be involved here, although only one interviewee made reference to it. Mary's tutor asked to see her about a low essay mark and, in the ensuing interview, voiced the opinion that she was too old to be doing the degree: 'he thought that I may get through the exams but he thought I was really too old. He said he preferred eighteen-year-olds....and he didn't think I was right for the course' (Mary, 45, Old University).



For some students, then, the Access qualification appeared to be a second-class route into higher education and one which some tutors regarded with suspicion. This was a source of anger to them as, without exception, they saw the Access course as a very positive experience of personal and academic development which, in the main, was not fully replicated in higher education.

#### 6.4.3 Social Class Background

In addition to age and entry qualification, social class background was seen as a further source of disjunction for a few students, especially those transferring to Old University. Students at College and New University did not, generally, express feelings of class disjunction. Diane (42), for example, experienced no 'university-type elitism' at College and Joe argued:

Certainly, there don't appear to be any barriers in this institution. It seems open to all and all seem to be accepted. And people get nurtured, don't they?...I've not seen any class barriers or any gender barriers and not any racial ones here, although there are very, very few black people on the course; there's certainly a couple, I think, that's all. There don't seem to be any barriers - or I've not come across any. (Joe, 54, College)

Similarly, Jack noted: 'I have found that my previous life experience in a working-class environment is useful and accepted here...this one [College] definitely does fit in with a working-class background' (Jack, 42, College). Nevertheless, the feeling that there were no overt barriers to working-class students in higher education may mask the rather more subtle barriers that can be argued to be in operation in all three higher education institutions. These barriers will be the subject of Chapter 6.

##### 6.4.3.1 *Feeling Different*

A number of students transferring to the two universities spoke of feeling set apart from many of the students and tutors as a consequence of their working-class backgrounds. Kevin (30), for example, immediately perceived a 'social distance' between himself and other students: they were mainly 'so-called middle class' students (for whom university was a 'natural' environment) whereas he had a 'like working-class tag'. As a consequence, Kevin reported feeling 'on edge', 'alienated' and 'stigmatised'. Bella



commented on the different life experiences which marked class boundaries and were revealed in conversation:

Socially, I feel quite different - talking - certainly when I was younger but even sometimes now, although it doesn't bother me quite as much. When young people are talking about education that they have had and, perhaps, you're all talking about something completely unconnected and then, five minutes later: 'And when we were at prep school..' or, you know, those sorts of things; feeling that - I don't know - just kind of feeling different. I guess when you're working class, you were in a majority, really - most people are - but in the environment of a university, that's not the same at all. (Bella, 30, Old University)

However, of more concern to a number of students was their 'working-class' accent.

#### 6.4.3.2 *'I've got this thick accent'*

A key marker of social class for Kevin was accent and he commented on the 'Estuary accent' which he saw as dominating the campus and on the different geographical (Southern) and social origins most of the other students:

Campus life round here, it just oozes middle-class, Home Counties, Estuary language type things, you know. If you're standing, or if you're in a social situation, everybody's got more or less a homogeneous accent...and, I mean, my accent does stand out...(Kevin, 30, Old University)

Kevin found this a strange experience: in geographical terms, the University was only a few miles away from his home town but its different social composition gave him a feeling of entering a different world:

...you feel a bit alienated, like, specially like you only live sort of half an hour away by car but you travel here and it's like probably living down in, down South or somewhere - just the accent difference. (Kevin, 30, Old University)

Kevin's acute consciousness of the difference between his accent and that of the majority of the other students, and of the social class differences that this betrayed, created a feeling of extreme embarrassment in the learning context which prevented him from contributing to discussions as much as he would otherwise have done:

I've found in seminars when....I've got interested.....and I start rambling on about this subject; I know what I'm - I've got a good point to make but I lapse into as if I was speaking to people back in [home town] and I just come out with these words and it's like I've got this thick accent and I just - these words - and they're totally alien to what these people use - not even pronounced the same. And you feel a bit embarrassed, so you think: 'Shrink back, not say as much'. And it's, there is that, because it's a different pronunciation. (Kevin, 30, Old University)

Kevin's insecurity about his working-class background intensified as he saw other students forming cohesive friendship groups from which he was excluded. He felt that his interaction with other students - even mature ones - was limited to 'small talk' and 'general things' and he had a suspicion that his social class background (as measured by his accent) was responsible for this:

I mean, there's some people who've been in the same seminar groups and if you're passing them you'll sort of look to acknowledge them and they just sort of blank you as if you're not there. Now, whether that's - I don't know if that's a problem with me, my accent, or whatever. They speak so 'nice', but maybe I'm reading too much into it. I don't know. (Kevin, 30, Old University)

The 'thickness' of the Northern, working-class accent has another connotation which Susan (23), at New University, noted when she expressed the worry that other students would hear her accent and think that she was 'thick'. Comments such as these illustrate graphically the way in which working-class habitus, inscribed in 'bodily hexis' in the form of accent, becomes an instant marker of social class and, by proxy, of level of intelligence and stock of cultural capital. Some of the working-class students were acutely aware of this, feeling as a consequence under-confident and ill-at-ease in the academic environment.

## **6.5 Tutors**

In the main, students at all three institutions commented that tutors were approachable and helpful: 'they seem to bend over backwards to help' (Jack, 42, College); 'I think they're more approachable than what I imagined' (Pam, 37, New University); 'all the tutors in general have been quite helpful' (Kevin, 30, Old University). However, careful probing of some interviewees revealed a number of sources of dissatisfaction with their relationships with tutors.

### 6.5.1 Uncertainty about the Relationship

The relatively close relationships students had had with their Access tutors in the 'cosy' learning environment of the Access course contrasted unfavourably with the perceived *physical* distance between tutors and students in the higher education environment.

Mary, for example, commented: 'You don't see that many of them.....You only see them at lectures' (Mary, 45, Old University). At New University, Maureen voiced a similar perception:

...on the Access course you can find the tutors all in one staff room at will whereas, here, you all have your little rooms, your little offices, and you come and give a lecture and then you stand around to talk to students and then wander off back to your little offices. I don't know whether you feel it, as a tutor, but if I was a tutor here I would feel alienated from my students. (Maureen, 34, New University)

This perception of a physical distance between tutors and students and a lack of knowledge of the conventions and processes in higher education initially created uncertainty about the nature of the tutor-student relationship and the appropriateness of asking for help from tutors. At College, Diane (who had transferred from an Access course elsewhere) initially felt unsure about how much help was on offer or should be asked for:

...most of them are extremely helpful....I don't feel frightened at approaching them; they're there for you . In fact, I didn't use them enough....last term. But I certainly shall do this term. It's a case of, I think, as much finding your feet - feeling what they are prepared to give as well. And until you know what they're prepared to give, you can't go in like a bull at a china shop, can you? Say: 'Now then, I want so-and so'. They might turn round and say: 'Sorry! We don't do that here!' So you've got to tread warily, I think, haven't you? Until you actually find, you know, where you stand with them. (Diane, 42, College)

### 6.5.2 Aloofness

Although the physical distance between tutors and students and the location of tutors in their own offices acted initially as a deterrent to interaction, there was also a suspicion among some interviewees that offers of help from tutors were not really genuine. At New University, for example, Sally noted:

I feel, in a way, that I'm a bit distant from the lecturers because you only see them in lectures and you feel as though they're not really approachable in any other times. I know that they do say, 'If you've got any problems, come to me' but I feel as if that's just a front and that really we shouldn't go to them. (Sally, 26, New University)

One interpretation of this perceived reluctance on the part of tutors to engage in one-to-one tutoring was that they were 'aloof' and 'stand-offish': 'he [the tutor] sits and looks as though he's looking through you, do you know what I mean? I don't know; I don't think I could go and talk to him' (Mary, 45, Old University). This feeling was expressed by others, at both universities. Tina, for example, remarked:

The staff are a bit - some of them here - they're more aloof....as if they've not got the time to get to know you....They don't even know our names and things like that, even since September. I find that a bit strange. ...So that's one of the big differences [between Access and higher education]: just the impersonal relationships. (Tina, 38, New University)

There is an indication that, for some of the interviewees the perceived 'aloofness' of some of the tutors appeared to act as a powerful source of deterrent to ask for help. This was particularly the case for those from working-class backgrounds, some of whom appeared to be in awe of tutors, especially in the early months of the degree course. For example, Maureen commented:

On the Access course, the staff were very approachable, very friendly, and they were sort of on our level. And then you come here and it's just as though you stand in awe of these lecturers, you just do - I don't know why, but you just think they're gods and I'm just a mere mortal. (Maureen, 34, New University)

However, for Paula, a middle-class student used to asserting herself and asking for (and obtaining) help if she needed it, gaining access to tutors was not a problem:

Well, I'm definitely middle class and I would say that I take that and use every moment of that so I know how to play the system by having a nice, middle-class accent and asking to have my essay plans checked...I sort of feel that the rapport between myself and the lecturers has something to do with the fact that we are the same class, probably, and that, because I'm verbally a talker, a contributor, and hard worker....that I'm probably a nice person to have in their class because I'm keen. And I'm sure I would be disadvantaged if I was [working class]. I mean, there would be an element of the class in that and the fact that we can

relate to each other on the level of being similar. One of my lecturers lives round the corner from me..... (Paula, 30, New University)

### 6.5.3 Busy Doing Other Things

Some interviewees felt that they were discouraged from approaching tutors, who were busy doing other things. Brian, for example, argued that, although students *could* see tutors individually, they were not encouraged to do so: 'the times are very carefully set out when you mustn't disturb them because they're doing their research and such like' (Brian, 46, Old University). Similarly, Sally commented: 'I just feel that I couldn't come and knock on your door; I feel you're just too busy doing other things' (Sally, 26, New University). A number of interviewees at both universities therefore concluded that the 'aloofness' of tutors arose because teaching and supporting students were not really their primary concern:

...I don't think they're interested in students. I don't think they're interested in you academically. I think they regard you as being a distraction...from the really important work, which is whatever they're doing when they're not with you.....research - those kinds of things. I mean, we have a [tutor] who does lab classes with us. And he gives us a video and then he buggers off. And one time he came running in at the end of the video, breathless, and said: 'Gosh, I'd forgotten all about you!' And he thought the video had ended and that we were all sitting there with nothing to do. And I think that typifies how they feel about first years. They maybe take more of an interest in you afterwards. (Bella, 30, Old University)

### 6.5.4 'Never been out in the real world'

A commonly-held view of students in all three institutions was that tutors were not in the 'real world' and were not 'down to earth' (Jenny, 32, College). At College, Joe (54) spoke of 'academics who've never been out in the real world' and Diane (42) elaborated on this theme, adding a class dimension:

They become cloistered in their own little world and they don't know what's happening outside. I mean....for somebody here to go into [local town] market on a Saturday afternoon, it'd be a right culture shock because...they wouldn't be able to understand the language half of the time. Because, I mean, mine's not as broad as it could be, but if you go into really broad Yorkshire, you know...I mean, I sometimes have difficulty with it. And it would be interesting to....put a load of tutors from different colleges in a little band in the middle of [local town] on a Saturday afternoon and ask them, 'Just go and try and speak'. And

question: 'What do you think about this?' And just see how long they'd last without thinking: 'Oh God, I can't cope with this!'. And I think they forget, actually, what the real world is like; I really do. (Diane, 42, College)

For Jenny (32, College), a middle-class student, tutors were 'cocooned within somewhat closed cloisters'. Safe in the cosy world of academia, they were regarded by some of the interviewees as not *really* understanding the commitments that mature students had at home and how these impacted on their ability to study: 'I don't think really the staff here know what it's like, I really don't. I still feel that they are living in cuckoo land' (Jenny). Jenny went on to argue that, when she took a problem to her tutors, 'they solve[d] it very academically; they don't come down to earth'.

This feeling that tutors were 'living in cuckoo land' can be interpreted as arising, at least in part, from a disjunction between experiential and academic knowledge which some of the interviewees had not anticipated when they transferred to higher education. Many argued that their life experiences as mature adults were important but were not recognised by tutors, who adopted a wholly *academic* approach - even to personal problems. The consequences of this tension between experiential and academic knowledge for selfhood is examined next and its implications for the development of an 'academic style' are discussed in Chapter 7.

## **6.6 Perceptions of 'Hazard'**

### **6.6.1 Putting Yourself on the Line**

Many students - around half of those interviewed - expressed feelings in the early months of the course which indicated that the transition to higher education was viewed as a risk, an 'occasion of hazard' in the moral career (Harré, 1993: 206 – see 2.3.3). These feelings surfaced as serious doubts about the ability to succeed at this level of study which some students coped with, initially, by mentally distancing themselves from the institution. For example, at New University, Pam commented that enrolling on the course was a risk that she was taking only because the tutors on the Access course were sure that she could cope. Nevertheless, she clearly reserved judgement until she got to university, distancing herself from the experience until she was *sure* that she could manage:



...before you got here [you were] thinking: 'I'll see how it goes because I can always pack it in if I don't like it', you know....because it's an unknown, total unknown, you know - an unknown, and that. So I think that's probably why you put your distance rather than build up these wonderful expectations and then you're disappointed. I think perhaps its just a strategy for dealing with it in case it doesn't turn out and you think: 'Well, I've been and tried it and I didn't like it. (Pam, 37, New University)

Similarly, at the Old University, Wendy did not feel that she could mentally commit herself to the goal of obtaining a degree until she was sure that she could cope with the course:

I'm always frightened of trying to tackle something and coming crashing down to earth, you know: 'It's far too high!'. Which I think is why I always said it was only an interest at first; I couldn't commit myself right from the beginning to say, 'I want to do this', you know. (Wendy, 40, Old University)

Kevin (30), who gained a place at Old University, perceived this course of action as a 'big gamble': he was 'putting himself on the line' and was unsure that he could get through the course. Self-doubt was expressed by many students - even one or two at College - and was explicitly linked by some to negative experiences of the education system in the past. Paul, for example, claimed: 'the barrier...is your own self-doubt because it's been instilled by the education system that you've come from' (Paul, 40, College). This self-doubt may be responsible for a reluctance to approach tutors for guidance or to ask questions in seminars or tutorials: these questions might be seen as trivial or unnecessary and result in a loss of face. Sally, for example, felt that, in her desire to 'know a bit more', she might ask a question which tutors would see as silly: '....a lecturer might say , "Well, you've read it! You know the answer already!"'. She reported an incident that had taken place in one of her seminars:

...I said something and it was wrong and I felt really small....and I spent half an hour thinking, 'Oh my god, I'm not going to say anything else ever again! (Sally, 26, New University)

Interestingly, in her second year at the university, Sally conceded that lack of confidence had been responsible for her perception of tutors as 'unapproachable' the previous academic year: 'I think it was probably me under-confident to actually really go and say

to them, "Look...". I was probably making a few excuses up, actually, saying that they were unapproachable'.

Self-doubt was most acute in relation to assessment. Bearing out James's stress on the significance of assignment grades for the self perception and personal worth of mature students (James, 1995: 463), many of the interviewees clearly saw assessment in particular as potentially extremely damaging to their self esteem: it represented an 'occasion of risk' which had to be faced in order to gain the respect of others. A common fear was of failure and the contempt of others. Margaret, for example, claimed that she 'felt sick for days' after handing in an essay and Wendy noted: 'I found doing the first essays....[a] very daunting task; I was terrified to put pen to paper' (Wendy, 40, Old University). Examinations in particular were a source of great fear for many students and a poor mark could be interpreted as a *true* reflection of ability, as Bella notes:

...my own feeling about it is.....that [poor mark] shows exactly, you know, where I am - that given all the time in the world, I can put something together but, under the same conditions as everybody else.....I do worse than everybody else.....deep down, that's how I feel, that sinking feeling, that disappointment, a sense of shame and also a sense of, well, you know, you had such big ideas and here you are! This is **really** what, you know, you're able to do. (Bella, 30, Old University)

#### 6.6.2 Earning Your Place

A commonly-expressed sentiment was that, as a mature student, you had to *earn* your place, to show that you *deserved* it by achieving good marks in assessment: 'if I pass these first year exams, then I will feel I've *earned* my place' (Margaret, 41, Old University). This could lead to a feeling - expressed by a number of students - that they had to *excel* to prove that they were worthy of a place, as Bella illustrated:

...what I'm afraid of is not getting a first...I mean, to me, that is a big pressure because anything less than perfect is a fail....And that sounds like I'm full of pride but I think it hides, you know, those feelings of inadequacy that I have to kind of prove myself all the time and there has to be no doubt that I **deserve** a place. (Bella, 30, Old University)

Sometimes, 'earning you place' was associated with not asking tutors for help, especially at Old University:

I think, as mature students, you don't want to feel you're asking [for help]....we've got...these high expectations and to ask for help seems like you're not coping on your own...someone will turn round and say, 'Yes, but I helped with that', or if I'd got a better mark after someone had looked it through, I would think, 'Maybe it's because they've helped me to do it'.  
(Margaret, 41, Old University)

They [tutors] have a very sort of traditional view of a university degree and that is that you 'read' for a degree, you know: 'We're there to point you in the right direction'. So if you want too much support, it's almost as though you're not actually getting your degree. (Bella, 30, Old University)

This was not, however, a view expressed by College students, for whom a high level of tutor support appeared to be the norm. Sarah, for example, praised the tutors for their help with essay preparation:

They're excellent; they are excellent. They might as well write the essay for you...they give you all the information; they give you a guideline....they have all given us an outline of the areas that they want to see in that essay.  
(Sarah, 39, College)

For students in all three institutions, however, performance in assessment was a source of great anxiety and the first year at least could be viewed as a roller-coaster of emotional highs and lows as they lurched from one piece of assessed work to the next, doing either better or worse than they hoped: 'I tend to have periods of feeling good and then....lapses into insecurity' (Kevin, 30, Old University). However, assessment anxiety may be seen as acting as a proxy for a much deeper anxiety about self identity.

### 6.6.3 Losing the 'sense of one's place'

As noted in 1.5.4.1, MacDonald and Stratta (1998: 76) argue that mature students enter higher education with statuses derived from domestic or paid employment which give them a sense of being able to control events in their lives; the transition to education threatens this sense of control as students encounter an 'occasion of hazard' during which others can pass judgement on them. It may be argued, however, that this

potential lack of control is only one dimension of a wider experience of losing the 'sense of one's place' which, it has been contended, is at the centre of identity formation.

In Chapter 2 it was suggested that identity is forged as individual biography unfolds within a given social context and that 'the sense of self is a distillation of personal exploration and the affirmations and denials of others' (Abrams, 1982: 249). The habitus from which the mature students in this study were drawn may be thought to have provided a relatively stable anchorage for self-identity - albeit one which may have been under severe strain following life changes such as losing paid employment or full-time child-care responsibilities. The transition to higher education, however, was a serious threat as all the familiar anchors of identity were no longer relevant in that context and a new, 'academic' identity had to be *achieved*. Yet, for these students, personal exploration in this new context engendered a feeling of being *different* to significant others and a fear that this place may not really *be* one's place; exploration carried the risk of denial, rather than affirmation, of these others, of contempt rather than respect (this is explored further in Chapter 8). From this point of view, *all* mature students may experience, in some degree or other, feelings of insecurity and doubt.

Of crucial importance to mature students is the life experience that they have: this is at the heart of their selfhood. They may therefore attempt to preserve a sense of security in the educational context by affirming the value of their previous life experiences and may work to develop a distinctive identity as *mature* students. Jenny, for example, a middle-class student who had experienced educational failure at school and been compared unfavourably with her siblings, clung on to her status as a *mature* student. When asked if she felt like a student, she replied:

Sometimes, the way they treat you. They don't treat you like you're a mother with two kids and everything else. I think they treat you like an empty vessel....which they fill with what they want you to hear and not to have to think for yourselves - an empty vessel. (Jenny, 32, College)

In her second year at College, Jenny started work on a project and recalled an incident when she went, with another mature student, to a General Practitioner's surgery to ask

for a questionnaire to be filled in. The receptionist spoke to the doctor about this in their hearing:

...she said, 'Oh, there's a couple of students here who want to give you a questionnaire to fill in about the practice'. And we just looked at each other and went: 'We're just students?', you know. We introduced ourselves as *mature* students doing a degree and then this receptionist turned round and said, 'Oh, there's a couple of *students* here who want to give you a questionnaire to fill in about the practice'. And I thought, 'That doesn't go down very well, that!', you know. (Jenny, 32, College)

The life experiences of mature students play a central role in their sense of difference and, as the case of Jenny would seem to suggest, may be held on to in the new educational context - especially by mature female students, whose roles as mothers and housewives may act as powerful alternative sources of identity and affirmation of selfhood. However, the *value* of this experience is not necessarily recognised by tutors and this is resented by some students. Jenny illustrated this well:

...they [the tutors], sort of, one minute turn round and say, 'Yes, you have a wealth of mature knowledge and you want to use that'. And then you get slapped over the wrist and [they] say, 'Naughty! Can't do that'. It isn't fair, really, you know, when one minute they're saying, 'Yes, we want to use that knowledge' but that knowledge isn't being used; it's not being allowed to be used. (Jenny, 32, College)

## 6.7 Summary

The data illustrates that the transition to higher education was viewed as an 'occasion of hazard' by most of the interviewees. A partial exception to this was those at College, most of whom were already familiar with the environment through their Access courses. However, students in all three institutions were unprepared for the sheer *scale* of the teaching context and uncertain about protocol: for example, the nature of the relationship with tutors and the level of help that could be expected from them. Many of the interviewees at the two universities experienced disjunction arising from a perception that, as mature students, they did not really fit in, that they were out of place in the higher-education context. In addition, old anchors of identity were seen as irrelevant in this context and new, *academic* identities had to be achieved. Assessment

therefore took on enormous importance, becoming the focus of acute anxiety for many of the interviewees, as James (1995) and Young (2000) also note in their research (see 1.5.2).

However, many of the working-class interviewees in the two universities appeared to have an additional source of dislocation and more intense feelings of disjunction than their middle-class counterparts, using graphic language to describe how they felt like ‘impostors’ and ‘interlopers’, waiting for a ‘tap on the shoulder’ to tell them that they had been ‘found out’: it had all been a mistake; they were not intelligent enough to be there; they had to leave. Although all students may experience feelings of disjunction as they transfer to higher education, for working-class students there appears to be a *fundamental* dissonance. Crucially, there are a number of points of disjunction between the working-class habitus and the assumptions and language underlying the academic style which may make the development of an academic identity a difficult process for working-class students, whatever kind of higher-education institution they attend. The academic style and the difficulties students have in learning it are the focus of the following chapter.



## **7.1 Introduction**

Many of the interviewees gave long and detailed descriptions of the adjustments they had to make to conform to the academic expectations of higher education; indeed, for many, this was a central and recurring theme as they progressed through their courses and indicated a crucial source of disjunction. In this chapter it will be argued that successful adjustment to higher education required the acquisition of an academic stance which, for many of the students in this study, represented an alien view of the world and of their relationship to it. The chapter will explore the accounts of the academic stance given by these students and their difficulties in mastering it and it will be argued that, for some, the acquisition of this stance represented, at least in part, a potential (and occasionally recognised) betrayal of working-class roots.

## **7.2 Perceptions of the Academic Stance**

Most of the interviewees drew attention to the form of writing required in higher education, arguing that it involved a distinctive *style*. Sally, for example, commented: 'I don't know - there's a definite style there but I think you've got to learn to do it' (Sally, 26, New University, Year 3). Although many had difficulty in explaining what this style entailed, there was a general consensus that it had to be acquired and that this was a lengthy and often difficult process.

### **7.2.1 A 'certain way of saying things'**

Many interviewees saw the distinctive style as 'a certain way of saying things':

I think [the academic style] is sort of just stating things certain ways, isn't it? I've actually become quite aware of this, also listening to Radio Four all the time now. But if you listen to Radio Four, if you listen to 'Question Time', they all have a certain way of saying things and they say it like almost how you write it down in academic form. I would say that's the sort of academic style.  
(Anne, 42, Old University, Year 3)

Although many had difficulty in identifying exactly what this ‘certain way of saying things’ entailed, most drew attention to the importance of a wide vocabulary:

It is, to a certain extent, a different language that we’re using at university....it’s using long words instead of short ones. It sounds silly but, like, I can be writing an essay and I can think, ‘And this shows -’ and I think, ‘No, that didn’t sound right, I can’t do that’. And so I spend ages and then I think, ‘No! This **demonstrates**’, you know. (Wendy, 40, Old University, Year 3)

Grammatical accuracy was referred to by others: ‘It’s being able to put your words on to the paper in sentences that sound correct, that look correct’ (Sally, 26, New University, Year 3). Some, however, felt that an extensive vocabulary and accurate grammar were only part of the academic style and Diane drew attention to a *nuanced* characteristic of academic writing when she commented that careful reading was necessary to reveal the ‘hidden meanings’:

I just think it’s a style that makes the reader think, to be quite honest. An academic style is to make you aware that it’s not only what’s written down, it’s what’s in between the lines that you’ve to pick out as well, you know. (Diane, 42, College, Year 3)

At the same time, echoing Bourdieu’s argument that academic language is ‘designed to dazzle rather than to enlighten’ (1994: 3), Diane felt that academic writing was unnecessarily circuitous and long-winded, arguing that academics ‘write fifteen lines when they can write three and they tend to go round the houses....It’s like a case of verbal diarrhoea, isn’t it?’ (Diane, 42, College, Year 3).

Emerging from these and similar comments made by other interviewees is a frequent *ambivalence* about the academic style and whether it represented a sophisticated, accurate use of language or an attempt to ‘dazzle rather than enlighten’. There is an indication in some of the interviews that this ambivalence was rooted in a concern, often only partially recognised, that the adoption of an academic style represented a changed way of looking at the world and a potential betrayal of previously-held views.

In addition to a sophisticated understanding of language and *style* of writing, an academic approach was also argued to involve a distinctive *stance* involving an analytical and questioning approach to the social world: ‘I think it’s just being analytical and argumentative and you don’t believe everything you read; learn to question things and then you write like that yourself’ (Tina, 38, New University, Year 3). Many interviewees felt that, to develop this stance, they needed to move from an approach which grounded knowledge in personal experience and prejudice to one which grounded it less personally. Anne, for example, spoke of ‘not putting yourself into your writing’ and of adopting a perspective which was ‘fairly non-committal, third party sort of’ (Anne, 42, Old University, Year 3). This notion of distancing yourself from your academic writing was commented on by many of the interviewees, who argued that it involved, in some way, a negation of personal experience and creativity - a point which is discussed below.

For some of the interviewees, the ‘non-committal, third party’ approach was simply a stylistic convention that they had to adopt in their writing:

...it’s the way you phrase it, I think - it’s the way I seem to write, anyway. You don’t put, ‘Well, I think this’ and ‘I think that’ - ‘It is believed that’, or ‘It may be assumed that’. And it’s sort of, it’s like a language. You’re still saying the same thing: it’s just not acceptable to write it in one way and it’s more acceptable in others. So I seem to think. I don’t know; I might be wrong - not got anything thrown back at me yet! (Tina, 38, New University, Year 3)

Others, however, argued that, underlying this stylistic convention, was a requirement that academic arguments had to be supported by some kind of ‘evidence’: as Joe put it, in an academic essay there is a need to concentrate on ‘*proving* everything, or referring to so-called experts or quotes’ (Joe, 54, College, Year 3). Joe stressed the importance of ‘putting both sides of the argument’ and others commented on the importance of this in academic writing:

...they like you to have both sides of the argument and then try and come down on one side or the other. But even then you wouldn’t say, ‘So I think somebody’s right’, you’d say, ‘From the evidence, it would appear that -’. I

mean, it's still what you're thinking, isn't it, but you just have to learn to write that, to get it over that you come down on that particular side, that you've weighed all the evidence up first before you made that choice.  
(Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 2)

For Julie, critical thinking depended upon 'being able to stand back so that you can listen with an open mind': looking for different perspectives, identifying criticisms of each and reaching a balanced conclusion (Julie, 31, College, Year 3).

The balanced, impartial perspective that was generally argued to be necessary in academic writing was therefore seen by the interviewees as necessitating both a *distance* between themselves and the objects of their enquiry and a different, more nuanced, view of the social world. Jenny illustrated this graphically when she commented: 'You don't treat things as simply as what is black and white; you look for the shades of grey in between' (Jenny, 32, College, Year 3). Adopting an academic stance involved, in some ways, a less certain view of the social world and a recognition that there was more than one way of seeing it: different perspectives had to be carefully considered, evidence assessed and conflicting arguments taken into account. There is a strong indication in many of the interviews that working-class students in particular may have problems in achieving the impartial and nuanced view of the social world which underpins an academic approach and it is to this class dimension of the academic stance that I now turn.

### 7.3 Social Class and the Academic Stance

#### 7.3.1 'I always feel disadvantaged'

Brian, a middle-class interviewee, spoke of the 'elitist, exclusive style' in evidence at Old University, a style exemplified by the use of Latin and French tags and phrases in academic writing:

The sort of view, you know, that you should be able to read Latin and French and, you know, things like that; it irritates me, and this is the sort of old Oxford and Cambridge idea of classical education almost, that it goes back to, that everybody could read Latin. (Brian, 26, Old University, Year 3)

He argued: ‘you’d never expect a working-class student to come along with a knowledge of Latin, would you?’ Although this kind of ‘elitism’ was not generally commented upon, the idea of a basic compatibility between the academic world and a middle-class background - and, conversely, an incompatibility between this world and a working-class background - was expressed by a number of students. Although Joe (54, College, Year 3) argued that it would be an ‘over-simplification’ to see the academic style as a middle-class style, others disagreed. Margaret, for example, commented, ‘I’ve had to learn to lift my game, lift the essays that I write into a sort of middle-class chat....I think the academic side is middle class’ (Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 2). Similarly, Jack claimed that middle-class language is ‘academic’ but working-class language is not: ‘A lot of working-class people have working-class language, don’t they, which is not academic’ (Jack, 42, College, Year 2). Pam argued that, for students drawn from working-class backgrounds, the academic style was ‘something that you’ve not been taught’. She felt that middle-class students perceived no difference between their usual language style and that required in academia but, for working-class students, ‘it’s an adjustment you’ve got to make that maybe middle-class people haven’t got to make’ (Pam, 37, New University, Year 3). This perception was endorsed by Paula, a middle-class student, who commented: ‘I probably have, already have, some of the speaking style that’s more appropriate to academia, so language isn’t such a barrier’ (Paula, 30, New University, Year 3).

Despite a fairly widespread agreement between the interviewees that a congruence existed between middle-class and academic language, many had difficulty identifying the precise constituents of language use which gave middle-class students an advantage. Although Pam believed that essays involved ‘writing in middle-class language’, she had difficulty identifying exactly what ‘skill’ was involved in this language, which remained a mystery to her right up to the end of the course:

It’s very hard to say, you know...I think that type of skill - it’s hard to put; it’s hard to say - but, yes, I think there [are]..differences that you get marked down on, you know...Although your ideas are there, it’s the way you put it over...That’s hard: What do they [the tutors] really want, then? You know....you think, like, ‘Well, yes, we’ve got the ideas, on the right lines and everything’, but: ‘If you had put it in this order or that order you would have got more marks’. So it’s that which I think would come back to like your class roots, you

know, and that....And the others that I've talked to, the ones that are struggling with, like, depth and their style, and it's down to the language skills, you know. (Pam, 37, New University, Year 3)

Kevin felt that, of central importance, were being 'more articulate', having a more structured mode of speech and a wider vocabulary which, he felt, were consistent with the University's academic requirements. However, in contrast to the middle-class students around him, he felt inarticulate, which created a feeling of disadvantage and a persistent, underlying lack of confidence: 'So I feel less confident in, like, a subjective way - I always feel disadvantaged, sort of thing. It's that confidence, always lack of confidence; it's always at the back of your mind' (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 2). Wendy similarly spoke of the importance of vocabulary, of 'using long words and knowing what they mean', and felt that 'these words come natural' to some students but not to those drawn from the working-class, who 'can't find the words to put down on the paper' (Wendy, 40, Old University, Year 3). However, for some of the interviewees, being 'more articulate' meant more than acquiring a wider vocabulary; it was associated with the adoption of a *way of thinking* with which they were unfamiliar.

### 7.3.2 A Way of Thinking

Echoing Bourdieu's claim that material differences between people, inscribed in the habitus, are reflected in representations of the social world which provide a vocabulary 'to name and think the social' (Bourdieu, 1987: 10), some interviewees saw the academic style as involving a *way of thinking* which needed to be instilled in children at an early age:

I don't know if it's the parents that have taught them to think in a certain way - think about things that perhaps my parents never tried to get me to think about....I asked my Dad something when I was young and he said. 'What tha' bloody asking me for? Tha' wants an academic. It's alright asking me!' So I don't know if it's a sort of way of thinking that you're taught from an early age; I'm not sure. (Susan, 23, New University, Year 3)

This *way of thinking* was associated, among other things, with an emotional detachment from the personal experiences which are central to social identity and perceptions of selfhood. Such detachment may be difficult for mature students who have more life experience than younger students, as Wendy noted:



...I did feel that my arguments would have fallen on to emotion rather than logic out of it and, again, it is perhaps because you're a mature student; you have got life experiences beforehand - being, as you know, the majority of them [other students] have come straight from school, done A Levels, on to university, and haven't got the same life experiences. So they're in a way still more into this mode of logical thinking, of weighing up the arguments for and against and everything. (Wendy, 40, Old University, Year 3)

However, emotional detachment may be even more difficult for people at the 'sharp end' of social existence. Bella graphically illustrated this point in her account of the experience of growing up in a low-income family; in her academic writing she had to learn to stand back from this 'anecdotal' experience to adopt a more 'objective' standpoint:

I daren't talk about my experience because that's anecdotal. You know, I **might** have been the only person who felt ashamed for standing in a different queue for school dinners or having - instead of being given money for a free school uniform - having that handed over, the voucher handed over the counter, terrified that somebody else, you know, in school, would see that my uniform was free as well; afraid that the second-hand clothes that my mother had bought in Oxfam would be, you know, somebody else's.....That's my, my sort of, sort of painful memories of that. But that's anecdotal - that doesn't count, that doesn't matter, you know, 'You're lucky you had clothes!' kind of thing. So I had to come up with something more concrete, something more general, something more objective. (Bella, 30, Old University, Year 2)

Emotional detachment may also be especially difficult when students feel that their experiences as working-class people are misrepresented in academic discourse, as Wendy recounted:

You know, you sort of wanted to say, 'Yeah, but they didn't feel that way', you know, 'We don't feel that way'. But yet you're not backing it up with anything. Perhaps because of research that's not been done in that way in the past, you know nobody's actually written it down and said, you know, 'This is how the working class live'. And not many sort of working-class people have written it down and said, 'This is how we live', you know. You're sort of getting views all the time from a middle-class writer talking about the working class. So you've got this going off but, yeah, it's very difficult for us to build that argument up without relying on our emotions and saying, 'No, we didn't feel this way', and what have you, 'There isn't this working-class solidarity around us', you know, 'We still, we all look out for ourselves and everything'. But, then, you're just relying on your emotion and your own experience. (Wendy, 40, Old University, Year 3)

What Wendy is drawing attention to here is the way in which history can be seen to be written from an essentially middle-class standpoint which may not be consistent with the lived experience of working-class people. The traditional middle-class dominance of intellectual production has left working-class people unable to challenge ‘official’ accounts of history without recourse to personal experience and emotion because they have not traditionally had access to the recognised *techniques* (of research, recording of evidence and so on) or the *language skills* which insulate academic writing from personal experience.

### 7.3.3 Two Languages?

Interestingly, two interviewees – one middle-class and one working-class – spoke of the need for two languages: an everyday, experientially-based language and an impartial, measured academic language. Paula, a middle-class student, spoke of possessing two ‘languages’:

I don’t know if I want to think that the only language is academic language, or an intelligent language - a head language. You know, I often talk, I often think in a heart language really, and that is when I’m enjoying myself the most.  
(Paula, 30, New University, Year 2)

Similarly, Bella referred to two languages, an academic language and an experiential one. In an argument which supports Bourdieu’s claim that, for working-class students, the appropriate style of language to succeed in education has to be acquired within the education system itself, Bella argued that working-class students, unlike their middle-class counterparts, are unlikely to possess both kinds of language:

If my background was different....I’d just have two languages....because everyone has access to....the language of feelings and what your thoughts are and your own particular prejudices. It’s just that we get the chance to have a go with the other stuff [academic language] much later on.  
(Bella, 30, Old University, Year 2)

### 7.3.4 Interim Summary

To summarise the argument so far, academic language was viewed by some of the interviewees as more than a specialised vocabulary, a set of skills or a style of writing. In addition to these, it implied a certain view of the social world and of one’s

relationship to it which represented a potential negation of the personal experiences which underlie identity and selfhood. As such, the academic stance may represent a potential source of disjunction for all mature students. However, the experience of disjunction in the higher education setting is argued to be more likely, or more acute, for working-class students as the world view underpinning the academic stance is conditioned by social class. As Bourdieu points out, an academic stance presupposes a distance from the exigencies of day-to-day material hardship that working-class students do not have. The language of these students, which ‘hugs the ground of practical experience’ (Charlesworth, 2000: 214), reflects a ‘narrow’ view of life which is inconsistent with the measured impartiality of the academic approach: ‘I think there’s a lot of working-class people who only look down a very narrow road and are not willing to, you know, take in other views - it’s their views, and that’s that!’ (Anne, 42, Old University, Year 3). Academic language reflects both a degree of detachment from the social world and its symbolic mastery: academics inhabit a world in which words, rather than experience, define the reality they seek to explain. This may be an alien world to many working-class students, whose involvement at the ‘sharp end’ of existence makes a stance of impartial detachment from the social world less easy. The class habitus of these students provides a set of dispositions which is inscribed in their language style and creates difficulties for academic writing. It is unsurprising that some of them were resentful of what they perceived to be a negation of their personal experience in higher education and adopted an academic stance reluctantly and instrumentally. Before turning to a discussion of this, however, students’ strategies for learning the academic stance will be explored.

#### **7.4 Learning the Academic Stance**

Jack argued that ‘most working-class people don’t do a lot of writing; it’s not part of their culture....and you’ve got to learn that’ (Jack, 42, College, Year 3). Many of the interviewees described in detail the process of learning to write academically:

You have to learn to become academic, I think. I think the Access course helped with that a bit - study skills that we did. But we’ve learnt. You just pick it up, I think, through reading: you read the books and you learn all the academic

language and how to put your arguments forward. So I think it's something you learn rather than something that's in you. (Tina, 38, New University, Year 3)

#### 7.4.1 The *Art* of Study

Part of this learning process was acquiring appropriate study skills. Julie, for example, commented: ‘..it’s learning how to study, because you don’t know how. It’s an art; there is a way of studying. Once you’ve grasped it you can study anything.....Some people never grasp it’ (Julie, 31, College, Year 3). Most students spoke very positively of the Access courses they had attended, claiming that they had helped enormously with study skills, teaching them, for example, the ‘knack’ of writing essays (Julie, Year 1). Sally, on the other hand, spoke of the ‘little tricks’ of study that she had learnt along the way but indicated that these had not been formally taught: ‘I wish when I’d started I would have had someone that I’d known who’d done a degree to say to me, “Look, this is how you do this, that and the other”. And they didn’t’ (Sally, 26, New University, Year 3).

Skills necessary for dealing with difficult academic material had to be developed by all students. For most, this was a lonely task and many commented that the mutual support system they had formed with other mature students did not involve scrutiny of each other’s work - ‘proving yourself’ in the academic world usually meant doing your work alone. Julie described how she learned to pick academic material apart through a lengthy process of reading and re-reading and, when this did not work, looking for sources which simplified complex ideas or asking for help. She described other skills she had had to learn in the following way:

You’ve got to know what’s relevant and what isn’t relevant, what to discard and what not to, you know; like when you come to do an assignment, for example, you’ve got to know by looking just at a page of a book whether that book’s any good - you’ve got to learn that. You’ve got to learn to skim read; you’ve got to learn to be critical; you’ve got to learn not to take things at face value. This is all part of being a student, being able to learn more. (Julie, 31, College, Year 3)

What stands out in the interviews is the grit and determination necessary for academic success - the constant battle to maintain confidence in the face of potential failure and the frequent cry from the heart: ‘What do they [the tutors] really want, then?’ (Pam).

Certainly, for many of these students, the process of acquiring an academic stance was often difficult and time-consuming and they anguished about their progress throughout their time in higher education. Basic problems of grammar and spelling dogged the progress of some; others had constant battles to structure their essays and develop coherent and sustained lines of argument:

...I've got to get as much information as I can and jot it all into six or seven sides and I find that I've got, like, a massive pile of notes, that I get sort of interested in the subject and, before I know it, I've got all these notes and I can't really structure it into a small essay and I get bogged down. And then I think, 'Oh God, should I put it there, or should I put **that** there?'. So I'm not organised with essays and I'm having problems. (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 1)

Wendy described her difficulties in changing her everyday vocabulary for one more appropriate for academic work, commenting: 'I do feel as though I'm dragging every word up from my toes and what have you, because I'm thinking, "No, that word isn't right", although it's saying the same thing and what have you, you know' (Wendy, 40, Old University, Year 3). Sally spoke of negative feedback she had received for one of her essays, which pointed to errors of spelling, paragraphing and structure:

I'm not very good at English and I know I'm not and I do try hard and....I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm sat there with a dictionary', you know, 'and I still spell words wrong!' And I hate it....And there's vocabulary as well. I've not got a massive vocabulary and I sit there with the Thesaurus and look at words, just think, 'I know this word fits; let me just look at some other words what I can use that maybe'll sound a little bit intellectual and put that one in'. (Sally, 26, New University, Year 1)

Margaret similarly described how she had to painstakingly build an appropriate vocabulary: she would sit through each lecture, 'write down words and then go home and look them up' (Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 2). Even by the third year, some of the interviewees were still reporting problems with essay technique; Diane, for example, commented: 'I can't say my academic style is brilliant, because it's not!'. For Diane, acquiring the art of study had clearly been a difficult and emotionally-charged process:

I've sat and cried for hours on end and I've thought, 'I can't read this book' and I've read a paragraph fifteen times and thought, 'what the hell does that mean?' because I can't understand it. (Diane, 42, College, Year 3)

#### 7.4.2 The Problem of Spoken Style

Sally and Margaret identified an important source of their difficulties as their working-class speech patterns which constantly intruded into their academic writing:

I think what I found difficult was probably a lot to do with how I talk. I don't know, I think that's probably a lot to do with being brought up on the wrong side of [the city] and missing out, you know - not talking proper and so not being able to write properly. So I sort of write as I talk, which is quite - that has been quite difficult, and it's improved a lot, and a lot of people have picked me up on things what I've done. So I've improved my writing ever such a lot now.  
(Sally, 26, New University, Year 3)

...it's learning now to write. I think it's learning that you can't - you can't write in the way I would have spoke as a child....I mean, I do some things in an essay and someone will say, 'It's not really academic'.  
(Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 2)

Similarly, Kevin spoke of the need for constant vigilance to prevent his working-class oral style transferring to his written work, which he felt sounded 'terrible' (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3). However, there was some disagreement about the necessity of changing your spoken style. Pam, for example, argued that although a 'working-class style' is inappropriate for written work, it is no hindrance to 'getting on with your courses' and, in classroom discussions, she claimed that she did not think about her oral style unless giving a presentation (Pam, 37, New University, Year 3). Others disagreed. Jack, for example, claimed: 'I think a [South Yorkshire accent] would not be fully appropriate, if I started going, 'Tha' knows' and 'Tha' knows what?' and that sort of thing...It just doesn't seem appropriate here' (Jack, 42, College, Year 2). Sally remained embarrassed about her spoken style throughout her time at university: 'I just kind of say the first thing that comes out of my mouth. It's awful when the tape's on as well because it makes you even worse' (Sally, 26, New University, Year 3).



### 7.4.3 Learning a Foreign Language

A key strategy identified by the interviewees for learning the academic stance was *imitation*. Kevin, for example, spoke about having to ‘adapt’ in order to integrate with academic life. For him, this meant approaching his writing from a more ‘eclectic’ position, structuring his phrases carefully to ‘replicate academic discourses’ (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3). Similarly, Sally argued that she ‘picked up’ an academic approach in the following way:

I don’t know, I think probably reading, reading other people’s work - not other students’ work, I mean books and things, that kind of reading, because it all goes in and you sort of transfer it on to paper. Thinking that, now, I can write a sentence properly; I know where commas should go; I know what a paragraph is. I know that, you know, it’s an item within a paragraph - you talk about one thing then move on to something else. Probably, at first, I would have linked it all together and have no paragraphs, nothing, not put commas in their proper places, so it just wouldn’t have made sense, it would just have gone on and on and on. (Sally, 26, New University, Year 3)

Some students commented that learning the academic stance was like learning a foreign language and this is a useful analogy. Being able to *speak* a foreign language comes later than being able to *understand* it, and this is also true in the case of working-class students learning the academic language. As Bernstein notes, *recognition* of an academic context does not necessarily imply *realisation* of an appropriate text - in this case, an appropriate form of writing (Bernstein, 2000: 17-18). Bella, for example, spoke of *thinking* in experiential, everyday language and then having to convert this to academic language - which is exactly the process beginners use when learning a foreign language; thinking in the language, which allows ease of expression, tends to follow later:

...my arguments arise from the things like: ‘That’s not fair!’.....What I’m doing is I’m thinking, ‘That’s not fair! Right, OK, what are the words for ‘that’s not fair’ that **count**? Do you know what I mean? Like that kind of argument counts but my deep sense of injustice, my deep sense of right, **doesn’t** count. My passion doesn’t count, my experience. (Bella, 30, Old University, Year 2)

Conversely, Julie emphasised the importance of going over and over academic material until she could write it in simple terms that she could understand:

I can't stand writing something that I don't understand....Because everything's got to be organised and structured...and, to me, you can't organise and structure something if you don't understand it. I mean, you can understand it, like - I can understand it while I'm reading it; I know what it means; I know what they're saying basically, but for me to put it in their words is too academic. To me, I need to simplify it - not simplifying it to primary school, not that way, but it's got to be coherent in the sense where it's got to be readable.  
(Julie, 31, College, Year 3)

In this way, academic reading and production for many of the mature, working-class students in this study can be seen to involve a process of 'double translation': questions or ideas arising from personal experience needed to be 'translated' into academic language and, conversely, academic texts needed to be 'translated' into more simple (everyday?) language. The learning of these students was essentially, therefore, a dialectical process in which experiential and academic knowledge, and the world views that underpin them, were counterpoised and potentially reconciled. If this is indeed a possibility and students are not, as Bourdieu argues, automatically condemned to regurgitating a little understood 'professorial language', there is a possibility that increasing numbers of working-class students in higher education may contribute to a significant change in, and de-mystification of, the academic stance. This aspect of widening access to higher education will be developed further in the concluding chapter.

The feeling of 'speaking in a foreign language' when adopting the academic stance - and therefore of being 'different' from others in the academic context - may persist even when students feel competent in this language. Bella, for example, commented:

And I think I always do feel like a foreigner in that kind of environment because I have some of the affectations and I know how to argue in the same ways that they know how to argue but I always feel I'm speaking in a foreign language somehow. (Bella, 30, Old University, Year 2)

As a consequence, Bella felt that she was 'checking all the time' that she was adopting the right kind of spoken style. Indeed, there is some indication that the spoken style is more difficult to develop than the written style - possibly because it is a more immediate form of communication than writing, which can be planned and considered before execution. Sally, for example, commented, 'I am more confident than when I first started in what I say but not as confident as my writing' (Sally, 26, New University,

Year 3). In addition, as Kevin pointed out, it is hard to develop the appropriate spoken style unless you use it regularly; he could not practice it with his family or friends as they would think that he was giving himself airs and that he thought he was 'some sort of professor' (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3).

The perception of having to communicate in a second language may partially explain some of the problems that students report in examinations. Wendy, for example, noted that writing in this language takes time and time is at a premium in examinations: 'I revert backwards and what have you, and it doesn't work' (Wendy, 40, Old University, Year 3). Pam noted that, although the failure to acquire the academic style meant low marks for assignments, acquiring this style was a slow process which had to be undertaken at the same time as students were grappling with course content (Pam, 37, New University, Year 3). A number of interviewees felt that they were only just starting to feel confident in their written work by the end of the degree course, by which time, in Jenny's words, 'you've learned to jump through those hoops and you know what's expected of you' (Jenny, 32, College, Year 3). Similarly, Tina commented, 'I'm just starting to get the hang of it now I've finished, yes. It's just the more you do the easier it becomes' (Tina, 38, New University, Year 3). For some, however, full development of an academic stance was not achieved even by the end of the course:

...I think I could develop it better if I'd more time, do you know what I mean? You are trying to develop that [style] and think while you're learning everything and I think ....that [style] would develop more with time, which I haven't got because this is the last [year]. (Pam, 37, New University, Year 3)

In addition to developing an appropriate academic style of writing - a sophisticated and accurate use of language, an extensive (and often specialised) vocabulary, and the ability to present arguments in a critical, balanced and structured manner, making full use of 'evidence' - some of the interviewees drew attention to a further dimension of student life in higher education. This dimension, which is one of power relations and 'game playing', will be discussed in the final section of the chapter.

## 7.5 Playing the Game?

Margaret spoke about 'learning how to play the game' in the education system. She described this game in class terms:

...you learn the sort of middle-class rules - and I think there are sort of middle-class rules - and I think you do have to bend into them slightly. I think - I don't think you should be untrue to yourself; I think you should stay true to whatever you believe, but I think you have to - I don't know whether it's the same in all education, but I think you have to learn to play the game slightly.  
(Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 2)

This analogy between learning the academic stance and game playing was one which appeared to be endorsed by a number of other students. Tutors and students were seen as the players in this game and what was at stake was a degree. Students were expected to conform to the academic stance and were rewarded with good marks for doing so. However, for some students, this meant 'not thinking for yourself' but thinking in a way prescribed by the tutors. At College, Julie (31, Year 3) voiced her dissatisfaction about the way in which marks are gained for 'regurgitating' material rather than for evidence of understanding and Diane (42, Year 3) argued: 'You're not sometimes allowed to think and put your own thought; you've got to put what they expect'. This dissatisfaction was expressed by students in all three higher education institutions. At New University, Pam observed:

We were saying the other day, we were saying first year were a bit like being in nursery school, you know...where you come in with all these wonderful ideas but you can't use them because you're not supposed to sort of think for yourself...(Pam, 37, New University, Year 3)

And at Old University, Kevin made a similar complaint:

...they say about university that it learns you to think, and think for yourself. But I don't know; it's still - I'm still not clear on that one. Because it is - all it is, anyway, is regurgitating a book into, in some form or other. So I think there's a danger that you've got to - *it's too easy to go through that system*. I'd like to be more analytical and thinking for myself. (Kevin, 31, Old University, Year 1)

Despite the perceived ease with which material could be ‘regurgitated’, however, a number of interviewees resisted this path, stressing, like Kevin, the need to ‘think for yourself’ or to ensure that difficult material was fully understood.

#### 7.5.1 The Game Strategy

For a number of interviewees, however, an important strategy in the ‘game’ was trying to find out what it was that tutors expected and then to deliver this. Jenny, for example, claimed that, in assignments, tutors wanted ‘their words or their suggested reading being thrown back at them again and no diversification to that, you know - it had to go within that square and if you stepped out of it then it was totally irrelevant’ (Jenny, 32, College, Year 3). Students at Old University and College, in particular, spoke of adopting this strategy. Julie, for example, commented: ‘If you get to know a tutor, get to know exactly how they’re thinking, you’ll get top marks every time. It’s easy because all you do is write what they want to read’ (Julie, 31, College, Year 3).

The difficulty was knowing what tutors want (hence Pam’s exasperated comment: ‘What do they really want, then?’). By her final year Bella, had developed the skill of slanting her essays in a way which was designed to appeal to the tutors they were written for:

If ‘X’ is setting a question, you want a biological approach - he is a biological determinist and his question will be pitched at that level and you know he doesn’t want you to bring in all the other stuff.....The same with ‘Y’: he is the qualitative guy, the token qualitative person in our department. You know when you do his stuff you have to be careful. (Bella, 30, Old University, Year 3)

Bella described how the ‘value-freedom’ of academic knowledge appeared to be overlaid with academic rivalries; she argued that what was taught was shaped by the values of the tutors, for whom academic debates had taken on a *personal* quality:

...we certainly think that there is, in our department, some kind of academic chauvinism between one lot and another....And then, you know, when you’ve seen them arguing with each other in debates where they’ve got really heated and angry, you begin to think there’s more to it than that; they’re actually defending their - it’s actually become personal. (Bella, 30, Old University, Year 3)

In this context, the 'academic stance' taken by students had to be carefully thought through or marks could be lost.

### 7.5.2 Power Games?

For some of the interviewees, learning the academic stance appeared to be a kind of power game, a game involving 'symbolic violence': far from being distanced and impartial, the learning process was argued to be about the power of tutors to *manipulate* or *mould* students, to change their systems of thought. Middle-class, as well as working-class, interviewees objected to this. Paula, for example, a middle-class interviewee, commented on the narrowness and insularity of academic viewpoints:

...there's part of academia that I can't take on, which I think is ridiculously silly. I don't know - sort of you're going down an avenue that's so small and so tiny and you just want to say, 'Get real! There's people starving!' I don't know, it's not there in reality; it's in its own little world and there's part of me that very much objects to that. (Paula, 30, New University, Yr 2)

In the academic 'game', power was seen to be weighted towards the tutor, the student being relatively powerless. Jenny, another middle-class interviewee, described the attitude of tutors in the following way: 'I am in the top box and you're in the little bottom boxes and if you don't fit them then, you know, I'm going to fail you no matter what' (Jenny, 32, College, Year 3). Similarly, Diane (working class) commented:

...it's either learning the rules or you've got to be an absolute master of the gentle art of manipulation - you've got to manipulate them into your way of thinking, but it's more difficult for you to manipulate them than it is for them to manipulate you because they've had more practice at it. You know, they've had a lot more years than you. (Diane, 42, College, Year 3)

The reactions of students who recognised this element of manipulation in the learning process can be described using Goffman's classification of responses to incarceration in the career of the mental patient (Goffman, 1961: 61-2). At one end of the spectrum, an 'intransigent line' - challenging the institution and refusing to co-operate with the staff - is not a feasible course of action for students if they wish to achieve a degree. Instead, students may pursue a strategy of instrumental conformity, which some of them clearly did. Jenny, for example, conformed only superficially to a academic view of the world:



...I sort of say, 'all right, I'll conform; I'll do what they want', but inside I think, 'Oh, it's a lot of stupidity, this', you know, 'and I'm going to hang on to my own ideas not matter what'. (Jenny, 32, College, Year 3)

Jenny was a middle-class student who had failed to gain sufficient A Levels whilst at school to obtain a place at university. As a consequence, she had been unfavourably compared with her siblings, who had obtained degrees. She had taken up relatively unskilled work as a clerical officer but recognized that she needed qualifications to get a better job and so had enrolled on an Access course. However, she maintained a degree of resistance to academic values throughout her time at College. In an argument which supports Bourdieu's (1987: 13) view of social life as struggle over 'the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world and its divisions', Jenny saw academia as buying in to a whole world view with which she could not identify. She argued that her experience as a school governor gave her a more authentic knowledge of life than that possessed by tutors who, despite being cloistered in higher education and insulated from the real world, felt that they could define reality for her: 'I am a lecturer; I am God almost - I will say what it is!'. Jenny's strategy was to 'go with the flow - don't antagonise everything, but still believe what you want to believe inside yourself' (Jenny, 32, College, Year 3). Similarly, over the three years of the degree course, Diane cynically played by the rules to get the degree:

...I've just done an essay and I know what this particular tutor's like so I've done it in her way of thinking and I know it - and it's not my thoughts, it's hers...I thought, 'This is my third year; I'm going to get through it'. So you have to learn. Yes - it is a game. (Diane, 42, College, Year 3)

At the other end of the spectrum, 'conversion' to the tutor's perspective was always a possibility and some students clearly followed this path, although they did not always do so with their eyes shut. The following quotation is taken from the interview with Margaret during her second year at the Old University:

Is it because I don't mind being moulded that I am quite happy to go along with it?.....because I just think that it's not doing me any harm - it's perhaps doing me some good if I can - provided I can stay objective about it; provided I can see what's happening and decide whether I want it to happen. I mean, if there was all this moulding going on and you think, 'Coo, this is wonderful!' and

everything they say is a hundred per cent right, you don't question anything; I think you've got to also play a part in the moulding.  
(Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 2)

At this stage, Margaret felt that she was 'playing a game' (it was, in fact, Margaret who introduced this analogy). Interestingly, however, by the final year of the course, Margaret questioned whether she had been 'moulded' by tutors at all and substituted the term 'guidance', arguing that tutors had helped her to 'move forward':

I've got to this stage now where I think - I don't know whether I can explain this properly but, before, I would write an essay in some ways possibly a bit blindly in so much that I would know what they wanted and then write that....whereas, now, I feel I can write an essay that I know about and, whether they agree with it or not, I feel, now I'm in this third year, *I can put me into it* and I can say, 'From the evidence, this is what I believe', even though I know it's the opposite to what the tutor believes...because, providing you can back it up with the evidence, then that's fine. I used to, before, as well, hide behind the books that I was reading. I would say, 'X says this and someone else says that'. I feel, this year, I've stopped doing that and I'm saying, you know, 'This is what is happening'.....And so, in some ways possibly, I've stopped playing the game; I can now learn properly and I can deal with it properly whereas, before, I think I was trying to pick up what side people were on and the deal with that.  
(Margaret, 41, Old University)

This quotation demonstrates very clearly the way in which student confidence may improve as academic skills develop. There is also an interesting suggestion that, as students learn more, they are able to bring *themselves* back into their academic writing, that they no longer 'play the game' but have fully adopted an academic stance. This conversion to an academic stance was not, however, without its cost for some of the interviewees, for whom it represented a fundamental change in selfhood.

### 7.5.3 Not Being True to Yourself

In order to adopt an academic stance, some interviewees indicated that they had to change or modify something fundamental within themselves, to essentially become *different kinds of people*: 'And so, in a way, I do have to adopt this different persona to be able to do these things' (Wendy, 40, Old University, Year 3). Many students referred to having to put on their 'academic heads' whilst at university or college. There is a suggestion in some of the interviews that this adoption of a different 'persona' whilst

playing the academic game brought with it the risk of *not being true to yourself*.

Margaret hinted at this during her second year at the Old University:

...going back to playing the game, I know how to write because I knew what they were wanting me to write. And even if I had to sort of - *not stay a hundred percent true to myself* - I knew what to write.  
(Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 2)

Similarly, Jack spoke about modifying his accent whilst at college, adding defensively that this did not mean that he was rejecting his working-class roots: 'I don't think there's anything wrong in that; I don't see it as betraying my working-class origins or anything - I just see it [a modified accent] as appropriate in certain situations' (Jack, 42, College, Year 2).

Although the feeling of betrayal of working-class roots as the interviewees progressed through higher education was not explicitly raised by most students, quotations such as these suggest that it was an underlying, if only partially recognised, dimension of their experience. The adoption of an academic stance implicitly requires the modification, or even rejection, of previously-held views of the social world and, potentially, of the basis on which relationships with significant others in this world are forged. It does this, in part, by challenging the dispositions and attitudes which are inscribed in the working-class habitus and reflected in language style. These points are considered further in the next two chapters.

## 7.6 Summary

All of the interviewees recognised that higher education involved a distinct 'academic stance'. Although many of them had difficulty describing this, there was a feeling that it involved a way of looking at and speaking about the world which was not familiar to them. Such a perception may not be confined to mature or working-class students: as argued in Chapter 1, every student entering higher education may experience a feeling of 'being a stranger in a foreign land' (Mann, 2001: 11) and of 'being in a place where those in power have the potential to impose their particular ways of perceiving and understanding the world' (ibid: 15). Indeed, many of the interviewees in the present

study, from both social class backgrounds, made reference to an educational experience which was strong on transmission and positioning of students, requiring 'regurgitation' of material rather than critical reflection.

However, the present research would indicate that the potential for 'alienation' is much greater for working-class than for middle-class students because the measured, impartial, distanced and analytical approach to the world incorporated in the academic stance is less in harmony with the working-class habitus (see 2.4.3). If, as Bourdieu argues, language use reflects the relationship between people and their conditions of existence, working-class students in higher education have to learn, not only a new language, but also a new way of looking at the social world.

Some of the interviewees - both working-class and middle-class - clearly had at least a partial penetration of the processes and power relationships at work in higher education, contesting the view of the world they were being offered and the power of tutors (exercising 'symbolic violence') to impose this view. Bella, for example, described it as just 'one way of seeing the world' and Wendy, studying a course in social history at Old University, rejected the portrayal of the working-class in academic writing. There is potential here for resistance to, and demystification of, the culture and ethos of higher education - as Diane demonstrated in her indictment of the linguistic gymnastics ('verbal diarrhoea') of some tutors - which is unexamined in Bourdieu's work. Nevertheless, all students recognised that they had to conform to succeed in this world and 'played the game', demonstrating considerable perseverance and resourcefulness in doing so.

Yet a feeling of ambivalence is discernible in some of the interviews, an uncertainty about whether the academic stance represents a middle-class style, the adoption of which means a betrayal of social class roots, or whether it represents articulacy of thought and a sophisticated, accurate use of language. Although, for some of the interviewees, the acquisition of an academic stance was certainly accompanied by a feeling of potential betrayal of working-class roots, engendering feelings of losing the 'sense of place' which is at the heart of social identity, there is evidence of a more dialectical relationship between class habitus and individual identities and dispositions

than, arguably, allowed for in Bourdieu's model. For these students, the experience of higher education fuelled a sustained period of personal development which was experienced by some as a significant change in identity as they progressed through their degree courses. These changes in the self, and the tensions that they created, are the focus of the following chapter.

‘It’s a real big thing - a bigger thing than getting married.’  
(Tina, 38, New University, Year 2)

### 8.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2 (2.3.1), it was argued that the self is inherently *social* because it is shaped by the dynamic interplay of reflexive social action and historically - and socially-grounded milieux and that the development and maintenance of self - its ‘moral career’ - relies as much on the approval and support of others as it does on the hopes and aspirations of the social actor. Working-class students entering higher education are following a trajectory which is untypical of members of their social class and, in this educational setting, are immediately discernible by bodily hexis - outward markers, or even ‘stigma symbols’ (Goffman, 1963: 59), such as dress, demeanour and accent. Higher education is likely to be perceived by working-class students as an alien world but it is, nevertheless, a world with which they have to become familiar. It is inevitable that the process of adaptation, and the intellectual development which accompanies it, will lead - to a greater or lesser extent - to changes in perceptions of the self. These changes may be affirmed and reinforced - or denied and rejected - by significant others such as partners, family or friends, with consequences both for long-established social relationships and identity. Chapter 7 dealt with the ways in which the interviewees perceived and adapted themselves to the experience of higher education; this chapter will focus on the concomitant effects on self-identity. An examination of the positive changes that students noticed in themselves as they progressed through their degree courses will be followed by a consideration of changes in their relationships with significant others and the ways in which problems arising from these changes were dealt with. Finally, there will be a discussion of continuities, discontinuities and tensions with regard to self and strategies for dealing with disjunction.



Some students had great expectations of higher education as a life-changing and identity-changing experience whilst others saw the educational process in much more prosaic and instrumental terms. Yet all of the students interviewed - even those who adopted an instrumental attitude - felt that the experience of higher education had changed them in some way; for some, it even fulfilled its promise of a life transformation, as the quote from Tina at the beginning of this chapter illustrates.

### 8.2.1 Wider Horizons

Most of the interviewees noticed the gradual emergence of an 'academic' identity, pointing to increasing knowledge and insight which had extended their horizons. This learning process was occasionally described in dramatic terms: 'I feel as if I've been blind and suddenly can see' (Jack, 42, College, Year 3). Paul described the experience in a similarly graphic way: '...my perception's been very, very narrow in the past and it's widened; it's widened three hundred and sixty degrees basically - I'm getting all-round vision now, or trying to!' (Paul, 40, College, Year 1). A number of students made direct reference to the way in which the 'narrow' views which they associated with living in small communities had been expanded through the educational process:

It's opened my mind. It's made me realise that there's more to life because, when you're in a small town....obviously, working-class principles and things rub off on you....but it [education] certainly opens your mind and makes you realise there's more to life than that.... (Susan, 23, New University, Year 3)

Others drew attention to changes in lifestyles or leisure pursuits which followed this broadening of horizons. Tina, for example, who was married to a university lecturer, noticed that her tastes in reading and television programmes had changed:

It's amazing - I'm just learning so many things that I feel I probably should have known before and never considered them....And it's just a change of life. Like television programmes that I want to watch, they're so different to what I would have watched before. So it's affecting all areas of my life - even, like I say, I read newspapers like the Economist. I mean, we've had it delivered for years and I've never picked it up except just to put it on the table, and now I actually open it up and read it, and it's really weird! (Tina, 38, New University, Year 2)

A widening of horizons was often associated with the critical abilities which students had developed during their educational careers. Many interviewees drew attention to this emergence of a more reflective and questioning approach to social life which created a reluctance to believe everything they were told and a more balanced and impartial viewpoint. Paul, for example, commented: 'There's nothing black and white any more for me: everything, I question everything' (Paul, 40, College, Year 1). However, the skills of structured and critical thinking were not always viewed as entirely beneficial: what was gained in objectivity and impartiality had, for some, been offset to a certain extent by a loss of certainty and trust, an insecurity which they had not previously felt, as Jack illustrated:

...it has its downside, doesn't it? You can't just read anything for pleasure anymore. Having knowledge doesn't mean you're totally free; I think that having knowledge means you're very restricted in some ways....You can't sit and watch the news or read the newspaper....and take on board the facts that they're giving you. You sit and you think, 'There's an agenda behind this', and you're analysing that all the time. (Jack, 42, College, Year 3)

Despite this downside, however, there was a general agreement among the interviewees that the experience of higher education had made them 'better people' in some way - more interesting, more alert, more tolerant and more 'rounded'. Joe summed up the qualities he associated with educated people in the following terms:

...better in their outlook, a broader outlook on life, a more tolerant person, a more responsible person - should be able to have a much broader view of every thing. I think that's the thing - to have a broader view of life and to be able to see all points of view and points of interest if you like.  
(Joe, 54, College, Year 2)

### 8.2.2 Gaining Confidence: 'I feel **right** now'

The majority of the interviewees reported that their return to education had been accompanied by an increase in confidence and a more positive view of self. After the initial feeling of wonder - or even disbelief - that they had been admitted to higher education, most of them discovered that they could cope with the intellectual demands of their courses and, to some, this came as quite a surprise. Women who had previously defined their capabilities in terms of the demands of domesticity and childcare found

that they had other talents: 'I think it's made me realise that I've got a bit up top, got a bit of brain that I didn't realise I'd got. Just discovered it up there!' (Tina, 38, New University, Year 1). This discovery gave them a feeling that they had *earned* their places in higher education and that they had a *right* to be there: 'I feel like I've earned a place here and I'm just as good as the next person as long as I do my bit, you know' (Tina, 38, New University, Year 2).

Anne described how this feeling grew gradually as she progressed through the degree and had the encouragement of good essay marks:

I think it's just been really a process of self-discovery, it really has. And it's been a quite nice process really because....I was....just so lacking in confidence. I really didn't think I'd the ability. I kept thinking, 'What am I doing here? All these people are so clever, what am I doing here?' And every time you get an essay back and think, 'That was a really good mark', it built on that and you think, 'Gosh, I can do this! I've got this ability'. And I think it's really been a process of self-discovery and I think it's brilliant!  
(Anne, 42, Old University, Year 3)

Initial perceptions of other students as more intelligent or more worthy, more *justified* in being at university or college, were gradually rejected as the interviewees realised that they could 'hold their own' in the learning context:

I had a right to be there - I'm exactly the sort of person who should be there. I've contributed more than other people that perhaps did better - I contributed a lot more to discussion, even in lectures, in seminars....I made people think and I argued with them. (Bella, 30, Old University, Year 3)

This increased sense of worthiness was often accompanied by an improvement in relationships with younger students as both mature and younger students came to recognise and value their complementary strengths: the perceived initial superiority of young students in terms of academic knowledge was seen to be balanced by the life experience of mature students. As Sally noted, mature students could contribute more in seminars because of their knowledge of 'real-life situations'. She added:

I think they've realised that we do work, you know - we've got the same standard as they've got and probably know a little bit more than them in some cases. (Sally, 26, New University, Year 2)

In addition, a number of interviewees felt that the younger students had matured as they progressed through the course, narrowing perception of an age divide.

For some students at least, the link that they had made early in the course - consciously or unconsciously - between social class and intellectual ability was recognised and rejected as false by the end of the course. Sally, for example, commented: 'Even though they might have this middle-class, upper-class accent and everything, they're still a bit thicker than me, you know' (Sally, 26, New University, Year 2). At Old University, Kevin echoed this feeling:

...as time has gone by, I've realised that I am up there with these people who's from this middle-class, different....background; I'm up there with these people so I shouldn't put myself down too much. And, if anything, I'm as good, if not better, than anybody else. (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3)

This reassessment by some interviewees of their intellectual ability and their suitability for higher education was occasionally accompanied by a lingering regret that so much of the early part of the course had been taken up by what appeared, in hindsight, to be groundless anxieties:

I feel really comfortable with it all - I just love it!....I don't mean I wasted the first two years, but in some ways I didn't know that it was OK to be here and I didn't enjoy everything....I don't know, I just feel this is the - I feel **right** now. It feels good and it feels that...I belong. (Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 3)

The growing feeling of belonging, of being tested and not found wanting, and the resulting growth in confidence, made itself felt in social contexts outside higher education, as many students illustrated:

My life is sort of different and I won't stand for men being insulting or anything like that or, you know, if they come up and sort of touch [you], being patronising to you, I'll tell them off now whereas I wouldn't have dared before. I think I've changed in that respect...I'm turning into one of these raving feminists! (Anne, 42, Old University, Year 3)

### 8.2.3 A Fragile Academic Identity?

Confidence and feelings of increased worth could, however, have a less positive dimension and there was a suggestion in some of the interviews that an expanding vocabulary and knowledge base gave *power* which could be used to ‘put people down’ in social interaction. Paul, for example, said that he derived ‘some sort of pleasure from being that little bit.....smarter’ and that he used his vocabulary to assert his superiority to others:

...it’s not made me backwards at coming forwards, if you know what I mean - I’ve got quite an opinion of certain things and, like, it won’t be hidden under a bush. If I’ve got something to say, I say it, and I can usually back an argument up because I’ve got some big words in my vocabulary, you know - I can really batter them to death. (Paul, 40, College, Year 2)

Susan similarly commented on what she saw as negative changes in herself arising from intellectual development:

...sometimes I don’t like the way I’ve changed....I can be really patronising and it’s terrible....My mother’s been out of education for years and she hasn’t had the opportunities.....When I get on my high horse, she’ll call me a cocky little cow - and I deserve it! (Susan, 23, New University, Year 2)

Kevin described how his underlying insecurities about his academic ability created a need to ‘prove himself’ all the time, which he interpreted as ‘arrogance’: ‘And in certain situations I’ll get a bit arrogant and try to put people down and....use it [academic knowledge] as a defence’ (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 2).

Interactive exchanges such as the ones reported above do not therefore necessarily arise from ‘cockiness’, arrogance or feelings of superiority but may derive from a rather fragile academic identity which created a need for constant reassurance of worth. Paul (40), for example, in his second year at College, said:

...I must admit I can go home and I can talk with the best of them and I can baffle my wife with science. It doesn’t mean a thing, of course, but it proves - I don’t know, does it prove I’m intelligent? I don’t really know. I don’t think so - it proves I know big words and I can apply them in certain places. I don’t feel any more intelligent now than when I was on the Access course....

Like Paul, throughout his degree course Kevin had deep-seated anxieties about his academic progress which clearly had their roots in the close link that he had forged between educational success and self-worth: he anticipated that having a degree would make him feel like ‘superman’ with ‘super-confidence’. Completing the degree would, he thought, make him more reflective, more confident and more ‘developed’ - a ‘whole person’ who no longer felt inadequate. Nevertheless, self-worth proved an illusive feeling, the full recognition of it always being set at a later date, and Kevin was constantly worried about his progress:

...if you’re talking in a social situation in a pub or whatever and I just think to myself, ‘What do I know about that?’ And then I panic, I think: ‘Well, I don’t know as much as I wanted or thought I did’. When you just ask yourself a question, ‘what do I know?’, [the] shutters just seem to come down, don’t they? (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 2)

When last interviewed, Kevin was hoping to study for a higher degree to get the ‘super-confidence’ he anticipated he would have gained after completing his first degree.

#### 8.2.4 Gaining Control

There is a pervading sense in many of the interviews of a bid for increased autonomy and control that is both a precursor to, and a product of, the return to education. Kevin, for example, a former miner, felt that he had never been a confident person and, from the outset, saw education as a source of self-validation and a bid for the ‘status’ and ‘autonomy’ which he had not had as a manual worker. He described himself as being in ‘inner turmoil’, not knowing what he wanted from life, and his application to university represented a means of self-development and self-fulfilment: ‘a quasi-religious quest in a way for some sort of happiness’ (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 1). Kevin felt that having knowledge and insight would make him feel better in important ways and would also provide a route away from the kind of work he had previously done, work which had left him with a profound sense of powerlessness.

However, it is in the interviews with the female students that this growing sense of control and autonomy is most evident. Bella, for example, made the following observation:



...what it's done for me is, it's opened up all sorts of options. I no longer say, 'I can't do this because of my age or because of circumstances'. I now know I can change all the circumstances in order to get exactly what I want. I start saying, 'This is what I want. Now, how am I going to get it?' instead of, 'What can I have?', you know, 'What am I allowed?'. (Bella, 30, Old University, Year 3)

Similarly, Susan commented: 'it's made me realise that I can do, not what I want, but if there's something I want to do and I go for it, I might be able to get it, might be able to do it' (Susan, 23, New University, Year 3). Women who had spent time looking after children felt that they now had the opportunity to be themselves. Julie described herself as a 'non person' in her first marriage: 'his wife and their mother', and the return to education represented an escape from this:

I'm doing this because I want to do it...I'm not doing it because I'm a mum and I'm a wife and I'm somebody's daughter; I do it because it's **me** and I want to do it and I don't care who thinks....whatever of me.  
(Julie, 31, College, Year 1)

There are indications that, for some women at least, the process of self-discovery and increasing control was not contingent upon the return to education: personal development had clearly been a goal from the outset, as Barbara hinted when she said, '..it wasn't college making me change, it was **me** making myself change [to] how I wanted to be' (Barbara, 24, College, Year 1). Anne had been in an unsatisfactory relationship for a while and saw her return to education as the first step in a separation from her husband: 'I'll be perfectly honest - the total aim for me is to be in a position to go and make a life for myself and my son'. Anne described her husband as possessive and 'inhibiting': their relationship had undermined her confidence and made her withdrawn and introverted. Her return to education was a calculated move to reverse this trend:

Before, I felt really oppressed and had no confidence in myself, which I hadn't experienced before [the marriage]. You know, years before, I was always quite an outgoing person and I felt I'd become really introverted and it was changing me and I didn't like what was happening. So this [education] is changing me back to what I was before. (Anne, 42, Old University, Year 1)

Clearly, then, the return to education represented, for at least some students, a deliberate attempt to alter fundamental aspects of themselves and of their life contexts. Other students hoped to gain the benefits of intellectual development and qualifications without changing other dimensions of their lives. However, very few managed to do this without upsetting the dynamics of established relationships with partners, families and friends and, for many of the interviewees, these changing relationships were a constant source of anxiety.

### **8.3 Changing Relationships with Significant Others**

The return to education created difficulties for most of the interviewees - difficulties which had dimensions both of gender and class.

#### **8.3.1 Lack of Understanding**

##### **8.3.1.1 *About the Motivation to Study***

Students drawn from working-class backgrounds with partners and friends from the same social class were often faced with a reaction of total incomprehension about what they were doing in higher education or why they were doing it. There appeared to be little understanding that the pursuit of education could be a quest for self-fulfilment - as many of the interviewees claimed it was. For female students, partners and families occasionally saw the return to education as a leisure pursuit, something that was taken up to fill in time when the children were older and needed less attention. Tina's father and step-mother, for example, thought that she was just filling up her time after the cleaning had been done:

He thinks it's something I do in between cleaning the toilet and peeling the potatoes. He doesn't understand what I'm doing. They call it going to work because they don't know what it is and they're not interested....  
(Tina, 38, New University, Year 3)

However, many partners and families assumed that the major motivation to study was monetary. Jack reported that his friends wondered if he was doing a degree 'just to get the Dole off [his] back' (Jack, 42, College, Year 2) and Kevin described the reaction of his partner in the following way:

She's glad I'm doing this but she's mainly looking at it from an economic point of view. She sees this as a chance, like, that I'm going to get a good job or whatever and she don't share that point of view that I'm - you get a buzz out of learning, really. (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 1)

Similarly, Julie's partner expected high dividends at the end of the course: 'he just sees these pound signs at the end of it all' (Julie, 31, College, Year 1). Pam's partner also assumed that at the end of the course she would get a good job with a reasonable salary and he occasionally joked about this: 'Is that what you are going to buy when you've finished your exams, then?' (Pam, 37, New University, Year 3).

This instrumental view of education as a means to a well-paid job was also coupled, in a few cases, with a similarly straightforward, literal - and unrealistic - view of the nature of the job that might be acquired, illustrating the idealised view of University held by some working-class people. Kevin's mother, for example, assumed that his study of Law would lead to a job as a lawyer: 'I mean, she [mother] even mentioned to one relative that I'd done Law and Economics, that, as far as she knows, I'm going to be a lawyer....So I says, "Oh, lovely!"' (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3). Kevin's friends also assumed an instrumental link between knowledge and its use: just as he might become a carpenter if he studied woodwork, so he might become a politician (or another Arthur Scargill) at the end of a Politics course.

Most of the interviewees, both male and female, made reference at some stage to problems at home arising from financial pressure. Anticipation of financial gain at the end of the course was only to be expected yet there was no guarantee of this. Julie, for example, did not immediately get a job after completing her degree and went back to her old job delivering post. Her husband clearly felt that she had wasted time and money pursuing a course of action which had brought no increase in the family fortunes:

...he's realized, you see, that the degree's not all it's made out to be. So, to him, it's just nothing now, you know: 'She's wasted three years...five if you count the Access [course], and where is she? She's still here.' ....It just doesn't exist; you can't even talk about it with him. (Julie, 31, College, Year 3)

Sally's partner also expected a monetary pay-back for the four years she had spent in further and higher education and put great pressure on her during her final year, telling her, 'I've invested four years of **my** life in **you!**'. Sally commented, 'This is how he says it, like he's invested in **me**. And I'm thinking, "Oh, for me to get a job, it's like pay-back time now - I've got to pay him back"' (Sally, 26, New University, Year 3).

#### 8.3.1.2 *About the Demands of Higher Education*

Lack of understanding on the part of families and friends about the motivation behind the return to study also extended to the nature of the higher education experience itself and the frequently heavy demands it placed on students. Families and friends who had no experience of higher education appeared to conceptualise the experience in terms of their knowledge of the educational process in schools or in colleges of further education, where courses are often part time, linked to employment and tailored to the demands of paid work. Sally described her husband's attitude in the following way:

...at first, he thought that, he actually thought that I was tossing it off at university because he said, 'How many hours have you got to do?'. And I said, 'Well, on my timetable it's twelve but I have to put in all these extra hours because they want me to do about thirty-five hours a week, so I've got to try and fit that in and do my housework'. And he said, 'Well, you're tossing it off, aren't you? It's not that hard!' (Sally, 26, New University, Year 1)

Kevin's friends also had little appreciation of the demands placed on him by the course or the amount of work he had to put into it; they did not see university as a 'real job' with real demands and felt that he should not need a holiday to recover from it! It was only towards the end of the degree course that Kevin's parents started to get a hazy idea of what he had spent the previous few years doing:

...for the first couple of years, just until the last few weeks when I says, 'Oh, I'm going to be graduating and it's robes and hats and everything', and I think it gradually dawned on her that it weren't just a college thing. Because all they've done is, parents just went to work and university were like - it might as well have been the other side of the world, another country...  
(Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3)

The lack of understanding of partners, families and friends, and the resulting tensions when expectations differed and motivations were misunderstood, created difficulties for the interviewees which were exacerbated by a number of other sources of friction.

### 8.3.2 Family Roles and Responsibilities

The return to education necessarily involved some readjustment in existing roles and patterns of responsibility. For female students, the pressure of combining domestic and child-care responsibilities with study created strains in their relationships with partners, from whom they expected (but did not necessarily receive) more support. Pam's husband, for example, saw her pursuit of education as an idiosyncrasy which could be tolerated only as long as it did not interfere with the domestic routine. As a consequence, her relationship with her him had to be re-negotiated when she embarked on full-time study and this created some problems. At a concrete level, she expected more help with the domestic tasks and, on occasions, with child care (although she never left him in sole charge of the children until they were of an age when he could not 'do any harm'). After an initial reluctance, which took some time to overcome, this expectation of help appeared to have been met - at least to some degree and on some occasions - although she made it clear that she has always retained the ultimate responsibility for domestic affairs and succeeded only in *delegating* some of the domestic duties.

Many other female students reported similar tensions. They expected their partners to be more willing to *share* domestic tasks and were disappointed to find that they were, at best, only prepared to *help* with them. Tina illustrated this graphically:

He still has this attitude of, 'I've done this for you, missy', you know - sort of tug your forelock and messes about and makes a joke of it....I think - I hope - he doesn't think it's women's work but, the way he acts, he acts as though it's women's work: 'I'm doing women's work'. And I pull him up on it every time he comes across like that. I pull him up on it and say, 'Is it beneath you to be doing this? Is this why you've got to talk about it all the time?', you know, make a big fuss: 'Oh, I had my hand down the toilet this weekend!' 'Don't tell everybody! I was doing that week in, week out, for years and never told a soul - it's not something you brag about!' So his attitude's still a mixture.  
(Tina, 38, New University, Year 3)

Child-care arrangements followed a similar pattern: partners might agree to take more responsibility for these but generally only under the direction and supervision of the women, who remained 'in charge':

...if I'm reading, I'm not totally absorbed because I'm still tuned in to what's going on around me as well. Whereas if [husband] is reading the paper, he's deaf, you know....I'm still - if the kids are around or anybody's around - I'm still tuned in to what's going on. (Tina, 38, New University, Year 2)

Although Tina felt that her partner had started to appreciate what she did in the house and had taken on some of the chores - including the task of 'nagging' the children - she argued that he was definitely not a 'new man': he clearly felt that he was doing her a favour and, by the end of the course, was involving himself in these chores reluctantly, if at all.

Interestingly, this attitude to domestic tasks was echoed by Kevin, who had clearly been under pressure to take more part in domestic duties since his redundancy from the pit. He claimed that he had taken more responsibility for tasks such as washing and vacuum cleaning but that he had 'never got into' the ironing and, 'like every other lad', he sometimes needed to be forced into helping at all (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3). Nevertheless, whether or not domestic chores became a bone of contention, both male and female students generally drew attention to pressures from their partners to lead 'normal' lives, to maintain the pattern of activities, family visits and routines that had become established over time. All too frequently, when the pressure of assessment deadlines struck, this expectation could not be met.

Although many of the female students expected more help from their partners with housework and child care and complained when this was not forthcoming, they all appeared to accept - if only tacitly - that they held the primary responsibility for domestic affairs. Their time in higher education was therefore often tinged with guilt about perceptions of sliding standards in the home and possible neglect of the needs of their children, creating ambivalent feelings about their involvement in higher education. Tina, for example, reported feeling that she was being 'totally selfish' when at university because she was doing what she wanted to do without having to be constantly



available to her husband and children. Many tried to assuage their guilt by pointing to the future benefits which would accrue to their children in the form of positive role models or a better standard of living. However, by the end of their courses, some were clearly feeling much less defensive and arguing that they had a right to pursue an education *for themselves*:

I can justify being here; I don't feel, like, I've got to say, 'Well, I'm only doing this for you', type of thing. I'm doing it for me. I set off to do it for me and I feel comfortable with it....I don't feel guilty for just being here now. I might have done before. (Tina, 38, New University, Year 3)

### 8.3.3 The Balance of Power

Quotations such as the one above suggest that, for some of the female students at least, the tensions about domestic involvement masked a fundamental shift in the balance of power in their relationships with partners. Many of them drew attention to the way in which increased confidence and feelings of worth had impacted on their relationships with their partners. Barbara, for example, said, 'whereas before, I was a lot more subdued, I started to question everything...and he didn't like that' (Barbara, 24, College, Year 1), and Sally argued, 'my attitude's sort of changed a bit. I'm a bit domineering, really, with him. I suppose I'm a bit cocky, bit of a cocky attitude now, I think' (Sally, 26, New University, Year 3). This increased confidence could produce tangible results. Tina noted how household decisions were made more jointly and that she had 'more control over things that happen' (Tina, 38, New University, Year 3). For Anne, access to a student loan gave her a certain degree of financial independence from her husband and, as a consequence, he had felt that he had lost control of her: 'You see, he feels that he's lost control because that has given me a bit of independence and I got my student loan and bought a car so that's another bit of independence' (Anne, 42, Old University, Year 1).

This feeling of 'loss of control' over partners could also arise because they had new lives of their own outside the home and this was a potential source of tension. A number of interviewees - both male and female - reported frictions as their partners became suspicious of their involvement with members of the opposite sex. Diane, for example, recounted an incident when a male student from the course had rung about a

course-related matter and her partner had been suspicious. Jack's partner was also clearly unsettled by the fact that the majority of students on his course were relatively young and female and he had to deal with this very sensitively:

...the majority of students are women so nearly all - well, all - of the people I've met this morning are women and I don't want not to tell [my wife] but, at the same time, if I tell her it's probably going to bother her....she gives me some stick about it but I know it's only - she knows that I'm okay, you know.  
(Jack, 42, College, Year 3)

The partners of some students clearly had an underlying fear that they were losing them. Barbara, for example, said that she had had 'some real problems' with her partner: 'I think it's insecurity and, in a way, fear. It sounds silly - as if I'm going to get educated and get up and go! It's definitely insecurity' (Barbara, 24, College, Year 1). 'Silly' or not, the potential for marital breakdown was undoubtedly present in the relationships of many of the interviewees, irrespective of their social class backgrounds. (This aspect of their experience will be considered later in this chapter and, in more depth, in Chapter 9)

Underlying the difficulties that many reported in long-established relationships was a growing sense of intellectual distance.

#### 8.3.4 Growing Intellectual Distance from Family

Tina, Bella, Pam and Diane were the only female, working-class interviewees whose husbands held professional occupations. Despite the potential (gendered) conflict over domestic responsibilities, their intellectual development posed no threat to their relationships; on the contrary, it appeared to lead to more satisfying relationship for both of them. Tina, for example, said: 'we talk more about all sorts of things so, definitely, [the] marriage is better' (Tina, 38, New University, Year 2). Similarly, Paul, whose wife was an accountant, remarked that he could 'relate to her' much better (Paul, 40, College, Year 1). For other students, however, intellectual development created a potential for a serious rift in their relationships with partners and friends, many of whom clearly felt threatened by the changes.

A common experience among the interviewees was of returning home from university or college, heads buzzing with new and exciting ideas, to be faced by complete indifference - or even hostility - from their partners. Kevin, at Old University, referred in all three interviews to not being able to share his learning experience or practise his expanding vocabulary with family or friends because this would make him feel 'a bit pretentious' and his wife 'sort of felt threatened' when he did so. Similarly, Sally said of her partner: 'He told me to stop using big words' (Sally, 26, New University, Year 1); Julie's partner told her: 'You've got a dictionary for a face now' and her family accused her of 'getting above herself' (Julie, 31, College, Year 1). There are indications that the 'threat' of their partner's intellectual development created acrimony in some relationships. Anne, for example, said:

I can't go home and talk about things because he doesn't want to know. All I get is, 'Oh, here we go again, Miss Clever College Kid', you know, and sarcastic comments. So I'm missing that as well, not having somebody [to talk to about University]. Even if I was taking part in some things at the University, at least you're in company of people a bit - you can talk...and, you know, have discussions about your subjects and things. And I feel I miss out on that as well. (Anne, 42, Old University, Year 1)

It is unsurprising that some of the interviewees began to worry that they were moving on and leaving their partners behind. Jack recognised this danger and wanted to avoid it: 'I don't want to leave her behind, if you know what I mean; I don't want her to feel that she is uneducated and I'm up there, sort of thing' (Jack, 42, College, Year 3). Similarly, Margaret hoped that the growing intellectual distance between herself and her family could somehow be ameliorated so that they could all move upwards together:

...it's as if....I'm suddenly going to be, I'm going to think that I'm up there and they're down there and....I don't think that's how it's got to be. I think we could all move along together. I hope so, anyway. (Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 1)

However, Margaret gave no indication of how this might be accomplished and, like many of the interviewees, gave the impression of growing isolation as she progressed through the degree course, even as she worked hard to maintain relationships that were

clearly of central importance to her. A similar pattern can be seen in relationships with long-standing friends.

### 8.3.5 Growing Intellectual Distance From Friends

A few students reported that their return to education had been viewed by friends in a positive way. Pam had clearly provided a role model for some of her friends, who gradually realised that education could be a way of providing for a future career when their children were older. Following Pam's encouragement, some of these friends began to take GCSEs. However, for other working-class students, relationships with friends deteriorated because these friends felt suspicious, resentful or even threatened by the turn of events. Sometimes this was expressed in the form of barbed jokes, as when one of Pam's friends poked fun at her in the pub: 'You're supposed to go to university and can't add sums up on the dart board!' (Pam, 37, New University, Year 2). On other occasions, the hostility could be more direct. Pam commented: 'I've got one friend who [said] 'Why should us tax-payers support you at university? What are you going to do when you get it [the degree]?' (Pam, Year 3).

Some of the working-class interviewees started to notice a growing intellectual divide between themselves and their friends. Diane spoke of the loss of a friend of twenty years standing: 'It's just that, I suppose I've changed and she could see me changing and we didn't have any more to talk about, you know' (Diane, 42, College, Year 3). Similarly, Susan began to feel that her friends were 'thick' and when she went out with them she 'felt like a square peg in a round hole':

I couldn't stand...all the nonsense conversation...about make-up and hair and, like, cooking the husband's tea and, like, who somebody had slept with...it wasn't stimulating enough....It wasn't interesting, really.  
(Susan, 23, New University, Year 2)

This sentiment was echoed by many other working-class students - both male and female - in all three higher education institutions. Over his three years at Old University, Kevin increasingly moved away from his old friends but did not develop new friendships in the university setting to compensate for this. Although he continued to take part in 'lads' night out' at the pub on Sunday evenings, he reported a growing

sense of dislocation. He could not discuss academic issues or even more general, topical issues with them without running the risk of being accused of feeling that he was better than they were, or that he thought he was 'some sort of professor' (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3).

The growing intellectual distance from friends was often equated with a growing *social* distance. For example Susan said that her friends thought of people who studied for degrees as 'snobby and brainy' and Diane's friends and neighbours associated the achievement of a degree with changing class membership:

People think because you're doing something like this that you're no longer a member of your own little community. Do you know what I mean? They think that, 'Oh God, she's a bit highfalutin now because she's done this degree'.  
(Diane, 42, College, Year 3)

Intellectual development was clearly firmly associated with upward social mobility in the minds of some of Tina's friends; two of them 'dropped her' completely and a further two became less friendly as a consequence of this. Of particular interest in the following quotation is the reference to 'ordinariness' (cf Savage, 2000: 116) and the perceived *danger* that this would be polluted by educational attainment:

I think they see me as a different person, probably can't relate to me because they - well, they're just like I am, just ordinary, but....I think they see me as something up above them, although I'm not. I just think they see me as - not as a threat but just somebody not on their plane, you know.  
(Tina, 38, New University, Year 1)

Other students noted this class dimension in their changing relationships with friends and neighbours. Anne, for example, commented:

I have been out with a neighbour and some friends and I've sort of been there and I've felt out of place. I don't mean to sound **snobbish** or anything like that, but I just thought, you know, 'This isn't my scene', you know. I think I've changed in that respect. (Anne, 42, Old University, Year 2)

Despite the growing distance from old friends, many of the interviewees said that they did not want to lose them. Kevin, for example, felt that he was moving away from his

old friends but had nowhere else to go; he was ‘sort of in limbo...stuck between two social contexts’:

I do feel different to them...I’ve done things and I’ve a bit more wider knowledge of life than I would have had but....it’s like an ambivalence sort of thing....If you’re in this situation, you feel opposite and same feelings towards them.  
(Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 2)

He therefore continued to go out with ‘the lads’ at weekends but gained little satisfaction from this; he had to ‘just adapt to that little social reality’, to spend the evening telling jokes or talking about ‘local things’ and ‘meaningless trivia’. This sense of ambivalence about old friends was apparent in many of the interviews: a feeling of moving on, of losing the common ground but, nevertheless, of sharing fundamental value systems and experiences which made interaction with them ‘safe’ and created a reluctance to let them go. The need to keep old friends was expressed by most interviewees and explained in terms of a need to keep some kind of ‘normality’ in their lives. Tina commented:

I need them more than ever now...It’s like you need some normality in your life because everything’s changed so rapidly that my social life, I’m clinging on to it for grim death and keeping my friends that I’ve had for years to carry on as normal if they would. (Tina, 38, New University, Year 1)

Similarly, despite her assessment of some of her old friends as ‘thick’, Susan felt more comfortable with them than with her fellow students, even at the end of the degree course: ‘it sounds stupid but we do seem more on one another’s wavelengths than I do here with students’ (Susan, 23, New University, Year 3).

### 8.3.6 The Interlinking of Class and Gender

The interviews reveal, then, a growing sense of isolation as intellectual development and the experience of being a student - with all that that entailed - brought a realisation that common ground shared with family, friends, and even partners, was starting to erode. However, social class and gender interlinked in complex ways in this area. Intellectual growth as a potential source of (class) disjunction was clearly likely to affect working-class students with partners and friends drawn from the same social class background -

although there was undoubtedly also a gender dimension here, as the following quotation from Diane illustrated:

...in an area like this....it's not 'done' for the woman, is it really, to be educated? Well, it isn't, is it, you know? I mean, if you've got, like, some women whose husbands are ex-miners and what have you...they're there to have the dinner on the table and watch the kids and go out for a game of bingo.  
(Diane, 42, College, Year 3)

Although a rather stereotypical view of working-class marital relationships - Diane had an upwardly-mobile partner and felt a growing distance from her class of origin - there were indications that the tensions in these relationships had dimensions of both class and gender.

For the middle-class students and the working-class students with middle-class partners, the incidence of disjunction deriving from social class appeared to be much reduced - at least as far as relationships with partners were concerned. However, in situations where class-based disjunction was not present, there remained a potential for gender-based disjunction as female students asserted the increasing confidence and independence that accompanied intellectual development. Paula, for example, said that she had gone through a 'rough time' with her partner which had to be worked through: 'I think we've negotiated a deal. It's I've been allowed to be more independent and he has....got over the fear of me being independent' (Paula, 30, New University, Year 3).

The working-class interviewees, then, had more potential sources of disjunction - especially if they had working-class partners - and were therefore more likely to experience discontinuities and tensions within their self-identities than the middle-class interviewees. The strategies for dealing with threatened relationships with significant others will be discussed in the following section and the final section will deal with the associated continuities, discontinuities and tensions within the self.



## 8.4 Maintaining Relationships: Keeping Things 'Normal'

### 8.4.1 Partners

Most of the interviewees who reported tensions between themselves and significant others arising from their return to education adopted a strategy of *compartmentalisation*, keeping home life and university or college life separate and attempting to appear 'normal' at home. Sarah commented: 'Well, that's college and I've got to leave that there because, if not, it can take over' (Sarah, 39, College, Year 3). Paul and others described very similar strategies: 'I try to compartmentalise, you know...When I'm here [college] I concentrate on what I'm doing here; when I'm elsewhere, I concentrate on what I'm doing elsewhere' (Paul, 40, College, Year 2). For the female interviewees in particular, this involved making efforts to ensure that home life continued as it had always done and that, whenever possible, studies did not interfere with family life, as Julie explained: 'when he [her partner] comes in everything stops and, to be honest, he's used to that now; he's used to my time' (Julie, 31, College, Year 2). Tina also adopted this strategy: 'I'm trying not to change the home life too much'. One of the ways in which she did this was to confine her academic work to the week so that she could relax with the family at the weekend and her education would therefore not be seen as 'too disruptive' (Tina, 38, New University, Year 2). There was certainly a potential for disjunction in Pam's relationship with her husband which was avoided only through her efforts to keep life 'normal' for him - both in terms of the domestic routine and her behaviour. She compartmentalised the 'normal' world of home and family and the (presumably 'abnormal') world of university and learning and made sure that, whenever possible, her studies fitted around the domestic routine: she generally managed to be home before the children came back from school and prepared tea and carried out any domestic duties that needed to be done before settling down to her university work. As a consequence, her husband eventually 'came round to the idea' of her being at university because 'it had not really affected him':

If I've wanted to do anything I've always gone and done it anyway but, having said that, it's never upset them: I've always made sure that it's fitted round everybody else...I haven't put them out; they haven't suffered from me doing ...anything.. (Pam, 37, New University, Year 1)

Male interviewees also spoke of their attempts to maintain the same daily routine that their partners were used to, fitting their academic work into the week and, wherever possible, keeping the weekend for the usual family activities of shopping and visiting relatives. Jack even made a point of leaving the house at the same time each day to go to college - as he had done whilst in employment - whether or not he had early lectures.

In addition to maintaining a continuity in the daily routine, however, the majority of interviewees also spoke of working to appear 'normal' at home. Kevin's attempt to keep apart the two the 'totally different separate spheres' in his life meant avoiding any 'pretentious' display of his expanding vocabulary at home (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3) and Pam made a conscious effort to appear to be the same person she had always been (Year 2). The temptation to bring ideas from university home for discussion was quickly repressed and, by the second year, Pam reported that she had become 'quieter' about what she was learning; she had 'settled down' and become 'normal again' (Pam, 37, New University, Year 2). As a result, there was no 'widening rift' with her partner, although he did occasionally accuse her of thinking that she knew it all now that she was doing a degree. Similarly, Julie separated her home life from her college life and spoke of 'not being **educated** at home'. She therefore developed 'two heads': one for college, where she could sit and talk about academic matters and one for home, where she talked about very different things (Julie, 31, College, Year 2). Jack also spoke of 'keeping it in separate boxes': 'I'd like to think I was acting the same at home as I was before I started':

I try not to act much differently to what I did before. It's very hard and, obviously, things keep coming in [to the conversation] that you've learnt here - that obviously keeps coming in....and she doesn't mind that...but I don't want to be as fully academic discourse at home that I'd be having here [at college]. I like to separate it a little bit. (Jack, 42, College, Year 3)

One of the best strategies therefore appeared to be to keep things the same. Those students whose lives had always involved aspects that were not shared with their partners appeared to have less difficulty doing this:

I have changed but I don't think it's been in a negative way towards my family. We've always, in some ways, we've always gone on our own ways...but it's always parallel; it doesn't pull apart. (Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 3)

Another successful strategy was to find common ground:

I think it's finding common ground and him keeping his things back, me keeping my things back. We find a common ground and that's where we tread....talking about everyday life, ambitions....we've both got a good sense of humour....we do things together. (Sally, 26, New University, Year 3)

Although relationship tensions appeared to be common among the interviewees - sometimes threatening to culminate in irretrievable breakdown - most managed to get to the end of the course with their partnerships intact. (Incidences of marital breakdown will be discussed further in the following chapter.)

#### 8.4.2 Friends

The dual strategy of compartmentalisation and keeping things 'normal' was also adopted by many interviewees in relation to their friends. Jack, for example, said of a relationship with a long-standing friend: 'I do have to watch my language a bit with him. He just uses [the local] dialect and register and everything so, to fit into the group, I have to use the language of the group' (Jack, 42, College, Year 2). Similarly, Margaret spoke about going with her husband to a working-men's club with 'rough and ready lads': in that situation, 'it feels natural to sort of, perhaps, drop a couple of aitches or - it's so stupid because I don't, I don't feel, it's not like I'm putting it on; it just seems to come naturally to deal with whoever I'm dealing with in that way' (Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 3). Susan made even more of an effort, maintaining a dual life with two sets of friends - her university friends and her old friends from the sewing factory. With her old friends, she dressed in 'womanly' clothes and went dancing; with her university friends, she pursued different leisure activities, wearing boots and jeans. She argued that she was playing two parts, trying to create a favourable impression with both groups of friends and spoke about changing her accent to suit the different contexts: 'I'm aware how I change it because, when I go back home, it's back to "watter" and "jee-ans" instead of "water" and "jeans"'. Susan was desperate to convince her old friends that she had not changed: she wanted them to realise that she was 'normal' and

not 'snobbish' because 'all the working class have, a lot of them, preconceived ideas about what students are like':

...you feel as though you've got to convince them that you're...really no different - you're just furthering your education, you're no different. You're just going further than they have'. (Susan, 23, New University, Year 3)

The strain of keeping this up took its toll on Susan, who commented, 'I'd got to be two people' (Year 2) and 'It's probably what stresses me out' (Year 3). Diane also described how difficult it was to maintain this pretence of being unchanged when speaking to old friends:

...you've got to be extremely careful about the type of conversations that you have. You've got to pick your conversations to match the person because, if you don't, you'll end up with nobody at all.....you've got to be extremely careful. (Diane, 42, College, Year 3)

Jack was also unsure about whether he was successfully keeping his two lives separate:

I'm not sure how I'm acting outside. I mean, you'd have to....ask other people how they see me. When I'm giving you all this crap about how I feel I'm keeping it in separate boxes, people may say differently if you asked them. (Jack, 42, College, Year 3)

One reason for working so hard to keep old relationships intact was suggested by Kevin. Having no-one with whom he could discuss his academic work - no friends at university and no family with any grasp of, or interest in, what he was studying - he feared total social isolation if he lost his old friends:

If you get too involved in academic work then you can't discuss things on an everyday level - you become too sort of academic in a way. But I become involved in academic work and I can't discuss it with anybody else so...you don't want to cut that thread between ...your ordinary reality and your academic reality. (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3)

However, for many of the interviewees, old-established relationships, valued though they undoubtedly were, served as a reminder of how far they had changed since returning to education and brought into sharp relief the tensions - frequently deriving

from social class - between their old, present and potential future selves. Indeed, for some, the prospect of fundamental personal change was present from the outset and regarded with fear, as Margaret illustrated: '...I thought, "I don't **want** that"....because I'm happy with my husband; I'm happy with my kids, you know, and I don't **want** to suddenly be this **other** person' (Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 2). Sarah similarly commented, 'I don't want it to change **me** - that's not what I came back to education for' (Sarah, 39, College, Year 2).

## **8.5 Continuities, Discontinuities and Tensions within the Self**

### **8.5.1 An Expanded Sense of Self?**

An essential continuity in the self was claimed by a number of interviewees. Although none felt totally unchanged by the experience of education, the changes that were noticed could be seen as peripheral rather than fundamental, such as having more knowledge or different opinions. Sarah, for example, argued:

[Education] doesn't change you as a person, what's inside you. It doesn't change *me*, the true me. Alright, I have different views and I have different opinions now. My sort of knowledge has widened. But, at the end of the day, I'm still me - I'm still Sarah! (Sarah, 39, College, Year 3)

Some interviewees pointed to an essential continuity in their daily routines, roles and interests as evidence of a lack of fundamental change in their selves. Tina, for example, pointed to a continuity in leisure interests as evidence of a lack of fundamental personal change:

I still like doing the same things; I've still got the same interests - I still like walking and being out in Derbyshire, tramping up and down with walking boots on, and I still like going for a meal, going for a drink, and the social side. That's not changed whatsoever - I still like doing the same things.  
(Tina, 38, New University, Year 3)

Frequently, the experience of education was linked to the emergence of new forms of self-expression: 'what it's done is given me a new language to be me in' (Bella, 30, Old University, Year 3) or to an expanded sense of self. Anne remarked, 'I definitely think I'm still the same person with just that little bit extra; I've got a bit more to offer'

(Anne, 42, Old University, Year 3) and Margaret echoed this feeling: 'I've added something to me. There's lots of my life still goes on the same and I've added to me, yes, another facet, yes' (Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 2).

Permeating a number of the interviews is a perception of identity as inherently multi-faceted and contextual: social identities could be adopted or discarded according to need. Bella, for example, felt that, having spent a long period working as a prostitute, she had no acceptable social identity and having a degree made her feel like a 'bona fide person', giving her the acceptable public image which she had not previously had. However, this identity was seen merely as a 'front': 'I may know deep down that I'm not really like that but, yes, it is my public image' (Bella, 30, Old University, Year 2). Although Bella's previous life experiences were untypical, other interviewees also drew attention to the contextual - and consciously malleable - nature of the self. Paul, for example, described himself as 'multi-faceted' and argued that he 'put on a different head' in each social context (Paul, 40, College, Year 2); Margaret commented: 'I can be perhaps more like a chameleon, I suppose - I can be whoever I want to be' (Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 3); and Jack argued: 'I think we do put on different acts in different places' (Jack, 42, College, Year 2).

Nevertheless, for many of the interviewees - even those at pains to demonstrate an unchanging self or an unproblematic management of multi-faceted selves - involvement in higher education created a potential for both a bifurcation of their lives and a serious disjunction in social identity. This was described in remarkably similar terms by different interviewees. Kevin, for example, spoke of a distinction between 'ordinary reality' and 'academic reality' and both Pam and Margaret of one between 'normal life' and university life. For most of the interviewees, there was a feeling of living in two different worlds and an experience of disjunction within the self. Pam, for example, speaking about university life and home life, concluded that she was 'a bit of both worlds, really' (Pam, 37, New University, Year 3) and Julie remarked:

I have got two heads, where you come here and you can sit and talk about a seminar or a lecture or your view [with] your colleagues here and then you go home and you talk about something totally different. (Julie, 31, College, Year 2)

Tina described herself at various times as a 'Jeekyll and Hyde' character and a 'transvestite' because she had this 'other life' at University:

I'm being myself when I'm here and I'm being myself at home but, because it's two completely separate roles, I'm like two completely different people: not at heart - I'm still me at heart, it's just that I'm doing different things and thinking in a different way when I'm here [at University] and everything else that's outside me I switched off - that's not there now. Things at home are, like, not going on for me; I've locked the door and that's waiting for me when I get home but I don't think about it when I'm here. (Tina, 38, New University, Year 2)

Interestingly, by the third year, Tina felt that the two aspects of her identity had started to merge together: 'like, before, I was sort of student and then Mum; well, now I'm not - it's all sort of merged and I've become what I am now and it's changing'. For many of the other interviewees, however, the perception of being 'two different people' persisted throughout the duration of the course.

The experience of having different dimensions of experience - being a mother, a worker, a voluntary worker, and so on - and having to adjust to each as the occasion demanded is, surely, a common one. However, there is an indication in the interviews that, for many of the students, not only was the 'academic' facet of their selves of increasing importance to them, it was also in significant ways potentially *incompatible* with other aspects of their self-identities. Paul, for example, described how his 'academic' self provided the 'overview': it monitored other aspects of his self and, in some instances, discredited them: '...education's, like, it's the overview, you know. It's like I'm a spider on a web and education's in the middle and all these little facets I bring in when I need them' (Paul, 40, College, Year 2). Paul had a long-standing involvement with the territorial army and as he progressed through his degree course he noticed sexism and racism which had not been apparent to him before. He began to feel that the territorial army did not fit in with his 'new-found perspective of life'. Other students also made reference to a fundamental change in the self: 'I didn't realise I could be a different person' (Susan, 23, New University, Year 2); 'I didn't realise this person existed' (Tina, 38, New University, Year 1). This change could create anxieties about who the 'real me' was, as Margaret explained:



I wonder a lot of times whether there's a real me, yes, and who the real me is - what the real me is. When I'm in an academic situation, I know the academic thing is me; when I'm with the kids, the Mum thing is me, you know....  
(Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 3)

There is undoubtedly a gender dimension in this perception of a bifurcation of the self. For many of the female students with children, the identity of 'Mum' was of central importance and involved demands, personal qualities and value systems which appeared to sit uneasily with those required of them in their role of student. However, some male students also appeared to feel tensions in their self identities and it is argued in the following section that a common factor underlying the experiences of both male and female interviewees was *social class*.

#### 8.5.2 Class Identity

Few of the working-class interviewees held straightforward or consistent views of social class and positioned themselves in relation to it in different ways at different times as they progressed through their courses. Although quite a number appeared to hold unproblematic views of the class structure as polarised between 'us' and 'them' (for example, Susan, Paul and Peter), some even using these terms, a few denied the relevance of class in today's society and others pointed to significant changes which had accompanied the decline of the solid, working-class communities with which they had been familiar in their childhood. Julie, for example, spoke of the decline of the 'typical' working class, which she described as living in mining communities where 'men ruled the roost', beat their wives and took themselves off to the pub with the weekly pay packet. Both Kevin and Julie stressed a corresponding shift in working-class values, noting a growth of materialism ('keeping up with the Jones's' - Kevin), competition ('dog eat dog' - Julie) and aspirations for an education and a better life.

However, arguments about the decline of the *working* class were often accompanied by ideas of an emergence of a new grouping of people at the lower end of the stratification system. Despite her claim that class was not important to people of her generation, Julie argued that the disappearance of the working-class had been accompanied by the growth of a 'sub-class' living in poverty. A commonly-held view among the interviewees was of a class structure in which a large, middle grouping of 'ordinary' or 'normal' people

was distinguished, on one side, from a small group of very rich people (in Julie's words, 'hooray Henries' and 'champagne Charlies') and, on the other side, from a (relatively) small 'underclass'.

This emphasis on 'ordinariness' is a common finding in other studies (see, for example, Savage 2000: 116). Savage argues that the claim to 'ordinariness' represents a claim to be treated as an individual, fairly and equitably. The idea of class, however, represents a potential threat to equal treatment, which is why many people are suspicious of it as a source of identity. Paradoxically, however, as 'ordinariness' is a relational construct - we can only identify what is 'ordinary' by contrasting it with what is not 'ordinary' - the notion of class distinctions necessarily reassert themselves (Savage 2000: 117). Savage therefore concludes: 'Class is salient in terms of constructing an idea of difference, not in terms of defining a class which one belongs to' (Savage 2000: 113). Illustrating Savage's argument, many of the interviewees clearly felt the need to distinguish themselves from others whilst, simultaneously, speaking of the declining significance of social class. Julie, for example, was at pains to distance herself from the 'sub-class', not necessarily in terms of lifestyle or income, but in terms of criteria such as values, parenting styles and aspirations (Julie, 31, College, Year 2). Diane similarly distanced herself from the narrow horizons of the working class: 'going to work, paying the mortgage, maybe getting off to Spain for a couple of weeks a year and that is their lot' (Diane, 42, College, Year 2), and Margaret distanced herself from the 'rough' working class:

I feel awful saying this, but when I'm in this [working-men's] club situation, that's not me because they are very rough and some of the women are very rough and that's not me - and that's nothing to do with coming here [to University]. I mean, we've always been a very working-class family with no money or anything but I've never been like that. (Margaret, 41, Old University, Year 3)

This ambivalence about class - denying its relevance whilst, at the same time, positioning themselves in relationship to it - appears in many of the interviews, echoing the findings of Skeggs (1997a) and others that, for many, a working-class identity is a spoilt or stigmatised identity from which people try to distance themselves. This feeling is clearly evident in June's claim: 'I'm from a working-class background but I

have...been brought up differently' (June, 27, New University, Year 1) and in Tina's reluctance to speak about class at all:

I don't like talking about classes, really, because we are both very working-class backgrounds - jobs our fathers had and our backgrounds are really working class. I mean, when he [her husband] were little, they only had one bedroom for all the family to sleep in and they didn't have a toilet inside. So, you know, really working class in that way. (Tina, 38, New University, Year 3)

Anne also associated being working-class with not feeling 'good' about herself but nevertheless seemed to positively evaluate the 'strong roots' that her background had given her:

I suppose, when I was younger, I did go through a sort of phase about feeling sort of 'not good' because, you know, I've never owned my own house and things like that. But, at the same time, I still feel that I've had strong sort of working-class roots, you know. I don't know.  
(Anne, 42, Old University, Year 3)

Yet, in the same interview, Anne expressed ambivalent feelings about her social class background: 'I don't know if I'm particularly working class; I think I empathise more with the working class, really - working class and socialism'.

Many of the interviewees remained ambivalent about their class identity as they progressed through their degree courses and very few claimed unequivocally that they had maintained their working-class identities. Jack, for example, commented:

...before, I probably accepted I was working-class and that people were better than me. Now, I don't - I think they're definitely no better than me....and I'm no better or worse than anyone else....it's changed me in that respect - it's levelled everybody off, I think. (Jack, 42, College, Year 3)

In contrast, Susan argued, 'I still hold my working-class origin. I still think I will be, no matter what I do; I'll still class myself as working-class even though other people won't'. The reason she gave for this was: '...there's deep-rooted principles that will never change because of the upbringing I've had and the people I know and the experiences they've had' (Susan, 23, New University, Year 3). Nevertheless, Susan said

that she would adopt the trappings of a middle-class life, such as a 'flash' car and having children later in life.

Kevin (30, Old University) held a similarly ambivalent view of his social class background. Although, in his first interview, he spoke at length about his problems as a working-class student in an old university, by the second year had attempted to rationalise and intellectualise this, challenging my use of the term 'ordinary working class' and claiming that he adopted a 'post-modern' approach of 'not trying to put people into categories'. Class was such a sensitive issue for him that he said he just tried to forget about it and get on with learning. Yet the ambivalence and uncertainty arising from the 'stigma' attached to being 'unskilled, manual, bottom bracket' can be identified throughout the three interviews with Kevin:

I think it's stupid just to hang on to your roots, to say, 'I'm working class and I'm proud...and I'm waving the banner'. I mean, I try, I can't reject - I don't even want to reject that I'm working class because I'll always have this sort of - I am working class and I can't really escape from that. I suppose I've benefited from a middle-class education and I wouldn't stay in an area because I'm faithful to working-class roots. I'm not faithful to any class; I'm just faithful to a good life in a way, and that's what I want, really. (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3)

Bella summed up the feeling, clearly shared by a number of interviewees, that despite the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle, she could not leave her working-class background behind entirely, giving her the feeling that she had 'two sides' to herself:

...I have two sides to myself; one side that accepts their [working-class] values - I mean, I still feel working class. I have a nice house and, you know, my boyfriend's a lecturer and I guess we have lots of middle-class aspirations but there's a sense in which I feel you can't forget where you've come from.....I've done all sorts of things to try to improve my social position because I always felt that, you know, I was a second-rate person. I'd be with people who sort of had nice jobs and lots of money and all of those things. And I would always feel, 'Well, I sound a bit like they do, you know: I know how to act and I know which knife and fork as I should be using and which wine to order. But, really, I'm not one of them. (Bella, 30, Old University, Year 2)

Even those interviewees who said that gaining a degree meant upward mobility did not always seem totally convinced of this and could be prey to feelings of guilt about what they saw as a potential betrayal of their roots:

I suppose I feel middle-class but I always felt working-class till I'd done this so I'm not really sure what class I am in myself. It's hard to distinguish, I think, to draw that line between middle-class and working-class. But I still do think it depends a lot on your outlook, what you want from life, as much as anything.  
(Diane, 42, College, Year 3)

Sally's husband was promoted at work and they moved to a middle-class area during her second year of University. This reinforced her view that she had become middle class: 'I'm not working class - I'm middle-class now I've got a degree...I've gone up, gone up a scale'. Sally wanted the 'status symbols' that went with a middle-class lifestyle to show others (and herself?) how far she had advanced:

Probably what I see as value now is a lot to do with prestige, status symbols like a fast car and, you know, holidays. And I want everybody to see that, 'Oh, isn't she doing well?' And probably that wouldn't have bothered me so much before.  
(Sally, 26, New University, Year 3)

Sally commented that she had cut herself off from her working-class roots in order to 'get on', moving to a house in a 'better' area of the city, changing her friends and sending her child to a private school. She argued, 'everything that I'm associated with is sort of middle class - it's no longer working class' (Year 3). Nevertheless, she felt ill at ease about appearing to be a 'snob', saying, 'somewhere along the line it must have changed to a thing where I wanted a bit of, a bit of prestige, and it's awful!'

Sally also felt that she was betraying her working-class background - her 'ancestors and what they stood for', adding, 'there's something in me that probably keeps me back there; there's a little part of me back there'. Tina similarly hinted at a sense of betrayal:

I don't like to say that I'm not what I was, really...you feel that you've achieved something.....We're just what we've always been, you know - work hard; he [her partner] has always worked hard and got where he's got through working. But because we've got the lifestyle that we've got, because of the money that he

earns, it gives you that status of middle class, so we've got a middle-class lifestyle. (Tina, 38, New University, Year 3)

In summary, uncertainty and contradiction characterised the attitudes to social class of many of the working-class students, for whom the pursuit of education represented a route away from a stigmatised class identity but brought with it feelings of guilt and a betrayal of cultural values. These feelings were brought into sharp relief by changing relationships with significant others, who provided a yardstick against which intellectual development and changing value systems could be measured. There was also a prevalent feeling of being 'in limbo', of moving on but not yet having arrived anywhere, and a fear of the future. This is one reason why the prospect of leaving the higher education environment was viewed with some trepidation by many of the interviewees.

#### 8.6 Hopes and Fears for the Future

Most of the interviewees were hoping to gain good jobs after finishing their courses but had become concerned that this might not be possible and this led to feelings of disillusionment:

I think, about a year ago, I realised that this degree was not.....going to be the be-all and end-all and was not going to actually get me anywhere specific...at the end of the day, I feel the actual hands-on [experience] is worth a great deal more. (Sarah, 39, College, Year 3)

For Kevin, education had opened up a new world but he feared he might not gain access to this at end of the course and that he would be caught between two social contexts:

I can just project forward and think, 'I'm going to do this [degree] but I'm still going to end up back in that [old] social situation'. So, in a way, it's [the] worst of both worlds because you can see what world that there is that has its benefits and then you can also see that you're straining against a leash in some ways because you're still going to be back in that situation, looking for a job, maybe, at the end of the day. (Kevin, 30, Old University, Year 3)

Others shared this fear and there was also a sense of anxiety about maintaining the new, expanded sense of self and the feeling of being on an upward trajectory once the support of the higher education setting was removed. Pam, for example, was concerned that 'the access to knowledge outside the University is limited' and she would no longer

have borrowing rights at the library. Her local library - with which she had been satisfied in earlier years - she now realised was 'full of Catherine Cookson' (Pam, 37, New University, Year 3). Anxieties such as these were not groundless, as Julie found when her links with the college began to break down in the final year. Her attendance at college was poor towards the end of the degree course as a result of illness and domestic difficulties and she began to lose her network of friends there. She said that it became increasingly difficult to sustain her academic identity, especially as financial difficulties had driven her back into low-level paid employment. Julie described how and her 'home head' rapidly began to take over from her 'college head':

...unfortunately, my home head's taken over more now. When I'm going out I'm finding it difficult to find the words to explain what I mean ...Previously ...I'd have easily slipped into it and I'm finding it difficult now .....That's a disappointment, very much a disappointment... ...Home has taken so much of me back again and so it just got to the point where I'd lost this side of my life; I'd lost the college side... (Julie, 31, College, Year 3)

Pam also felt uncertain about the future. She felt that getting a degree would give her 'status' and that people's attitudes towards her would change. She certainly felt more confident, knowledgeable and assertive: she *could* lead a different kind of life. Yet she did not want to use the degree to climb up the social ladder - this would be 'snobbery' - and she might not feel comfortable socialising with people from middle-class backgrounds or taking part in what she perceived as middle-class leisure pursuits, such as attending operas. Instead, she wanted to keep her old friends and therefore concluded that the tendency would therefore be 'downwards' (back towards her old friends and social life) rather than 'upwards' (Pam, 37, New University, Year 3).

## 8.7 Summary

For many, then, the final year at university or college was accompanied by a feeling of being 'caught between two contexts'. As the experience of disjunction in the higher education setting itself decreased, there could be a corresponding increase in feelings of disjunction in the home setting and a perception of a new 'occasion of hazard' in the moral career. There had been fundamental changes in the self which could not be undone: 'I can't go back now, I can't; I'll never go back to how I was before because I have changed' (Tina, 38, New University, Year 3). At the same time, however, some



interviewees were receiving little support from significant others for their new self-identities and were starting to feel that their hopes and aspirations for the future would not materialise and they would end up back where they started from.

For the majority of the interviewees, gaining a degree was associated with a move away from working-class membership to a greater or lesser extent. Most commonly mentioned was a change in value systems and outlooks, and a struggle for a better material standard of living. However, ambivalence about this is evident in many of the interviews: 'working classness' was seen both as a stigmatised identity but also as a source of *fundamental* values and principles, and of life experiences, which could not be totally rejected. In addition, the move away from aspects of working-class culture was not necessarily associated with an increasing allegiance with middle-class culture, which was frequently described as high-brow and 'snobbish' (cf Savage 2000). Kevin's description of being 'in limbo' captures this profound sense of dislocation. Serious dislocation arising from this and other aspects of the higher education experience lay behind the withdrawal of ten of the interviewees from their courses. In the following chapter, withdrawal will be examined largely through a detailed consideration of the experiences of one of these interviewees – Wendy.

### 9.1 Introduction

Withdrawal from the course is an event which is often the culmination of a set of complex and inter-related factors (HEFCE, 1997: 39). General underlying problems can be identified, such as academic or financial difficulty, wrong choice of degree, and dissatisfaction with the social environment or with other aspects of the student experience (see 1.2.3). However, each withdrawal has a unique history and a case study provides the opportunity to explore the ways in which different pressures may inter-relate over time to culminate in the decision to withdraw.

Ten of the twenty-seven interviewees withdrew at some stage during their degree courses and only one of these had returned by the end of the research process. (See Appendix 3 for details of the students who withdrew.) The subject of this case study is Wendy, who was the only student to return to her course after a 'leave of absence' of a year. Wendy was chosen as the focus of this chapter not only because her story illustrates many common themes but also because it draws out the subtle ways in which class-related pressures contribute to the decision to withdraw.

Wendy was forty at the time she enrolled on a degree course in social history at Old University. Born into a working-class family, her father was a crane driver in the steel industry and the family lived on a council estate. Her early educational experiences were negative in many ways and her failure in the 'Eleven Plus' examination set the stamp on her self-evaluation and aspirations for the future: 'I was a failure and grammar school and anything above that was out of my reach'. She went on to 'just a secondary-modern' school but enjoyed it - she had always loved learning. She decided to stay on into the fifth year (in today's terms, Y11) despite a lack of parental encouragement. Although her father was pleased that she was doing well at school (he had passed his examination to go to a grammar school in the 1930s but the family could not afford to let him go and he always resented this), her mother was 'of the old school that education was not for girls'. In addition, as many of the interviewees noted, the economy was

buoyant and jobs were plentiful: Wendy's parents felt that they were keeping her at school for a final year when she could have been out earning her own money.

A major reorganisation of the education system in the city meant that Wendy had to move schools for her final year (around 1970), transferring from a small school to a large one. The move was disastrous for Wendy as the syllabuses at the new school were different and the timetable could not accommodate her combination of subject choices. One result of this was that the only teaching she received for Biology was gained through sitting at the back of a Y9 classroom as the O Level group in Biology was timetabled at the same time as that for Physics, which Wendy was also studying. In addition, Wendy had, with another girl from her old school, to 'fight the school' to be allowed to take an O Level in Commerce: 'we really felt outsiders'. The inevitable result of this chaos was that Wendy's work suffered; she disliked the school and could not wait to leave. She left with few, if any, qualifications which, she said, 'confirmed' her academic failure and put her 'back into position', effectively killing off any remaining academic aspirations she had, including the dream she had long had of going on to higher education: 'I loved school and I would have wanted at that stage to maybe have gone to university, you know, at eighteen, but there was no way I was ever going to get it'.

Wendy went into office work and slowly climbed the career ladder to a 'middle management' position. She married a 'Passenger Assistance Co-ordinator' (Railway Porter) but never had children. Her love of learning remained and she always intended to go to night school to start courses but, each academic year, managed to find excuses not to do so until she was made redundant twenty years later. After she had been out of work for six months, her sister showed her a leaflet she had received about an Access Open Day at a local further education college. Wendy was interested in this and persuaded her sister to go with her to find out about it ('I was such a coward that I couldn't go on my own, so I dragged my sister round'). The course looked so interesting that Wendy enrolled.

Wendy argued that she started the Access course purely out of interest: 'it was only out of interest, you know - I thought I was only going to do it for a year and that was it'. She confessed that she was 'terrified' at the prospect of going to college and, at that stage, felt that university was not even a remote possibility. Wendy described how much she enjoyed that first year on the Access course, which gave her more confidence in herself:

And I think one of the main things was that they gave me a sense of my opinions; my ideas *did* count for something and I could voice them. You know, nobody was going to deride me for them - they might not agree with them but they weren't going to pull me down for them. And I think it's from that that the confidence grew. (Year 1)

The course also gave her 'the bug for education' so that she wanted to carry on. By the end of the first year, Wendy was working part-time in a job which she described as making her feel 'brain dead' and the thought of continuing in that job for the rest of her life encouraged her to continue to the second year of the Access course. At that stage, higher education still appeared to her as an impossible dream: 'No way was I going to get here!'. She explained that she had lacked the confidence because of the 'conditioning' that had attended what she saw as her earlier failure in the education system. A second failure was too unbearable to contemplate.

However, Wendy described how things 'escalated' during her second year on the Access course and how she gradually came to think about higher education as a real possibility. The other Access students clearly saw higher education as a feasible goal and Wendy came to feel that it might be so for her too. Perhaps this was the outcome she had always hoped for but never dared to admit until this stage:

I'd never thought I could do it and everything, and I think I'm always frightened of trying to tackle something and coming crashing down to earth, you know - it's far too high! Which, I think, is why I always said it was only an interest at first: I couldn't commit myself right from the beginning to say, 'I want to do this', you know. But being with the other students and, you know, they were so

enthusiastic about it and, you know, saw going to University, or Polytechnic as it was then, as a real possibility. That, yes, that fired me up and everything.  
(Year 1)

The second year of the course involved only one day's attendance each week. With the support of her husband, Wendy gave up her part-time job to become a full-time college student, taking GCSEs to fill in her time and give her confidence that she could cope with examinations. Wendy applied for courses at both Old and New University and was 'shocked' to be accepted at both. She chose to study at Old University despite being warned against this by some of the Access tutors who felt that it was not 'accommodating to mature students' (See 5.7.3). Wendy decided to ignore this advice, partly because three of her friends from the Access course were going there and partly out of what she described as 'snobbery':

I mean, [New University] is still the Polytechnic to a lot of people and, although you were getting exactly the same things - you could come out with a degree at the end of that - the [Old] University was the 'proper' one. And....a lot of people, I think, they still perceive it that way, And, I think, to me, it was flattery to have been offered a place to come to [Old] University and I think that had a big influence on me taking that....I was really just going with the flow of the crowd from the Access Course and snobbery. (Year 2)

Wendy pointed to the 'slightly higher status' of Old University, although she did not see this being important to her in terms of subsequent employment.

### **9.3 The Transition to University**

#### **9.3.1 Isolation and Loneliness**

Wendy described the transition to University as a 'terrifying' experience and one for which she was totally unprepared. She reported feelings of *isolation*, *loneliness* and, relatedly, a *loss of confidence*, which were so intense that she had to undergo counselling during her first year at University (although the nature of this counselling, the process of referral or self-diagnosis of need and the precipitating events were never disclosed). Initially, the new learning context appeared to be very different to anything she had experienced before and, in her second year, she described how it had appeared to her as an alien environment:

In that two years of the Access course [I] really did find this confidence, you know; I was comfortable amongst my peers and everything and **that** I really loved, and **that** made a difference. Then, I think, the problem was I came then to University....I think, naively, I expected University to be an extension of the Access course and I thought it was, you know, I was still going to get that same sort of buzz out of it that I had from the Access. And I think, throughout the first year, a lot of it was coming to terms with it as a **totally** different environment. It isn't the cosy environment of a college, you know, where you do get closer to tutors....I found it difficult to get the confidence going again because there seemed to be so much flitting around all over the place and difficulty building up relationships there. (Year 2)

A number of sources of disjunction are evident in this quotation. Firstly, like some of the other interviewees, she was not feeling comfortable with the other students (see 6.4.1). She had, however, transferred to the University with three of her friends from the Access course and, as two of these were on the same degree course, she was part of an established mutual support system from the outset. In addition, she did not appear to have any difficulties with the younger students:

Well, I've always got on with them very well. I mean, I expected to feel, you know, so much older than everybody else and everything but I've never felt like that at all, mixing with the youngsters, you know you've just been another student and everything. (Year 1)

However, this interaction with the younger students was limited to tutorials and, as she said later, 'it really does end once we walk out of the classroom' (Year 2). In addition, transferring to the University with her Access friends removed the necessity to establish new friendships - even with other mature students - and, being shy and under-confident, Wendy made no effort to do so. A contributory factor here was that, like most of the interviewees, Wendy lived at home and therefore had little involvement in the social life of the University, attending just for academic purposes. The result of all this was that Wendy felt isolated from most of the other students on her course.

### 9.3.2 Feeling an Impostor

A second source of disjunction apparent in the quotation above was the learning context. Wendy described the University environment as 'totally different' to the Access course in a number of ways. She had been used to a much smaller, 'cosier' learning context but the sprawling University campus meant constant dashing about

from one lecture to another, which had an ‘unsettling’ effect (see 6.3.1). In addition, Wendy found that relationships with tutors were not as close as they had been at College and she described these tutors as ‘a breed apart from myself’ (Year 2) (see 6.5). Yet the initial loss of confidence which accompanied these feelings of isolation and dislocation - which must be experienced to some degree by most students entering the University - would probably have been overcome had Wendy not had more serious, underlying, problems, both at University and at home.

A major source of anxiety for Wendy was a feeling of being out of place in the University setting, a feeling that she did not really belong there, that she was essentially an impostor. Like many of the interviewees (see 6.4.3), she saw the University as a middle-class institution: ‘I still very much have it in my mind that a university is for middle class; you know, it’s still not a working-class institution and I belong to working class, out of it all, you know’ (Year 3). She commented that the University ‘can be off-putting for, you know, the little kid from the council estate, as I was, you know - it can be a little bit frightening at first, you know’ (Year 3). Yet Wendy was not able to identify the ways in which the University was ‘middle class’: she saw no overt barriers to working-class students there; she was not criticised for the way she spoke; and, in the teaching context, other students appeared to accept her without question. Nevertheless, she was clearly uneasy with these students, commenting that she was ‘frightened to take some of them on’ in tutorials (Year 3). She was also greatly in awe of the tutors: ‘I still do see these sort of up at the pinnacle and me down at the base of the triangle, you know!’ (Year 2). She described her attitude to tutors as one of extreme deference, a feeling which she believed was part and parcel of a working-class background:

I think it’s partly class background. I think we were brought up that way, you know. I mean, being at school, we called our teachers ‘Sir’ and everything. And I still feel that way now, you know - to me, these, they are lecturers, they are still ‘Sir’ ...I mean, when I worked at the Building Society, you know, if the Branch Manager came near me, you know, I felt as though I should curtsy to him and what-have-you. And I think it’s something within me and it’s something within class. I mean, I’m the same if I go to see the doctor, you know.... (Year 3)

Like many of the interviewees, then, these feelings of being *different* to others in the University context were accompanied by the conviction of being *inferior* in some way



(see 6.2). Wendy felt that she had ‘fluked’ getting to university and did not really belong: ‘Somebody had made a mistake somewhere and I was waiting for the tap on the shoulder, you know, to say, “Please go”, and everything’ (Year 1). As a consequence, she built up enormous anxiety about assessment in the first few weeks - failure at this stage would confirm that she did not deserve a place at University. Paradoxically, the support she had from the Access students with whom she had transferred proved to be a double-edged sword: although she felt that she would not have survived the first term without this, her consequent lack of involvement with other students, or discussion with them about assessment tasks, left her under-confident about her assignments. Her fears were ameliorated, temporarily, when essays had been handed in and not found wanting:

I was terrified to put pen to paper and I really only settled down once we got the first work back and, you know, felt, ‘Yes, I can do this, I am in the middle of it all’, kind of thing. And from then on, things picked up. But I did find the first six weeks very bad. (Year 1)

Wendy’s lack of confidence manifested itself during the first interview as an apparent indifference about her aspirations in higher education:

I haven’t got the big ambition. My big ambition is to get a degree and what-have-you; beyond that, I haven’t thought. I mean, a job to come after that is a bonus and everything and, in a way, I think that limits you....it’s easier to turn round and say, ‘I can’t do this’, because of not having a big ambition. (Year 1)

This diffidence, this profession of the absence of ‘a big ambition’, was clearly a defence against what was viewed, at times, as inevitable failure. Wendy was highly motivated and conscientious: as she said herself, ‘I am a hundred per cent sort of person; if I go into something, it’s got to have a hundred per cent’ (Year 1). Acceptance at University had ‘fulfilled [her] dreams’ and, despite the perceived personal risks, she was fully committed to it from the start. Unfortunately, like some of the other students at Old University, Wendy felt that the reality of the university experience did not live up to the dream (see 6.3.2). This disjunction between the preconceptions Wendy had of University life and the reality was crucial to her feelings of isolation and loneliness.

### 9.3.3 University: the Dream and the Reality

Although she had initial fears about her ability to cope with the academic demands of higher education, Wendy soon discovered that it was well within her capabilities. Despite an underlying lack of confidence, she found herself contributing fully in the tutorials and, by the second term of the first year, felt that she was 'in routine' and 'settled', although she did confess to a 'big fear' of the examinations at the end of the year.

There was, however, an underlying sense of disappointment about the university experience, which was not as she had imagined it would be: 'University and the way I perceived it - which I now know was so wrong - did help to knock the confidence out of me a little bit that I'd gained from the Access course' (Year 2). Her preconceptions of university life had been gained from watching the film 'Educating Rita' and she had envisaged more interaction amongst students and more intellectual stimulation from discussions with them. Instead of this, her time at University was spent rushing between lectures and tutorials, which were not always as stimulating as they might have been as students had little time to prepare and did not necessarily have 'big ideas' on the topics being discussed. In addition, Wendy's lack of involvement in the social life left her with the feeling that the intellectual discussion and stimulation were taking place elsewhere and that she was excluded from it: '....maybe all this is happening there, you know, within the bars and one thing and another on Campus, which I don't go in to or anything. So maybe that's why I miss it all' (Year 2).

Intellectual stimulation at home was also missing and this was the cause of increasing problems in her relationship with her husband which were central to her decision to withdraw at the end of the second year.

### 9.3.4 Marital Problems

Wendy's husband had always been financially supportive of her return to education and did not feel 'threatened' by her life at University as he knew that she attended purely for academic reasons and that her social life was at home, where she was happiest. He was unconcerned about the changes in domestic affairs, not minding if the housework did not get done and quite happy to pitch in himself when necessary; there is an indication

that he was used to sharing the domestic chores anyway. Although he had noticed changes in her from the start, many of these were not necessarily seen as negative in any way. For example, her increased confidence had made her more out-going and sociable, which Wendy felt had improved their relationship in many ways, although her husband clearly felt that this increased confidence went too far at times: 'there are times when he says that he ought to get me a soapbox out and everything' (Year 1).

A slight tension was evident about leisure pursuits and Wendy worked hard to ameliorate this. One of their main shared interests was crown green bowling and, having no children, they had been able to take part in this every evening. However, Wendy's increasing academic commitments meant that she could no longer do this. She felt that she was being 'selfish' in putting her work first and made a great effort to 'work at the relationship', to keep up the joint activities she shared with her husband, whatever the cost to herself:

...if he's wanting to go out for a drink and, you know, you've got a pile of work to do that really you ought to get done but, you know, you feel that you've got to say, 'Yes, we'll go out for a drink', you know, because that's important, you know. And I'll struggle along with the work; I'll get up an hour earlier or something in the morning to get that done. (Year 1)

More difficult to overcome, however, was the fact that Wendy's husband did not really understand the quest for personal fulfilment that education represented for her or the educational experience she was involved in. He appeared to think of university as an extension of school, asking Wendy if she had any 'homework' and finding her willingness to sit up until the early hours of the morning to finish an essay totally incomprehensible. Strains in the relationship were evident early in her first year at University, when she commented: 'You feel quite frightened that there's changes between us'. Wendy remarked wistfully, 'I think it must be nice to be able to discuss ideas amongst people whereas you don't get that by going straight home' (Year 1). Instead, she described returning home 'fired up' over a lecture to be met by a stone wall:

He's inclined to switch off then and what-have-you and I know he doesn't want to listen to me and everything and that can sometimes upset me then because I'm bubbling and wanting to just talk about these things in a general way. I mean, I

don't want to sort of go in and be talking over his head - I mean, if he'd just said to me, 'Calm down', you know, 'Tell me what you mean', and this sort of thing. But I just want, for me it is that I want to share it with him and what-have-you but yet I can see that he doesn't really want to know. (Year 1)

Instead of sharing the University experience with her, she sensed that he felt a growing intellectual distance between them: 'I think he does fear sometimes that I am going to say something that he doesn't understand and that I am moving away from him in that respect' (Year 1).

It is unsurprising that Wendy reported 'a slight drift apart' at this stage; what is surprising, however, is that she described this in terms of social class: '...it must be frightening to him to imagine that I'm moving slightly out of his *class* or something, if that's the right word; that my interests are no longer just the same as his' (Year 1). This social class dimension was hinted at by other interviewees when they voiced their fears of 'moving up' and leaving partners and families behind (see 8.3.4). This association of education with class mobility, and its implications for relationships with significant others, will be discussed later in the chapter.

#### 9.3.5 Summary

To summarise so far, Wendy's feelings of isolation and loneliness, and the consequent loss of confidence had a number of dimensions. Transferring to Old University with some of her friends was insufficient to compensate for the alien learning context, a context very different to the 'cosy' and supportive environment of the Access course. The sheer scale of the campus and the constant rushing from one part to another intensified the feelings of alienation that Wendy experienced in the new context, where she was expected to organise herself and to do new and terrifying things such as giving presentations in the tutorials (not always with the support of her friends, with whom she did not share all her teaching sessions). In addition, Wendy felt a sense of being out of place in the University setting, an impostor whose intellectual and social inferiority was always on the brink of being discovered. She clung to her former friends for support and, as a consequence, made little effort to make new relationships, even among the other mature students, which intensified her feelings of isolation and loneliness and her worries about assessment.

Wendy's failure to integrate with other students or to become involved in the social side of university life exacerbated her disillusionment about higher education: she had anticipated a much more heavily intellectual focus than she found, much more intellectual debate and stimulation. Essentially, she was in love with the *idea* of a university education and the reality fell far short of this. (Kevin and Bella at Old University voiced similar feelings - see 6.3.2.) Yet she was reluctant to admit, even to herself, that the picture of university that she had built up over the years was false: the intellectual discussion for which she craved could be happening elsewhere, in the student bars and halls of residence to which she had no access.

Disappointed that the university experience had not proved to be as enjoyable as she had anticipated and that she felt isolated in that environment, Wendy was also worried that her home life was changing and that her previously close relationship with her husband was under threat. With no-one to discuss new ideas with at University, she went home and tried to discuss them with her husband, who showed no interest, and even annoyance, at this. More worryingly, however, she felt a growing distance between them: a new world had opened up for her and, although she wanted to share it with him, there was a feeling of moving away. Nevertheless, despite all her insecurities and fears, Wendy appeared to be in a relatively buoyant mood as she neared the end of the first year at university:

I'm reasonably happy. There is a sense of belonging in that the confidence is there....you know, you're capable of doing the work, which is a big boost to confidence and everything. Yes, I'm feeling very happy about things generally, you know. (Year 1)

However, her levels of confidence fluctuated on a daily basis and she was clearly feeling the pressure of the impending examinations:

I mean, **now**, as opposed to the first term, the thoughts of giving this up now, you know, really terrifies me and would really break my heart, which in actual fact adds to the pressure of the exams of course. (Year 1)

She did pass the examinations but, in her own estimation, just 'scraped through'. This set the tone for the second year, after which she withdrew.

Wendy found the experience of examinations extremely stressful, having little sleep during the examination period and living in constant fear of failure:

The very first examination I took, you know, I really felt at first, 'I can't put pen to paper here' and everything, and sort of got half way through a question and thought, 'Now, what am I talking about here?' and, you know, just waffled on for half a page and everything and I kept losing track altogether. I really did find them very hard... (Year 2)

Nevertheless, the first term of the second year passed reasonably well: Wendy felt more 'settled' and confident, and more integrated with the other students on the course (although some of the younger students were inclined to treat her like 'Mum' and look to her for help with their work). She began to feel that her working-class background was an asset on her social history course:

I think it probably depends on modules and things you're taking but, sort of, politically, you can be quite revered coming from a working-class background, you know.....I mean, I do find this within the courses that I've taken, that there's very much a Marxist bent to everything. I mean, we're getting into [social] class and one thing and another and politics here but, because you've come from that [working-class background], you know, you've experienced it, they're more inclined to revere you to draw upon your own experiences, you know, and say, 'Well, yes, when I've looked back on my life, it is my class....background that's prevented me from doing certain things', and one thing and another. So I find background really is more in favour of me rather than against me. Mind you, whether every university's going to be the same, I don't know. (Year 2)

Wendy passed a second set of examinations at the end of the first semester although, again, she did not reach the high standard of attainment that she had aimed for and this clearly troubled her: '...it's still a thing with me, failure, and....I set myself very high standards and I am unforgiving of myself if I don't achieve them....'. However the start of the second semester brought new problems and, by April of that academic year, a decision to withdraw from the course permanently, although the reasons for this were not fully explained at the time as she was extremely upset about the situation:

I'm having problems in my private life that [are] affecting University at the moment....I've really gone through a crisis of confidence over the last two months out of it. I mean, so much so that I was going to withdraw from the course completely. I didn't feel that University or attending University is the cause of my lack of confidence and stress but it was contributing towards it. (Year 2)

#### 9.4.1 A 'massive sense of failure'

What had happened was that a number of pressures had come to a head, creating this 'crisis of confidence'. Firstly, changes in the pattern of teaching and assessment had intensified her feelings of isolation and lack of intellectual stimulation. Even the limited interaction with other students that Wendy had experienced in her first year was reduced in the second year when class contact hours fell from thirteen to four hours a week.

(Comments about a dramatic reduction in class contact hours after the first year was reported by a number of interviewees at Old University.) Although most of Wendy's teaching was, by then, taking place in the same part of the campus, her feelings of isolation in the learning process intensified. She felt that she worked much better when involved with other students and that, without this and the routine of regular scheduled teaching, she had to motivate and organise herself. She commented: 'the loneliness of it I never expected' (Year 2).

A further source of disappointment and anxiety followed the introduction of a semesterised and modularised system for Wendy's second year which, she felt, resulted in a more superficial learning process:

...the biggest thing to me I've found has been this swapping over to semesters....I still feel very cheated over it...the big thing that I feel about that was I expected perhaps in my second year to be more involved in fewer subjects and to really go in depth and I've found with this semester system that....it's surface painting all the time, you know - we're not really digging deep enough for me, you know....I did expect...that I would have sort of one or two subjects that I would know in depth...I felt that we've only sort of skimmed across. (Year 2)

Semesterisation produced another unwelcome effect: examinations at the end of semester one. These examinations, like the ones at the end of the first year, had been passed but Wendy still felt that she was not living up to her own high expectations: she had 'felt good at the time' of the examinations but still had not achieved the marks she



had hoped for: 'that wasn't good enough for me, just to have passed'. The prospect of more examinations at the end of the year was daunting and she commented, 'I really don't know how I'm going to face these exams that are coming up...I was in a state of: "There is no way I can take these exams coming up now; it's just going to be a total failure"' (Year 2). This fear of examinations, however, was masking a much more complex set of problems, which was only revealed much later:

It was all sorts of problems....there was this complete sense of failure within me which I don't want to blame the University for but, in a way, that was adding to it. You know, you get exam results through, you've never done as well as you've wanted to have done, and it all added to this failure. Not that I was ever in any doubt about me flunking out of the course - I was never going to fail the course or anything - but *there was this massive sense of failure with[in] me....I just knew I was going to fail.* (Year 3)

#### 9.4.2 Relationship Breakdown

The 'massive sense of failure' was precipitated by a serious relationship breakdown with her husband. She was unable to speak about this at the time but explained what had happened later, following her withdrawal and subsequent return to the course. By this stage, there had been a reconciliation with her husband and a rationalisation of the problem:

I did feel we were growing totally apart at that stage and everything which now, as I say, when in perspective, I do realise that a lot of it was me, you know - we weren't really, you know, if I had just accepted him. I don't know whether I expected to come here, starting this totally new life, and I wanted him to fit in with it totally and what-have-you and it wasn't his scene; it wasn't something he wanted to be involved in and what-have-you. And then I was putting up barriers; I wasn't accepting him then....he's just the same man as he was before, you know - it was me that was changing. And I do realise now it was me shutting him out rather than anything else along the way and, you know, things just weren't in perspective for me. And I think then that added to my loneliness....Back to the confidence thing; confidence why I sort of came here and I think I always felt as though there'd been something wrong somewhere - I'd not done it; I didn't deserve to be here, you know, and I was still always waiting for that tap on the shoulder, you know, 'Come on, get out of here', along the way....but I do realise now it was me shutting everyone out rather than it being the other way round. You know, it wasn't anybody putting up barriers to stop me entering something, it was always me doing it. (Year 3)

Wendy was quick to blame herself for these relationship problems and to minimise them afterwards: she was at fault for expecting more of her husband than he was prepared, or able, to give; she was putting up barriers between them; she was the one going against the grain, out of place, at fault. As she said a few times, she had ‘over-dosed’ on the film ‘Educating Rita’ which portrayed a certain (elitist?) view of university life and the disjunction and marital breakdown which accompanied the entry to this world by a working-class woman. Like other interviewees, Wendy had feared from the outset that this would happen. In hindsight, however, she came to believe that many of the problems she had experienced had been in her imagination.

Yet it was clear that this was not the whole story. There was certainly an indication that Wendy had **wanted** her life to change: she had wanted to be involved in the social life of the university but had not wanted to include her husband in this, arguing that he would not join in and she would have to stay with him, which would be ‘limiting’. Revealingly, she commented:

I don’t know whether, within myself....I thought I was starting this new life and, perhaps, *part of me in a way wanted to give up the old life*, you know, and I shut him out even more because of that. (Year 3)

It is unclear, however, whether Wendy had had any focused vision of what this new world might be. She spoke a few times about an interest in teaching and, despite the avowed lack of a ‘big ambition’, had undoubtedly long entertained thoughts of going on from the degree to take a teaching qualification. This opened up in her mind the question of her class identity.

#### 9.4.3 Fear of Changing Selfhood

Wendy described herself unequivocally as working-class: she had grown up in a working-class household on a council estate; she had married a railway porter; all her friends and leisure activities were working-class. She was suspicious of, and even possibly hostile to, those she saw as middle-class: ‘I’m an inverted snob’ (Year 3). She saw class membership as involving more than economic factors and pondered the nature of class distinctions.

I suppose, I mean I know it's a very, very fine dividing line, class wise, and one thing and another. I mean, is it financial things that made up class and everything? And, you know, and it isn't, really. (Year 3)

Wendy saw the University as a middle-class institution and worried that this would change her in a fundamental way:

I did think, you know, that, well, I'm coming here, I'm mixing with all these middle-class people and everything, you know, it's going to change me.... But, yes, *I was frightened that I was going to be something different*. As I say, I think it was all mixed up – probably watched 'Educating Rita' too often! (Year 3)

She was concerned about what would happen when she got the degree and, possibly, a 'middle-class' job: would she become a different person? And would she be able to keep her old friends? Although she claimed throughout that her relationships with friends had not changed in any way - she even appeared to have acted as a role model for some of these who, following her example and advice, were starting to return to education themselves - she was clearly worried about what would happen when she graduated. She believed that her friends probably saw her pursuit of education as simply an interest and wondered what would happen if she went on to get a job teaching: would her friend who worked in a shoe factory 'resent' this?

#### 9.4.4 The 'Unbelievable' Support of Tutors

By April of her second year at University, Wendy felt unable to continue grappling with these problems and had made up her mind to withdraw from her course permanently. By this time, her confidence had hit rock bottom, together with her relationship with her husband, who was refusing to recognise that anything was wrong. She made a phone call to the University to find out the procedure for withdrawing. Later that day, her Year Tutor rang to ask her to go for a 'chat' about this. Initially, she declined: 'No, it's not up for negotiation - I've done my crying; I've made my decision and that's it' (Year 2). However, she was persuaded to go in to the University the following day and, after a lengthy 'chat' with her Year Tutor, was persuaded to take a leave of absence rather than to withdraw entirely. She decided not to attend any more lectures but another of her tutors sent her a message that he would like to see her; he had 'shown a little concern' over her and she felt obliged to agree to this. The tutor said that he would work out a

plan to relieve some of the pressure of assessment so that she could finish the second year. Wendy was overcome with the ‘unbelievable’ level of support that she received ‘out of the blue’ from tutors at this time:

I have really been amazed at, you know, the concern that they’ve shown for me and everything. So as I say, really, at the moment I’m feeling quite confident, you know; they’re really sort of saying to me, you know, ‘We want you to stay’, and everything. (Year 2)

The response of tutors came as a shock to her. Her feelings of deference for them had not prepared her for the personal concern that they showed her at this time and prompted her to reassess her feelings about them: ‘...they’re not these ogres and everything – they are there to help you’ (Year 2). Arrangements were made to extend the deadlines for some pieces of work, giving Wendy the opportunity to finish the second year of the course, which she did. She then took a year out and returned to the University the following academic year to complete her degree.

## **9.5 The Return**

### **9.5.1 Reasons for the Return**

When Wendy decided to take a leave of absence, she was worried that that she would not return; she would have lost the support of her friends from the Access course and would have to build new relationships and she was not sure that she could do this. She took a job with a Building Society which, although initially a temporary post, was subsequently offered to her on a permanent basis. Nevertheless, she turned down this job and decided to return to complete her degree. The main reason for this was a feeling of incompleteness and of failure:

There was also this feeling of, in a way, adding to my loneliness by not finishing it, because it was incomplete. And it was another sense of failure, really, you know, that there was something I’d failed at. And so that spurred me to go back. (Year 3)

Wendy’s Access friends had kept her in touch with the course and the Course Tutor, who continued to offer her support. This feeling of still being in touch with the course

contributed to her decision to return and, paradoxically, seeing her friends graduate also motivated her to do so. In addition, the job offer had given her confidence in herself: 'Well, somebody wants me somewhere!'. She started to 'get things in perspective': she had already spent four years in further and higher education and she should not waste this by not finishing, which she would be in danger of doing if she delayed her return.

Wendy said that she was 'terrified' when she returned but was welcomed back by the Course Tutor. She felt much more confident and settled: her problems had been resolved and, as a consequence, she relaxed and started to enjoy things more. Significantly, there had been a reconciliation with her husband and the relationship was felt to be 'stronger than ever'. Wendy had discovered that he had told many people about what she was doing at University and concluded that he was very proud of her; he had encouraged her to return to University, even though this meant her giving up her job. Her friends also showed support. The day of her final examination was a 'bowling day' and they had 'a quiet prayer' for her round the green, which made her realise how supportive they had been all along and how pleased they were that she had successfully completed the course. When graduation was looming and she was unsure about whether she wanted to attend the ceremony, her husband insisted that she did and arranged a party for her that day: 'I wasn't allowed to go out with anyone else, you know. I'd got to go home because everybody was going into our local pub and everything that night to celebrate with me and everything' (Year 3). Wendy's one remaining worry was that her husband had always anticipated that she would get a good job after completing the degree. He was made redundant a few weeks before she left the University and was clearly expecting to reap the rewards for their joint sacrifices, looking forward to being a 'house husband' whilst she went out to work.

#### 9.5.2 A Reassessment of the Relationship Difficulties

On her return to the course, it was clear that Wendy had reassessed the nature of the problems she had experienced the previous year. She felt, in hindsight, that she had been unrealistic in her expectations of her husband:

...perhaps during that time I was looking too much for him giving me a pat on the back and saying, 'Oh, you're doing great!', you know....and it's not his way

at all, out of it all, you know. I mean, I realise now I was never going to get that but yet, in his own way, he is happy enough in what I'm doing and what-have-you....and, as I say, I mean, financially he's never put up a barrier to stop me that way round at all... (Year 3)

During her leave of absence from the course, a compromise was reached: she would understand that he was not going to be very interested in what she was doing at University and, in return, he would make an effort to support her and show at least some interest:

He has been more supportive this year than ever. You know, he has taken an interest in it all, you know, and I, from my side, have accepted his limitations in how much interest he wants to show. I mean, he'll say to me things like, 'Well, I'd help you with it if I could understand it', you know, and this sort of thing. And I do realise now that, you know, he doesn't understand it and he doesn't want to understand it because it's not his thing at all, you know....And so there is this sort of acceptance now that I have got of how far he wants to go....to an extent he will sort of let me come home and I will warble out and I can see from his face that he doesn't really know but he really does try now to look interested in it all, poor man! (Year 3)

The effort made by Wendy's husband to show an interest in what she was doing and her recognition of his 'limitations' made her feel less isolated at home.

### 9.5.3 A Restructuring of Goals

At University, the increased confidence engendered by this improvement allowed her to reassess her progress and her goals. She began to feel that many of her problems had been of her own making: 'I do realise that a lot of it was within me that was feeling wrong with everything, not - it wasn't the University's fault, it was within me' Year 3). She argued that she had been driven by a need to prove herself to be a model student: 'I didn't want to admit to any problems, you know...I'd got to be this perfect student and wasn't going to cause anybody any problems' (Year 3). This feeling was shared by many of the interviewees, who believed that asking for help of any kind - such as advice from tutors about work - would be construed as an indication that they were not coping and should not really be in higher education. As a consequence, despite all her difficulties in the first two years, Wendy did not draw on any of the University services, such as the counselling service. However, receiving lower marks than she hoped in the

examinations had threatened this image she held of a 'perfect student' and given her a sense of failure. On her return to the University she adopted a more balanced view:

I know I'm not going to be, you know, an honours, first student, or anything like that. But I'm not the worst, you know. I know I'm average now and I can accept that and I'm happy with that, being as before there was this - it was too much of a desire to prove [myself] at the time and it was because of what was happening in my private life. (Year 3)

Other interviewees also reported a similar change of outlook as they progressed through their degree courses: they did not need to be the best to be worthy of a place in the University.

#### 9.5.4 Class Barriers: Real or Imagined?

This change reflects a re-assessment by some of the interviewees of the relationship between social class and higher education. Part of this reassessment involves the process of *demystification* which was argued in Chapter 7 to be a possible outcome of increasing numbers of working-class students in higher education. Just as 'learning to play the game' could de-mystify the academic stance, so the increasing confidence which came with a familiarity with the ethos, processes and people in the higher education institution (and the relief which accompanied the realisation that they could cope academically in this setting) could shatter some previously-held 'misrecognitions'. A number of interviewees, Wendy included, came to feel that middle-class students were not naturally more intelligent or capable in the higher education setting and had exactly the same academic difficulties and worries as they did (see 8.2.2). Wendy commented:

And, you know, at the end of the day, you know, they've all got the same worries as me, you know, whether they're going to get a piece of work in on time, how they're going to do in their exams and everything.....I think it was me putting up the barriers of class, you know. You know, when you get right down to it, there isn't any. I haven't noticed any within our groups, you know, in the different modules that I've taken. (Year 3)

Wendy's reassessment of middle class students was echoed by Susan when she remarked, 'having got here and met middle-class people, I've realised they're alright:



they're nice - they're not scary, nasty people sat up there dictating our lives' (Susan, 23, New University, Year 3). Conversely, during her time studying history at University, Wendy revised her views of the working class, concluding that her beliefs about this class had been overly romantic and nostalgic; working-class solidarity was argued to be a myth and individualism a characteristic of both the middle and working classes. Wendy felt a sense of betrayal about this:

In a sense, I feel as though the working-classes have betrayed me because I'd got this notion of us all being together, this solidarity and, sort of from what I've learnt, you know, I've thought, 'Well, they haven't really', you know, 'they just haven't out of it all'. And that's changed my view of us, you know; I've thought, 'No; we're really, at the end of the day, we're all out for number one, you know....' (Year 3)

Paradoxically, as Wendy lost some of her fear of the middle-class students and tutors in higher education she found it increasingly difficult to identify the nature of the barriers faced by working-class students and concluded that these had been imaginary: 'It wasn't anybody putting up barriers to stop me entering something, it was me doing it' (Year 3). Yet Wendy had, in addition to the problems described in this chapter, described graphically the difficulties she had faced in acquiring the academic stance (see Chapter 7). This rationalisation - or misrecognition? - of what was, for Wendy, very clearly a number of class-based problems is an interesting example of the subtlety of class barriers and the invidious nature of symbolic violence in the educational field (see 2.4.3.1), a theme which will be developed in the concluding chapter.

#### 9.5.5 Coping with the Fear of Changing Selfhood

In addition to a reassessment of class barriers, by the end of her course Wendy felt that she had resolved her anxieties about personal change. Her fear that attending University and mixing with middle-class people would change her in some *fundamental* way was argued to be unfounded: 'we're still living our life *as normal*'. Here, again, is the distinction made by so many of the interviewees between 'academic' life and 'normal' life, with its underlying assumption of an incompatibility between an 'academic' and a 'normal' identity. It is argued that this incompatibility is grounded in an implicit, if not explicit, recognition of class distinctions. For Wendy, the resolution of this incompatibility involved a rejection of the possibility of any change in her social class

identity: 'I don't think it's changed my view of the class I'm in because I've got a degree'. The evidence that she drew upon to make this claim was the acceptance of her achievements by significant others, which gave a crucial endorsement of her unchanging class membership:

I've come to accept where I am and know that everybody else is accepting me and I don't have to make this massive leap, I don't have to take this massive step and become somebody totally alien, you know, try to move out of class barriers and one thing or another; that doesn't make any difference now. I'm still going home to my own home but everybody round there accepts me; they all admire me to a certain extent because of what I've done, you know. (Year 3)

As evidence of her unchanged, class-based attitudes, Wendy pointed to the deferential outlook that she still had and which she attributed to her class background: she still saw tutors as 'that bit above' her, commenting, 'I am still very much a deference person':

So I do think it is a class thing, you know, a deference, you know - we have to know our place and I think, as well as it being a class [thing], it's something that I am never going to get past. But I am getting better in that I accept that this is the way I am now. (Year 3)

Nevertheless, Wendy argued that she had much more confidence in different social contexts than she used to have and that she could meet people from all 'social positions' on their own terms if she had to. By her own admission, Wendy was a 'completely different woman' to the one who started out on the Access course six years earlier: 'I'm not that frightened little person. I mean, there's still things that do frighten me but I'm not as bad as that timid, frightened little person I once was' (Year 3). She described how her horizons had widened and she had become 'more of a risk-taker':

I think my feelings towards the world are very different now to what they were then, you know. They were very singular, you know - sort of get up....go to work, go to bed, that sort of life. And now I feel as though there is something else but I also, I can't expect it to come to me - I know I've got to go out there to do it. But I've got the confidence, or some confidence, now to go out there and have a go. (Year 3)

Wendy was also ambivalent about how the job she might get after graduation would impact on her class identity: 'I would like to think that something better than an office

clerk's going to come out of it all so, perhaps, it is going to change me, you know, along the line'.

## **8.6 Discussion**

Withdrawal was not an action that was taken lightly by any of the interviewees. It was clearly an event which had serious implications for self esteem - especially when students felt that they had already failed once at school - and all of those who withdrew did so reluctantly. Shirley, for example, commented: 'I felt I'd let myself down but I just couldn't do anything else' (Shirley, 42, New University).

All of the factors contributing to Wendy's withdrawal were present in the experiences of other interviewees, sometimes leading to withdrawal and sometimes not. In the early months of their courses in particular, most of the working-class interviewees exhibited a fear of failure which, in a few cases - for example, Tom and Mary - was realised. Yet failure was not, for any of these students, the sole reason for withdrawal: also implicated were financial difficulties, relationship breakdowns and the pressure of work or family commitments which impacted on the ability to cope with the academic demands of the course. Shirley, for example, had few, if any, academic problems but, as the sole wage earner in her family, had serious financial and domestic difficulties which ultimately led to a degree of (redeemable) failure and withdrawal which was not necessary on academic grounds but had every indication of being permanent.

Marital difficulties which culminated in separation or divorce or which were patched up were common among the interviewees but not all resulted in withdrawal from the course. Anne and Mary, both of a similar age and family background to Wendy, were also studying at the Old University. Both had similar marital problems and both separated from their partners - in Anne's case, very acrimoniously and following violence and police involvement. Yet Anne completed her course whilst Mary withdrew, possibly because Mary had, in addition, serious academic and health problems.

Despite the complexity of the factors leading up to withdrawal, it can be viewed as an extreme reaction to feelings of dislocation and disjunction and other difficulties - health-related, financial, domestic or academic - which are experienced in some degree by most mature, working-class students. In a very real sense, despite the conviction voiced by some that class barriers were imagined rather than real, the dice were loaded against these students in higher education in ways that they often recognised but did not necessarily associate with social class. Wendy demonstrated an extreme case of individualisation of her problems, arguing that the fault lay in herself rather than the structural context in which she was placed: despite the insight into class processes gleaned from her course in social history, the *misrecognition* of these class processes in her own case was apparent.

For those students who completed their courses, there often remained the problem of self identity: what kinds of people could they now be? Where should they position themselves in relation both to significant others from their previous lives and the new friends and colleagues they would make if they gained employment commensurate with their educated status?

### 10.1 Introduction

This thesis was inspired by reports of the persistence of social class inequalities in participation in higher education and accounts of ‘disjunction’ experienced by those working-class students who did participate. Its central aim was to explore the nature of the barriers to - and within - higher education for mature, working-class Access entrants to three higher education institutions in an area of the (formerly) industrial North of England. The focus has been on both the experiences and trajectories of these students - their feelings of disjunction, anxieties and difficulties, and subsequent ‘moral careers’ - and on the wider social class processes at work in the higher education setting. It was hoped from the outset that, through the examination of a specific empirical context, the research would shed some light on the nature of social class itself and, by implication, on the thorny problem of the inter-relationship of structural constraint and purposive action in social life.

The thesis draws upon an analytical framework derived from a re-working of Bourdieu’s ideas and a methodological approach consistent with a critical realist perspective. Both the analytical framework and the methodological approach were developed at the time of data collection and analysis using Layder’s modified grounded theory approach (discussed in 3.3.2) and gave rise to a number of assumptions. Following Bourdieu, social life is viewed as an inherently *relational* process characterised by struggles over forms of *distinction*. These struggles, which are both material and symbolic, are argued to have a social class dimension although, as Savage suggests, classes may now operate more as ‘modes of differentiation’ than as ‘types of collectivity’ - as benchmarks against which people measure their similarity to, and difference from, others in the social world and their personal life trajectories (Savage, 2000: 102). However, it is also argued that social class is a real phenomenon with causal powers of which social actors may not be aware. These underlying causal powers, or generative mechanisms, affect what happens in social life but in a contingent, not a necessary, way: different generative mechanisms may cut across and block each other; they may be activated in certain contexts but not

others; their effects may be situationally specific; and, crucially, they are amenable to change through human action.

What kinds of causal powers might these be? In a Marxist interpretation, they would be powers deriving from the inherently exploitative nature of the capitalist system - powers which derive from *economic* processes. In Bourdieu's analysis, however, weight is also given to *cultural* and *symbolic* forms of capital which are implicated in processes of social exclusion and can be stored and transmitted to the next generation, giving rise to social reproduction. Cultural assets, for example, may be stored in the habitus as dispositions and value systems which inform social action and function as a mechanism of exclusion. Nevertheless, to be fully effective, Bourdieu argues that cultural capital needs to be converted to economic capital and the educational system is a powerful mechanism in this process, acting to credentialise those with the appropriate cultural capital and thereby reproduce material inequality in society.

There are, however, problems with Bourdieu's argument and a suspicion that, in his model, cultural capital (and cultural systems in general) are ultimately reducible to economic forms of inequality, leading to the charge of economic determinism. It is suggested, following, Jenkins (1992) and others, that the relationships between structure and culture, and between constraint and purposive social action, remain unresolved in Bourdieu's work and that the weight of his argument tends to suggest that social reproduction rather than transformation is the only logical outcome of the processes he describes. In distinction, in this thesis it is argued that class analysis should be a two-fold process, involving an exploration of the relationship both between social structures and forms of agency, and between the mechanisms that produce material inequalities and cultural identities (Savage, 1995: 25).

In Chapter 2, it was noted that there have been two major theoretical stumbling-blocks in class analysis: firstly, the nature of the relationship between class position and cultural forms; and, secondly, the identification of the ways in which structural constraint and purposive action articulate to shape class-based forms of inequality (see 2.5). The argument that cultural forms derive straightforwardly from material bases is rejected, as are older theories of social class which assume an unproblematic

relationship between economic inequality, cultural forms, class formation and class consciousness. Nevertheless, it is contended, following Savage (2000) and Archer (1996), that cultural and structural forms are linked - although not in a way which implies a reductionist account of culture. At some times, cultural and structural forms coalesce but the direction of the influence can vary: differential material rewards may flow from 'ideational interaction' between groups with different types of cultural capital; alternatively, the direction of influence may be the other way round (Archer, 1996: 283 - see 2.5.3). Nevertheless, the relative autonomy of structural and cultural domains is emphasised and the relationship between the two is argued to be a contingent, not a necessary one, shaped, *inter alia*, by contextual and temporal features of social life and by processes of social interaction. Crucially, in this thesis, structure, culture and agency are assumed to be analytically separate domains (*pace* Giddens, 1984) although, in distinction to Archer (1996), it is argued that the relationship between these domains is impossible to specify at a theoretical level and can only be determined in concrete empirical contexts - such as the educational context.

The remainder of this chapter summarises the findings of the research, linking these to the theoretical framework employed and then identifying the contribution to knowledge made by this thesis and further, potentially fruitful, lines of investigation.

## **10.2 Summary and Discussion of Findings**

### **10.2.1 Early Educational Experiences and Values**

Despite a difference of more than thirty years between the oldest and the youngest students in this study (Joe and Tom in their fifties and Susan aged 23), similar experiences and value systems were described by many of the working-class interviewees. A common theme was the denigration of academic knowledge, of 'thinking for the sake of thinking', and a stress on 'useful' or 'practical' intelligence. Frequently voiced was a doxic acceptance of a life trajectory that had been mapped out in advance, a trajectory in which, for males, the highest aspiration was a trade; for women, the expectation was of marriage and children. These trajectories were endorsed, certainly by parents and, in some cases, by teachers.



For many of the working-class interviewees school and educational qualifications had been seen as an *irrelevance*: school was simply something you had to put up with or was viewed in terms of the social life it engendered. Instead, the importance of early life experience were stressed, echoing Willis's description of the attitudes of the 'lads' - working-class youths who spent their school days 'having a laff' and subverting the system (Willis, 1977). Implicated here is a *pragmatic* attitude to life: jobs were plentiful and the wages were comparatively high so qualifications were not thought to be necessary. This pragmatism was often extended to an acceptance of the exclusionary processes to which the interviewees had been subjected at school - as Jack said, 'it's gone and happened, so why regret it?'

The interviews of the working-class students give a clear indication of both misrecognition and symbolic violence. Contrary to the arguments of rational action theorists, higher education was not just ruled out as an option by these students but was simply *unthinkable* - even by the younger students in the research - being thought of as the province of people from middle-class backgrounds or the 'super-bright'. The coupling of terms such as 'bright' and 'middle class' and the perception of higher education as not being accessible to 'ordinary' people indicate a misrecognition of the processes of exclusion: 'ordinary' working-class people did not go to university because they did not have the 'right' kind of intelligence. Only in hindsight did many of the interviewees develop a partial penetration of the nature of the processes that had worked against their educational success in earlier years.

The school experiences of the middle-class interviewees had been very different. Here, there was a doxic expectation of educational success culminating in a university education which, for one reason or another, had either failed to materialise or been consciously rejected: none of the middle-class interviewees had felt that university was an impossible ideal. Although many of the working-class interviewees had similarly rejected education, this had been largely the consequence of a doxic acceptance of a perspective on life in which educational success was irrelevant. This perspective was held by interviewees of different ages and both sexes, indicating a certain *durability* of attitudes and values over time.

Although it would be inappropriate to generalise from one, relatively small, qualitative study, the accounts of these students are suggestive of wider class processes at work. Most of the working-class interviewees in this study had grown up, like their parents before them, in circumstances of relative economic deprivation in mining and steel-working areas in the South Yorkshire region where higher education was not a common experience and entry to manual work after school a generally anticipated path. It would be easy to imagine them living in close-knit working-class communities which provided both a source of shared outlooks and values ('proletarian traditionalism') and a support for shared social identities (Lockwood, 1966). As argued in Chapter 2, however, this would be to idealise the past (Bourke, 1994) and ignore the erosion of the spatial, temporal and cultural co-ordinates of our collective and personal histories through rapid social change (Rutherford, 1990: 24 - see 2.2.2 and 2.3.1). (Indeed, in support of Bourke's argument, a few of the interviewees reported a change from communality to individualism in the areas in which they grew up and an increasing competition for material prosperity and a 'good life'.) Nevertheless, the similarity of attitudes and world views of many of the working-class interviewees in this study - interviewees of very different ages - indicates the existence of a shared and relatively durable cultural outlook and value system which is likely to be associated, *inter alia*, with life in areas characterised by economic disadvantage and low rates of geographical (and social) mobility. This is not, however, to be interpreted as a claim of economic determinism but rather as the identification of an historical, geographical and social situation in which there is a contingent coalescence of economic and cultural forms.

#### 10.2.2 The Return to Education

The data from this study indicates that a contingent combination of structural context, individual motivation and, in some cases, fortuitous events lay behind the entry of mature, working-class students to higher education in the 1980s and 1990s. The rapid social change following the process of economic decline which decimated the mining and steel-working industries in South Yorkshire, coupled with active strategies to widen access to higher education, particularly for mature students, provided the context in which increasing numbers of working-class adults could return to education. The return to education for some of the students in this study represented a conscious attempt to gain the credentials to enter higher education. This was especially the case

for the middle-class interviewees, who all regretted that they had not taken this path earlier in their lives. For the majority of working-class interviewees, however, *contingency* played a vital role in the journey towards a degree. What stands out clearly is the way in which structural shifts in society and the attendant changes in educational policy coalesced with individual motivation and pure accident to deliver many mature, working-class students, who would otherwise not have even considered this course of action, to the doors of universities and colleges. The strategy to widen access to higher education, involving the provision of Access courses which were, in many cases, free in the area, together with a pro-active recruitment strategy at a time when unemployment was rising, ensured a healthy recruitment of working-class adults to Access courses.

Quite often, fortuitous events were responsible for a decisions to enrol on these courses: an occupational assessment following redundancy which uncovered a previously unsuspected level of ability and led to advice to study for a degree; an unfocussed desire to study which became channelled by Access course recruitment agencies; a chance leaflet about an Access course brought home from school by children; or simply running out of subjects to take at night school and being offered an Access course as an alternative. The majority of the working-class interviewees in this research entered Access courses in this way. As a consequence, many said that they did not enrol on these courses with higher education in mind and that they had resisted the pressure to apply to higher education, feeling that this was an unthinkable course of action until persuaded by tutors or other students that it was indeed a possibility. (There may, however, have been some disingenuousness here. In some cases, it was clear that higher education had been a consideration from the outset but feared to be an impossible aspiration.) Serious concerns and anxieties ensued and, occasionally, a perception of being pressurised into applying: as Rose recounted, following her withdrawal from higher education after the first term, she had enrolled on the Access course only to get a 'decent job'.

In line with the studies discussed in Chapter 1 (see 1.2.2), the interviewees demonstrated an awareness of a 'pecking order' in their applications to higher education: Old University was seen as the 'real' one, a high-status institution dominated by young, middle-class students with traditional entry qualifications and, as such, more difficult to

gain entry to. New University, on the other hand, was described as the old Polytechnic, lower in standing and catering more for mature and working-class students and much easier to get in to. College, regarded as the most accessible and supportive of mature and working-class students was, nevertheless, viewed as 'a franchise of a second-generation university' which provided a 'working-class degree'. These considerations, alongside the nature of the courses on offer, were taken into account in the application process, some of the interviewees saying that the higher levels of student support and the accommodation of mature and working-class students that they associated with the College and New University had influenced their choice of institution and others clearly attracted to Old University by its perceived higher standing.

### 10.2.3 Disjunction

The transition to higher education was marked for many of the interviewees - both middle-class and working-class - by intense feelings of disjunction. In the two universities, students of both social-class backgrounds felt out of place and isolated as a consequence of their age and entry qualification. In Old University in particular, many voiced the feeling that the University was a place for younger, brighter, students with traditional qualifications who were more 'tuned in' to the academic demands of their courses; in contrast, they felt that they had crept in by the back door with an Access qualification. In College, however, where the majority of students appeared to be mature Access entrants, neither age nor entry qualification appeared to be a source of disjunction although the interviewees in the older age bracket did feel a little out of place. (Interestingly, students over the age of fifty years were only in evidence at College.)

Some of the working-class interviewees at the two universities had an additional source of disjunction, feeling conspicuous as a consequence of their class background and therefore marked out as different. This working-class background, inscribed in bodily hexis - in accent, linguistic style and personal demeanour - set them apart from the majority of the other students and the lecturers. Some were clearly uncomfortable with other students and tutors, certainly at first, seeing them as inhabiting very different physical and social spaces to themselves. In distinction, most of the middle-class students appeared to be less in awe of the tutors, one of them making explicit reference

to shared social class backgrounds. For some working-class interviewees, the combination of multiple sources of difference - age, entry qualification and social class background - created intense feelings of anxiety, of being 'interlopers', 'impostors' or outsiders, of having the 'wrong' kind of intelligence or the 'wrong' kind of knowledge. Immediate responses to these feelings could be so intense as to precipitate an identity crisis, as Tina succinctly illustrated when she commented, 'it's just not me at all'. These initial perceptions of dislocation were intense in Old University and, to a lesser extent, New University, but were not in evidence in College, which appeared to cater well for mature, working-class students with non-traditional qualifications.

Interviewees, particularly in Old University, had a further potential source of disjunction in the perceived difference between the anticipation of the university experience and the perceived actuality. The expectation had generally been of an all-encompassing experience with both social and academic dimensions. Entering this world later in life, many had had time to build up a rosy picture of intellectual discussion with other students, one-to-one tutorials and a sustained period of intellectual development which was out of tune with the reality of a mass higher education system. Although this disappointment was evident almost exclusively among the interviewees at Old University (again suggesting that they had entered higher education with pre-formed, if rather stereotypical, views of the differences between higher education institutions), in all three higher education institutions interviewees spoke negatively of a system which they saw as pressurised and assessment-oriented, a system which appeared, at least initially, to be no longer on a human scale, to be a production line. Many commented about their disappointment that learning seemed to be superficial and that marks appeared to be awarded merely for the 'regurgitation' of material.

Crucially, however, in all three institutions there was evidence that the academic stance itself, with its distanced and nuanced impartiality, constituted a subtle source of disjunction. Factors associated with both maturity and social class, in particular, inter-linked in complex ways to shape this experience of disjunction. The middle-class interviewees appeared to be more familiar with the academic stance, recognising its difference from that adopted in 'everyday' conversation and being easy with both: as Paula noted, she had access to both a 'head' language and a 'heart' language and felt

comfortable using either. For working-class students, however, the 'head' language was an alien form which had to be learned in the academic setting itself, contributing to the almost universal worries about failure which were expressed by the interviewees - whatever their social class background, gender or age. In addition, however, ambivalence about the academic stance was evident in the interviews of many of the working-class students: did it represent a precise, considered use of language through which complex ideas and arguments could be explored or was it really just a middle-class style, an unnecessarily long-winded and circuitous use of language, a kind of 'verbal diarrhoea'?

At issue for students of both social classes was the status of experiential knowledge. As mature entrants, all the interviewees had developed perspectives on life grounded in personal experience which could be dismissed as incomplete, inaccurate or irrelevant in higher education. Resistance to this was demonstrated by interviewees of both social classes. Jenny, for example, a middle-class student, saw her experience as a school governor as equally important as the academic knowledge she was acquiring, which she denounced as 'a lot of nonsense' and Paula, also middle class, commented on the distance between academic knowledge and the 'real' world. There was a strong sense that personal experience was about identity - about who you were - and that the adoption of an academic stance posed a threat to this.

For working-class students, however, academic constructions of reality could run counter to personal experience in a much more damaging way than they did for middle-class students, negating and misrepresenting working-class lives and history. Further, in adopting an academic stance, these students were developing an approach which involved a detachment from, and symbolic reorganisation of, their social worlds, a measured impartiality which sat uneasily with the exigencies of life at the 'sharp end' of social existence. The academic stance was therefore seen as potentially negating not only their personal experiences as adults but also the working-class values with which they were familiar and the relationships that were built on them. For some, the adoption of this stance could signify a potential betrayal of working-class values, creating feelings of guilt and a sense of betrayal of working-class roots, of their 'ancestors and all they stood for' (Sally).

In sum, the data suggest that interviewees of both social class backgrounds could perceive their entry to higher education as an ‘occasion of hazard’ in their moral careers. The experiences which had provided the bedrock of their selfhood came to be seen as less relevant in the academic setting but new, ‘academic’ identities required the authentication of success in assessment, which became closely associated with perceptions of self worth. However, there was also evidence of a ‘social class effect’ which operated *in addition to* the effects of age and gender and could be seen in all three higher education institutions, although there was evidence of a complex inter-weaving of these dimensions which shaped the experiences of the students in different ways in the three institutions.

#### 10.2.4 Coping with Disjunction

What is being proposed here is unequivocally not a deficit model of working-class dispositions and value systems; rather, forged as a means of coping with life at the ‘sharp end’ of social existence, these dispositions and value systems can be argued to provide an adaptable set of tools for dealing with unknown circumstances. As Bourdieu notes, practice arises from the operation of habitus and capital in a given field - such as the higher education context, where working-class students have to marshal the cultural resources available to them to adjust to, and survive in, this context (see 2.4.2).

Learning the academic stance proved to be a long and tedious process for the working-class students in this study; for many of them, it was almost like learning a foreign language, with similar problems of interpretation and of written and oral communication. Yet the majority displayed a dogged determination in the face of difficulty, developing systematic approaches to help in this learning. Establishing a mature students’ support group was a key strategy, especially for the female interviewees, although such a strategy may have arisen as a consequence of the isolation of mature students generally rather than of working-class students in particular.

In addition, however, some of the interviewees recognised, at least partially, the power dimension at work in the higher education context and the necessity of learning to ‘play the game’ in order to succeed. In some ways this ‘game’ was seen as a personal power game waged between tutors with different academic viewpoints - a game which they, as students, had to understand in order to get high marks in their assessment. It was



therefore necessary to find out exactly what tutors wanted - what kind of academic stance needed to be taken and what kind of style adopted in each piece of work? At a deeper level, however, some students - of both social classes - saw this process of learning as symbolic violence, as manipulation which was designed to change systems of thought.

The responses of the interviewees to this varied from tacit resistance to qualified acceptance but, in both cases, there was an attempt to *debunk* high-flown academic discourse by, for example, drawing on personal life experience in the teaching context or a refusal to 'parrot' academic discourse in their assignments. Many of the interviewees drew attention to the different approaches to study adopted by themselves and the younger students, complaining that these younger students were happy to 'regurgitate' material - and, indeed, were rewarded with high marks for doing so - whilst they struggled to *understand* and explain ideas in simple language. There is an indication that the inclusion of mature students in higher education - of all social classes but particularly those from the working class - may contribute to a process of progressive *demystification* of both the academic stance and of enshrined university traditions and processes that may help to bring more transparency and accountability to the system. Perhaps the increasing emphasis on the quality of teaching and student support in universities, and on skills development and 'employability', may be implicated in this process of demystification and change.

#### 10.2.5 Higher Education and 'Moral Career'

Clearly, the experience of higher education had implications for identity and selfhood. Interviewees of both social classes spoke of widening horizons, changing perspectives and feelings of enhanced self-worth, although a few working-class students noted an accompanying loss of security and trust as old, 'safe' views of life were shattered. However, the emergence of an academic identity was, for many of the working-class interviewees, accompanied by a loss of the 'sense of one's place'. Although some spoke of an enhanced, more multi-faceted self, others had feelings of a divided self and of not knowing 'who the real me is' (Margaret). These feelings were often brought into sharp relief by the perception of increasing distance from significant others such as

partners and friends, and from old leisure pursuits and interests, which led to tension and, in some cases, marital breakdown.

This was particularly the case for those with working-class partners and friends who were hostile to the new, emerging academic identity and the changing values and interests associated with it - indicating the importance of the support of significant others for the legitimisation and maintenance of identity. As a consequence, some of the working-class interviewees spoke of living a dual life, confining their academic identity to the higher education setting and 'not being educated' at home. The strain on relationships could be so intense as to precipitate either withdrawal from the course (and re-assertion of the 'old' identity) or a breakdown of the relationship (and assertion of a new identity). In many cases, however, adjustments were made to paper over the cracks - very often by pretending that no change was taking place and by confining the 'academic' identity to the higher education setting.

This potential breakdown of relationships was not confined to working-class interviewees and two of the female middle-class students spoke of strains in their relationships with partners which emerged as a consequence of the perceived bid for independence and *control* which the return to education symbolised. However, for the working-class women in the study in particular, a serious source of strain was a worry about the opening up of a *class difference* between them and their partners. Higher education was, for some, a powerful symbol of increased status, of *distinction*, and as they progressed through their courses these interviewees spoke explicitly of a changed class position. Two moved house during this time to properties and locations which they saw as more consistent with their changing status and many spoke of wanting 'a good life' (Kevin), the material possessions and life style that would mark their upward mobility.

Bearing out the results of other studies (such as Devine, 1992b; Savage, 2000) the working-class students in this study were generally equivocal or even contradictory when talking about class identification. A few asserted an unchanged class identity, citing their working-class background as a fundamental source of values; others spoke of a changing class membership but nevertheless claimed that part of them remained

working class; a few rejected social class as a meaningful source of identity for them. For many, though, social class had a powerful *symbolic* dimension as a measure of moral career, a yardstick against which to judge personal life trajectories and the distance between where they had started from and where they were going to. Echoing Skeggs' argument that a working-class identity is a stigmatised one (Skeggs, 1997a), a number of working-class interviewees spoke of 'not feeling good' about themselves in the past as a consequence of their class origins, or said that they did not like to talk about class for this reason. Some contrasted their lives in the present with their lives as children, stressing their distance from 'traditional' working-class lives, which some portrayed in an extremely stereotypical fashion. The importance of a degree as a symbolic marker of social class membership was explicitly commented upon by many of the interviewees and, in line with Archer and Hutchings (2000), some of them were ambivalent about the desirability of the perceived upward mobility with which education was associated.

Nevertheless, there were fears that this upward mobility would not materialise and that when they left higher education they would lose the only *place* in which their new identity was validated. The academic identity that had been achieved was therefore viewed as fragile by many of the working-class students in this research, partly because it lacked the support of significant others but also because of feelings of anxiety about the future. Some were worried that they would lose this identity once they left higher education, that they might not get jobs commensurate with their educational status and would end up stacking shelves in the local supermarket. A new life had opened up for them but could they attain it? This was particularly a worry for those students who had attended College and were concerned that their degrees would not carry the same weight in the job market as those from other, more 'prestigious' institutions but students from all three institutions voiced similar concerns.

To summarise, then, attaining a degree was imbued with great symbolic significance for the working-class interviewees, representing not only the culmination of many years' hard work but also a rite of passage to a better life and increased status. At the same time, however, as they moved towards the end of their courses, most of these interviewees expressed doubt and concern about the future. At issue was more than

obtaining an appropriate career: their identities were also at stake. Many expressed feelings of moving on, of fundamental changes in selfhood which could not be undone, but also of an absence of appropriate *places* and *relationships* which would support these changes. Being 'in limbo' graphically describes this feeling.

### 10.3 Class Processes and Higher Education: Reproduction or Transformation?

The impact on working-class communities of increasing numbers of higher-educated residents was commented on by some of the interviewees, who reported that higher education was coming to be seen as an acceptable - although not usual - trajectory in these areas, marking a change in aspirations and values. A few of the interviewees had encouraged friends and neighbours to return to education, acting as influential role models, and all commented on their ability to encourage and support their own children as they progressed through school and to encourage high aspirations. It may be posited, then, that as the numbers of working-class students entering higher education increase, this could ultimately produce a 'critical mass' which tips the balance, making it an acceptable - or even a commonplace - aspiration and facilitating the emergence of 'academic' working-class identities (although financial factors may mitigate against this). It would be interesting to undertake a study to explore the changes in attitudes to higher education in working-class communities where there have been significant numbers of mature returners and the effects that these have on the attitudes of young, working-class people in these communities.

However, it is also likely that, as more working-class students enter higher education, the nature of educational distinction will change. Some of the interviewees, particularly those at College, voiced concerns about the value of their degrees compared to those conferred by other, more prestigious, higher education institutions and had a suspicion that they would be at a disadvantage in the job market. As noted in Chapter 1, this suspicion was not groundless (see 1.3.1). Yet many of the working-class interviewees chose their higher-education institutions carefully and with regard to their perceived accessibility to, and support of, students like themselves, choosing New University and College for these reasons. In this way, as Giddens (1984) argues, social reproduction may be brought about through the unintentional consequences of purposive action: by

channelling themselves into certain institutions and avoiding others, working-class students may be contributing to a hierarchy of prestige among higher education institutions.

It seems likely, then, that new forms of distinction are emerging, based on a differentiation between *types* of educational capital within the graduate market. In addition, as Bourdieu notes, there is likely to be a growing separation of educational and cultural capital as more members of the working-class gain higher qualifications (Bourdieu, 1984: 81). In an increasingly credentialised society, new modes of distinction will undoubtedly arise and some of the working-class interviewees in this study appeared to suspect that this was the case, fearing that the degrees they had struggled so hard to obtain would not be followed by appropriate employment. This area holds out exciting possibilities for future research.

#### **10.4 Contribution to Knowledge**

It is claimed that this research makes both an empirical and a theoretical contribution to the study of social class processes in higher education and in society as a whole. It has extended the empirical exploration of the nature of the barriers faced by mature, working-class students through longitudinal research in three different kinds of higher education institution, examining the nature of any cultural disjunction experienced by these students - especially that arising from the adoption of an academic stance. A comparison of the experiences of the interviewees indicates that, although there are important differences between the three institutions in terms of access strategies, ethos, student composition and levels of student support, the academic stance on which all three institutions are premised may itself be a source of social class disjunction. One implication of this is that, whilst financial support and initiatives to encourage working-class students to apply to higher education are necessary conditions for widening access, they are not sufficient to ensure the success of these students, who may face serious difficulties in adjusting to an academic stance which seems to imply a potential negation of their values, outlooks and life experiences. Traditional 'study skills' teaching will need to be supplemented by continued research to find the most effective learning and teaching strategies to help these students.

Crucially, the longitudinal nature of the research has allowed an exploration, not only of the sources of disjunction and the complex ways in which effects of age, gender and social class coalesce, but also of the ways in which the interviewees dealt with disjunction. It has been argued that the working-class habitus provides resources for dealing with the academic environment, although more work is needed to uncover the nature of these resources and the ways in which they are deployed in the educational context. In addition, by interviewing students over the span of their degree courses, it has been possible to explore both the effects of higher education on selfhood and relationships with significant others and also the ways in which these two facets of individual experience inter-related in the moral careers of the mature returners. It has been shown, for example, how some learned to cope with the institution and the academic stance whilst others gave up on them; how some developed new identities whilst others doggedly held on to their old ones; how criticism from partners, family and friends was resisted or accommodated; and how this series of challenges culminated in either strengthened or severed relationships and in successful completion or withdrawal from the course. It would be interesting and informative to study the trajectories of students such as these after graduation from different higher education institutions, exploring their reflections, employment paths, relationships and feelings of identity and selfhood.

At a theoretical level, the study is suggestive of the nature of social class itself, indicating that it is a *real* phenomenon, a source of advantage or disadvantage in both a material and a cultural sense which is inscribed in personal dispositions and value systems and evident in bodily hexis. Class at this level may have effects which are recognised only partially by those marked by it - if they recognise them at all. Nevertheless, the majority of the working-class interviewees in this study implicitly recognised the conflictual nature of social life, which they discussed in terms of the job market and access to a 'good life'. In addition, they had a realistic assessment of their chances in obtaining this good life, recognising their potentially disadvantaged position in the struggle for distinction. The data therefore bears out Savage's argument that class operates at a *symbolic*, as well as material and cultural, level, but generally in terms of an awareness of *difference* rather than source of identification. The symbolic nature of

education as a marker of middle-class status was evident in many of the interviews and shaped the hopes and aspirations - as well as the identities and relationship problems - of many of the working-class students.

In conclusion, this thesis has argued that class processes in education - and by implication in society as a whole - are much more dynamic than allowed for in Bourdieu's model and that education does not function as a mechanism of social reproduction in a straightforward or unequivocal fashion. It is contended that the relationship between social class and education is shaped by struggles for distinction in social life which both draw upon and, in turn, influence, cultural and structural processes. In these struggles, social life may be reproduced - either through a doxic acceptance of life trajectories in which higher education is seen as either a 'natural' or 'unthinkable' course of action, or through the unintended consequences of purposive social action which reinforce existing patterns of disadvantage. Yet the potential is also there for change: in the context of this study, for a progressive demystification of higher education and an increasing awareness in working-class groups that it is a 'thinkable' and potentially worthwhile pursuit.



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## Appendix 1: Access Tutors' Questionnaire

### **SOUTH YORKSHIRE OPEN COLLEGE FEDERATION/SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY**

#### **Students Completing the Access Course, July 1993**

The questions below relate to **all** students who **completed the Access course in July 1993** - both one-year students and those who had been studying on the course for longer than one year.

<b>Name:</b>	
<b>College/Centre:</b>	
<b>Course:</b>	

#### **A ONE-YEAR STUDENTS**

##### **1 Background details**

How many **one-year students** enrolled in **September 1992?**

How many of these students completed the course?

How many obtained a kite-marked Access to HE Certificate?

How many did **not** complete the course?


##### **2 Please give the number of **one-year students** who did **not** complete the course for the following reasons:**

Withdrew

Decided (or needed) to take longer to complete


**3 Please give the number of one-year students withdrawing before the end of the course for the following reasons:**

Financial	
Academic	
Domestic/personal	
Course-related problems of a non-academic nature	
Gained employment	
Health	
Got an unconditional HE offer	
Lost interest in the course	
If 'other' please specify	

**4 What happened to the one-year students who completed the course in July 1993? How many:**

Entered higher education	
Gained employment	
Became unemployed	
Other	
If 'other' please specify	

**B     TWO-YEAR STUDENTS**

**1     Background details**

How many **two-year students enrolled in September 1991?**

How many of these students remained on the course for the full two years?

How many obtained a kite-marked Access to HE Certificate?

How many did not complete the course?


**2     Please give the number of these two-year students who did not complete the course for the following reasons:**

Withdrew

Decided (or needed) to take longer to complete


**3     Please give the number of two-year students withdrawing before the end of the course (July 1993) for the following reasons:**

Financial

Academic

Domestic/personal

Course-related problems of a non-academic nature

Gained employment

Health

Got an unconditional HE offer

Lost interest in the course


If 'other' please specify

--



4 What happened to the two-year students who completed the course in July 1993?

How many:

Entered higher education

Gained employment

Became unemployed

Other

If 'other' please specify

C **ONE-YEAR AND TWO-YEAR STUDENTS ENTERING HIGHER EDUCATION IN OCTOBER 1993**

Please give the number of students enrolling on courses in the following areas:

Clinical and pre-clinical studies

Subjects allied to medicine

Science

Engineering and Technology

Built Environment

Mathematical Sciences, IT and Computing

Business and Management

Social Sciences

Humanities

Art Design and Performing Arts

Education

**THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE**

## Appendix 2: Access Students' Questionnaire

### **SOUTH YORKSHIRE OPEN COLLEGE FEDERATION/SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY ACCESS STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE**

**THIS INFORMATION WILL BE TREATED WITH THE STRICTEST  
CONFIDENTIALITY**

Name:	Home Post Code:
Course:	College:
How many timetabled hours per week are you studying?	

***Please tick the box which corresponds to your answer***

Does your course run in the daytime or  
the evening?

Is it a one-year or a two-year course?

<b>Daytime</b>	<b>Evening</b>
<b>One- year</b>	<b>Two- year</b>

#### **A PERSONAL DETAILS**

***The next few questions are about you***

**Sex:**

<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
---------------	-------------

**Year of birth:**

**Status:**

Single

Married/ living with partner

Widowed

Divorced


If you have children living at home, how many of them are in each of the following age categories?

Below school age

5-15

16 or over


**Are you:**

Able-bodied

Unregistered disabled

Disabled


**Would you describe yourself as:**

White

Black-Caribbean

Black-African

Black-other

Please specify:


Indian

Pakistani

Bangladeshi

Chinese

Other

Please specify:



**The next few questions are about the time before you came on the access course.**

**Before you started this course were you:**

Employed full-time  
(30 or more hours per week)

Employed part-time  
(less than 30 hours per week)

Self-employed, employing other people

Self-employed, not employing other people

Unemployed

Unable to work because of long-term sickness or disability

Engaged in home duties only

Retired

Student full-time

Student part-time

Other

If 'other', please specify:

**If you have been employed full-time or part-time in the past, or have been self-employed, please give details of your most recent occupation:**

**Full job title**

**Main things done in job**

**Description of Employer's business**

If you have any qualifications before starting the access course - O'levels, A'levels, GCSEs, BTEC, RSA, trade qualifications etc - please give the following details:

<b>Qualification Level</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Date obtained</b>

***The next few questions are about when you were at school.***

**When you were at school:**

**Was the main wage-earner in your family:**

Employed full-time  
(30 or more hours per week)

Employed part-time  
(less than 30 hours per week)

Self-employed, employing other people

Self-employed, not employing other  
people

Unemployed

Unable to work because of long-term  
sickness or disability

Engaged in home duties full-time

Other

Please specify:

**If, when you were at school, the main wage-earner in your family was  
employed  
full-time or part-time, or was self-employed, please give details of their  
occupation:**

**Full job title**

**Main things done in job**

**Description of Employer's business**

***The next few questions are about your partner.***

Do you have a partner with whom you share your financial arrangements?

If the answer to the above is yes, is this partner in paid employment?

Yes	No
Yes	No

If your partner does share your financial arrangements and is in paid employment, please give details of the nature of his or her work

<b>Full job title</b>	
<b>Main things done in job</b>	
<b>Description of Employer's business</b>	
<b>Is your partner:</b>	
Employed full-time (30 or more hours per week)	
Employed part-time (less than 30 hours per week)	
Self-employed, employing other people	
Self-employed, <u>not</u> employing other people	



**B      DECIDING TO ENROL ON AN ACCESS COURSE**

How important were the following factors in your decision to enrol on an Access course? PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ON EACH LINE

	Very	Fairly	Not very	Not at all
Personal and educational development				
Job/career development or change				
Preparation for higher education				
Life change (eg redundancy, retirement, house move)				
Influence of careers/educational guidance				
Other				
If you have ticked 'other', please explain				

How did you get information about the Access course you are now on?  
PLEASE TICK ANY BOXES WHICH APPLY

From friends	
From the college	
From Careers/Educational Guidance Service for Adults	
Public Library	
Media (newspaper, radio, TV)	
Special publicity event	
HE Institution	
Other	
If you have ticked 'other', please explain	

How important were the following factors in your choice of this particular course?

**PLEASE TICK ONE BOX ON EACH LINE**

	Very	Fairly	Not very	Not at all
Length of course				
Course content				
Timetable flexibility				
Creche facilities/childcare arrangements				
Location/transport				
Under 21 hour rule - not losing benefit entitlement by being on the course				
Nature of student group (age range, gender, social background etc)				
Facilities for the disabled				
Specific HE course link				
Assessment methods (eg exams)				
Other				
If you have ticked 'other', please explain				

**C FUTURE PLANS**

Have you applied for higher education courses?

Yes	No

If you **have not** applied for higher education, what future plans do you have?

--

If you **have** applied for courses in higher education, please list the HE institutions and courses applied for with the outcomes of applications if known.

HE Institution	Course	*Outcome

**\*Code for outcome**

R = rejection  
 UO = unconditional offer  
 CO = conditional offer  
 NK = not known

If you have any other comments you would like to make, please do so

A follow-up study will be carried out in the next few months. Would you be prepared to be interviewed as part of this study?

Yes	No

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION IN COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE**

### Appendix 3 Interviewee Details

Name	Institution	Inter-view dates	Age	Class: Family of Origin	Class: Own job	Class: partner's job	Class identity	Qualifications (school)	Comments
Anne	Old Uni	8.2.94 13.6.95 3.6.96	42	IIIM Water Board	IV Quality Controller: Textiles	Not employed	Working class	Few or none	
Barbara	College	24.3.94	24	IIIM Foreman: Construction	II Public House Manageress	IIIM Technical Engineer	Unknown	Few or none	Withdrew at the end of Yr 1 as she moved to London. Enrolled on a degree course there. Interviewed once.
Bella	Old Uni	22.2.94 26.4.95 12.6.96	30	Not employed	Not classified Prostitute	II Lecturer	Working class	Few or none	
Ben	Old Uni	7.2.94	26	II Fur Buyer	II: Deputy Advertising Manager	II Computer Consultant	Unknown	O & A Levels	Public-school education. Interviewed only once: could not be contacted after Year 1.
Brian	Old Uni	17.3.94 27.4.95 9.5.96	46	Not classified (MOD)	II Buyer: Builder's Merchant	Not applicable	Both classes	O & A Levels	As his parents were upwardly-mobile working class, he felt as if he belonged to both middle and working classes.
Diane	College	24.3.94 23.5.95 11.6.96	42	Not employed	II Assistant Personnel Officer	II General Manager	Working-class origins	Few or none	Said that she was originally working class but now middle class, although somewhat ambivalent about this.
Jack	College	20.12.93 27.3.95 3.5.96	42	IIIM Miner	IIIM Foreman	Not employed	Working class	Few or none	
Jenny	College	8.3.94 3.4.95 5.7.96	32	II or IIIM Quantity Surveyor	IIIM Clerical Officer	Student	Unknown	O & A Levels	

Name	Institution	Inter-view dates	Age	Class: Family of Origin	Class: Own job	Class: partner's job	Class identity	Qualifications (school)	Comments
Joe	College	20.12.93 20.3.95 19.6.96	54	IIIM Railways	I Mechanical Engineer	Not employed	Working-class origins	Few or none	Took on a apprenticeship and gained qualifications through day-release courses.
Julie	College	7.3.94 15.5.95 26.6.96	31	IIIM Miner	IV Post Woman	IIIM HGV Driver	Working-class origins	Few or none	Said that she no longer identified herself in class terms.
June	New Uni	17.2.94 8.12.94	27	Not employed	V Home Help	Not applicable	Working class but 'brought up differently'	Few or none	Withdrew at the end of Year 2. Reasons unknown as she could not be contacted. Previous interviews indicated that financial and childcare problems were an issue (June was a single parent). June returned to her course after the fieldwork had been completed and was not re-interviewed.
Kevin	Old Uni	7.2.94 28.4.95 5.6.96	30	IV Surface Worker (Mining)	IV Surface Worker (Mining)	II Nurse	Working class	Few or none	
Margaret	Old Uni	3.3.94 2.5.94 13.5.96	41	IV Swing Grinder	IIIN Cashier	IIIM Foreman	Working class	Few or none	
Mary	Old Uni	3.3.94 23.5.95 25.6.96	45	IIIM Brick Maker	Voluntary work	Not employed	Unknown	Few or none	Failed her exams at the end of Year 1 and needed to repeat the year. Marital breakdown and counselling. Returned to her course but then left permanently.

Name	Institution	Interview dates	Age	Class: Family of Origin	Class: Own job	Class: partner's job	Class identity	Qualifications (school)	Comments
Maureen	New Uni	24.11.93	34	IIIM Carpet Fitter	II Nurse	Not applicable	Working class	O Levels	Withdrew at the end of Yr 1 as she needed to come to terms with her newly-recognized gay identity. Did not return to her course.
Pam	New Uni	15.2.94 28.11.94 20.3.96	37	IIIM Mechanic	IIIN Sales Ledger Clerk	II Construction Director	Working class	O Levels	
Paul	College	21.3.94 20.3.95 30.8.96	40	IIIM Miner	IIIN Stock & Stationary Control – Bank	I Accountant	Unknown	O Levels	Left at the end of Yr. 2 with outstanding work. Interviewed afterwards but most of the interview was lost when the typist accidentally recorded over the tape so reasons for withdrawal are not known.
Paula	New Uni	6.12.93 12.12.94 26.3.96	30	I Electronic Engineer	II Nurse	I Chemical Engineer	Middle class	O Levels	
Peter	College	10.3.94 3.4.95	50	Children's home	IV Shelf Stacker	Not applicable	Unknown	Few or none	Withdrew during Year 1. (Had enrolled the previous year and withdrawn then as well). Mental health and family problems.
Rose	New Uni	17.9.94	34	IIIM BT Engineer	IIIN Cashier, Bank	Not applicable	Unknown	O Levels	Withdrew after one term. Reasons: pressures of being a single parent; pressures of assessment; lack of motivation.



Name	Institution	Inter-view dates	Age	Class: Family of Origin	Class: Own job	Class: partner's job	Class identity	Qualifications (school)	Comments
Sally	New Uni	1.3.94 14.6.95 16.5.96	26	IIIN Property Developer	V Kitchen Assistant	IIIM Foreman	Working class	Few or none	
Sarah	College	21.3.94 1.5.95 17.7.96	39	II Restaurant manager	IV Service Assistant	Not employed	Working class	Few or none	
Shirley	New Uni	21.2.94 7.12.94 2.9.96	42	II Sales Manager	II Nurse	Not employed	Working class	O Levels	Withdrew at the end of Year 2 with outstanding work. Reasons: financial; working full time; family difficulties.
Susan	New Uni	14.2.94 16.11.94 25.3.96	23	IIIM Joiner	IV Sewing Machinist	Not applicable	Working class	Few or none	
Tina	New Uni	15.2.94 21.11.94 25.3.96	38	IIIM Slinger	IIIN Clerical Officer	I Lecturer	Working class origins	Few or none	Ambivalent about her class membership.
Tom	College	7.3.94 26.3.95	55	IIIM Miner	IIIM Miner	Not employed	Unknown	Few or none	Withdrew at the end of Year 1 with outstanding work. Reasons: financial and academic problems.
Wendy	Old Uni	17.3.94 28.4.95 18.6.97	40	IIIM Crane Driver	IIIN Purchase Ledger Clerk	V Railway Porter	Working class	Few or none	Withdrew at the end of Year 2, had a year out and then returned to complete. Reasons for withdrawal: loss of confidence, isolation and marital difficulties.



**INTERVIEW ANALYSIS: CODING SCHEME (1)****1. Biography (Pre-Access Course)**

BIO:FB	Family background
BIO:SH	School history
BIO:ALK	Attitude to learning and knowledge
BIO:WH	Work history
BIO:MH	Marital history
BIO:GVO	General value orientation
BIO:SELF	Perception of self

**2. Access Course**

ACC:EN	Reasons for enrolling	positive/negative self-initiated/other-initiated instrumental/non-instrumental
ACC:F	Feelings about the Access Course	familiarity/strangeness ease/difficulty in adjusting risk/non-risk to self fitness/unfitness security/insecurity
ACC:STS	Perception of / relationship with other students	identification/non-identification integration/isolation
ACC:LIFE	Involvement in college life	participation/non-participation ownership/non-ownership
ACC:AC	Academic demands	expected/unexpected manageable/unmanageable flexible/rigid spaced out/concentrated
ACC:TUTS	Perception of / relationship with tutors	identification/non-identification interaction/non-interaction
ACC:SUPP	Support systems	close/distant single/multiple supportive/non-supportive
ACC:CUL	'Culture' of Access Course	familiar/strange inclusive/exclusive congruent/dissonant
ACC:DEV(A)	Academic development	rapid progress/slow progress skills acquired/not acquired confidence/lack of confidence self-defined/other-defined
ACC:DEV(P)	Personal development	continuity/change in the self continuity/change in value security/insecurity self-defined/other defined

ACC:PART	Relationship with partner	continuity/change positive/negative
ACC:FAM	Relationships with other family members	continuity/change positive/negative
ACC:FR	Relationships with friends	continuity/change positive/negative
ACC:N	Relationships with neighbours	continuity/change positive/negative
ACC:DIFF	General difficulties: travelling; balancing domestic, academic and work demands; financial arrangements etc.	
ACC:COPE	Strategies for coping with difficulties experienced	denial; adjustment; accommodation; rationalization; rejection etc.

### 3 Application to Higher Education

APP:R	Reasons for application	instrumental/non-instrumental other-initiated/self-initiated
APP:INST	Reasons for choice of institution	pragmatic/non-pragmatic course-/other-oriented
APP:C	Reasons for choice of course	instrumental/non-instrumental
APP:EX	Experience of the application process	simple/complex positive/negative
APP:AMB	Ambivalences and uncertainties	feelings of fitness/unfitness confidence/lack of confidence risk/non risk to self

### 4 Transfer to Higher Education: the First Year

TRANS:C	The campus	familiarity/strangeness simple/complex compact/spaced out
TRANS:IND	Induction process	well-/ill-organised positive/negative experience
TRANS:F	Initial feelings on transfer	familiarity/strangeness ease/difficulty in adjusting risk/non-risk to self fitness/unfitness security/insecurity
TRANS:STS	Other students	familiarity/strangeness identification/non-identification interaction/non-interaction integration/isolation
TRANS:LIFE	Involvement in university/college life	participation/non-participation ownership/non-ownership

TRANS:AC	Academic demands	continuous/discontinuous with FE manageable/unmanageable flexible/rigid spaced out/continuous preparedness/unpreparedness
TRANS:TUTS	Perception of/Relationship with Tutors	close/distant identification/non-identification interaction/non-interaction
TRANS:SUPP	Support systems available	close/distant single/multiple supportive/non-supportive
TRANS:CUL	Higher Education Culture	familiarity/strangeness congruence/dissonance inclusive/exclusive continuous/discontinuous with FE
TRANS:EXP	Expectations of higher education	confirmation/disconfirmation satisfaction/disappointment
TRANS:DEV(A)	Academic development	rapid progress/slow progress skills acquired/not acquired confidence/lack of confidence self-defined/other-defined
TRANS:DEV(P)	Personal development	continuity/change in the self continuity/change in value orientation security/insecurity self-defined/other defined
TRANS:PART	On-going relationship with partner	continuity/change positive/negative
TRANS:FAM	On-going relationships with family	continuity/change positive/negative
TRANS:FR	On-going relationships with friends	continuity/change positive/negative
TRANS:N	On-going relationships with neighbours	continuity/change positive/negative
TRANS:DIFF	General difficulties: travelling; balancing domestic, academic and work demands; financial arrangements etc.	
TRANS:COPE	Strategies for coping with any problems of transition	denial; adjustment; accommodation; rationalization; rejection etc.

HE2:F	Feelings as s/he progresses through higher education	familiarity/strangeness ease/difficulty in adjusting risk/non-risk to self fitness/unfitness security/insecurity
HE2:STS	Relationships with other students	identification/non-identification interaction/non-interaction integration/isolation
HE2:LIFE	Involvement in university/college life	participation/non-participation ownership/non-ownership
HE2:AC	Academic demands	manageable/unmanageable flexible/rigid spaced out/continuous transparent/opaque
HE2:TUTS	Relationships with tutors	close/distant identification/non-identification interaction/non-interaction
HE2:SUPP	Support systems	close/distant single/multiple supportive/non-supportive
HE2:CUL	Perception of the culture of higher education	identification/non-identification acceptance/rejection
HE2:EXP	Expectations of higher education	confirmation/disconfirmation satisfaction/disappointment
HE2:DEV(A)	Academic development	rapid progress/slow progress skills acquired/not acquired confidence/lack of confidence self-defined/other-defined
HE2:DEV(P)	Personal development	continuity/change in the self continuity/change in value orientation security/insecurity self-defined/other defined
HE2:PART	On-going relationship with partner	continuity/change positive/negative
HE2:FAM	On-going relationships with family	continuity/change positive/negative
HE2:FR	On-going relationships with friends	continuity/change positive/negative
HE2:N	On-going relationships with neighbours	continuity/change positive/negative
HE2:DIFF	General difficulties: travelling; balancing domestic, academic and work demands; financial	

	arrangements etc.	
HE2:COPE	Strategies for coping with with difficulties experienced	denial; adjustment; accommodation; rationalization; rejection etc.

## 6 Experience of Higher Education: the Third Year

HE3:F	Feelings as s/he progresses through higher education	familiarity/strangeness ease/difficulty in adjusting risk/non-risk to self fitness/unfitness security/insecurity
HE3:STS	Relationships with other students	identification/non-identification interaction/non-interaction integration/isolation
HE3:LIFE	Involvement in university/college life	participation/non-participation ownership/non-ownership
HE3:AC	Academic demands	manageable/unmanageable flexible/rigid spaced out/continuous transparent/opaque
HE3:TUTS	Relationships with tutors	close/distant identification/non-identification interaction/non-interaction
HE3:SUPP	Support systems	close/distant single/multiple supportive/non-supportive
HE3:CUL	Perception of the culture of higher education	identification/non-identification acceptance/rejection
HE3:EXP	Expectations of higher education	confirmation/disconfirmation satisfaction/disappointment
HE3:DEV(A)	Academic development	rapid progress/slow progress skills acquired/not acquired confidence/lack of confidence self-defined/other-defined
HE3:DEV(P)	Personal development	continuity/change in the self continuity/change in value orientation security/insecurity self-defined/other defined
HE3:PART	On-going relationship with partner	continuity/change positive/negative
HE3:FAM	On-going relationships with family	continuity/change positive/negative
HE3:FR	On-going relationships with friends	continuity/change positive/negative
HE3:N	On-going relationships with neighbours	continuity/change positive/negative

HE3:DIFF	General difficulties: travelling; balancing domestic, academic and work demands; financial arrangements etc.	
HE3:COPE	Strategies for coping with difficulties experienced	denial; adjustment; accommodation; rationalization; rejection etc.

## 7 Leaving Higher Education: the Future

FUT:P	Plans for the future	further study; career etc.
FUT:F	Feelings about leaving higher education	
FUT:SELF	The future self	The same self? Self in transition/ Multi-faceted self?

## 8 Miscellaneous

CL	Reflections on social class	

## **Appendix 5**

### **INTERVIEW ANALYSIS: CODING SCHEME (2)**

#### **1. Biographical Details**

Date of Birth	
Family Background	
Educational History	
Work History	
Marital History	
Reasons for Returning to Education	
Feelings about the Access course	
Reasons for Applying to Higher Education	

#### **2. University Life**

Preconceived Ideas Of	
Feelings About	
Disappointments/ Disillusionment	
Other Students	
Tutors	
Social Life	
University Culture	
Academic Issues	
Practical Difficulties	

#### **3. The Academic Style**

Features	
Class dimension	
Strategies for Learning	
Difficulties Learning	
Assessment of the academic style	
Evaluation of academic knowledge	



#### **4. The Changing Self**

Perception of the self in relation to higher education	
Risks to the self in HE	
Development of an Academic Identity	
Changing Identity	
Continuities of Identity	
Conflicting Identities	
Perception of Self in Relation to Social Class	
Plans/Aspirations for the future	
Fears for the Future	

#### **5. Relationships with Significant Others**

Partner and Family	
Friends and Neighbours	