'I Want to Prove to Myself That I Can do This!': Risk and Uncertainty in the Construction of Personal Biographies for Access Students

Richard Waller

This article is based upon a paper presented at UWE's Centre for Critical Theory's conference on 17 January 2002, the theme of which was 'Trust, Risk and Uncertainty'.

Abstract

This paper is a preliminary discussion of research findings from a PhD study that began within UWE's Education Faculty in September 2001. It will seek to outline provisional thoughts as to how notions of risk and uncertainty are employed in the construction of personal biographies for (mature) students on an Access course. Extracts from interviews undertaken with the students will be used in an effort to ground the theory in personal experience.

The fear of failing the course, thus reinforcing previous negative experiences of the education system and further damaging an already low self-esteem, is paramount for some of the cohort. Others meanwhile express worries over how non-academic issues including relationship or monetary pressures may jeopardise their chances of success.

Introduction

Much recent government policy in respect of Higher Education has focused upon increasing student numbers, particularly from traditionally under-represented groups (HEFCE 2000a, HEFCE 2000b). As Baxter and Britton (2001) suggest, this is seen as being both desirable for society in terms of economic and human capital needs, and empowering for the individual in terms of opening up employment opportunities and aiding self-development. Mature students are central to this planned expansion, and Access courses at Further Education colleges are the most likely route for many of them. Such courses are often presented as routes to the certainty of greater long-term economic and social rewards. This certainty is the very opposite of risk, and, as my study shows, is far from the actual experience of those undertaking such academic programmes.

Background to study

This paper is a provisional report on a work in progress. Many areas that form the focus of my on-going research will be introduced here, areas that are to be examined as my study progresses. I began my PhD in the Faculty of Education, University of the West of England, last September, looking at mature students and their experiences of the transition from an FE Access course onto university. The findings here are drawn from a preliminary analysis of five of the first 20 semi-structured interviews.

Following an overview of the project, I will outline the theoretical framework for the study. The notions of 'uncertainty', and 'risk' will be discussed by considering their part in the construction of the biographies of the five Access students. Whilst there are quantitative elements to my research, I will not be drawing upon them here. I will instead ground the theoretical notions chosen in the words of the interviewees themselves. In terms of representation, the rich data gained by these interviews will illustrate their (and, I hope, *my*) ideas. Methodologically, I value an acknowledgement of the role and influence of the researcher in the research process, and am seeking to reflect upon that here as well.

How did I determine whose thoughts and experiences to include in this paper, given that it is an interim report on a 'work in progress'?

In this paper I will focus on interview data from a cross-section of 5 of my 20 interviewees. The 20 were chosen as a sample from across all Access pathways in the college. They all began their full-time studies in September 2001. The five, all of whose ethnicity is self-identified as 'white', 'British' or 'white UK', are as follows:

Elizabeth is a middle-class woman in her mid-20s with a strong family history of participation in HE. She is now on the Access to Teaching pathway, having tried a succession of short-term (usually non-manual) jobs since leaving school.

Sasha is a single mum in her 30s with a rather unconventional educational background in that she went to a 'free school'. She has travelled and worked abroad quite widely and held a variety of jobs in the UK, including most recently a period of self-employment.

Jim, in his early 40s, grew up in Northern Ireland. As a child, he enjoyed a stable middle class family background. He is estranged from the mother of his son, and has had a range of jobs in the computing industry. He is on an Access route into engineering.

Max is an ex-milkman in his late 20s, and had grown up in a large working class family. He is separated from the mother of his two pre-school children and is now studying on a Humanities programme. He now lives in a house with other students.

Geraldine is 36. She was originally from a poor council estate in the city, and has only worked casually in low-skill, poorly paid jobs since the birth of her daughter, now 16. She too is a single mother, and, like Sasha, on an Access to Science pathway.

Where and how are the students' assessment of risk and uncertainty taking place?

For Shah (1994:261) returning to education as an adult '...is a public exposure of one's ignorance.' This exposure is a form of risk, one that I am seeking to explore in my research. My own return to full-time studies has involved major changes to my life and a careful assessment of risk. However, in contrast to my experience of having left fairly secure employment to become a research student, most of the Access students within this study are undergoing even greater exposure to

uncertainty and changes in identity. They have ceased to be full-time workers, family carers or unemployed persons, and are now full-time students, in most cases for the first time since leaving school. As Elizabeth acknowledges of her peers, '(w)e've all come (to education) and *given up things*…everybody is here for a reason'.

For Giddens (1991), this process of reflecting upon one's changing sense of self is an inevitable aspect of contemporary life. Yet while many are struggling to come to terms with the identity change involved in becoming an FE student, they are already being made to consider 'the next step' - university - and the contingent risks that this entails, as mapped out below. Because of the timing of the UCAS application cycle coinciding with these interviews, the students' minds were focused on two important questions: 'Where do I want to go to university?' and 'What will I study?'. Inevitably this involves an assessment of whether applying for one university or course rather than another will involve greater levels of uncertainty. For example, would going to the University of Bristol be 'riskier' than joining UWE? Would they feel comfortable, that they would 'fit in' there? Will studying say, Philosophy, lead to a job upon graduation? Would it exacerbate their alienation from relationship networks to a greater extent than a more vocational degree might?

Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) suggest that such reflexivity, which can have both short and long term components, is something that people approach with varying levels of enthusiasm. And as Douglas (1992) noted, perceptions of risk, whilst - or possibly because - they are socially constructed, vary from one individual or social group to another. They are not therefore *objective*, as rational choice theorists would tend to claim, but *subjective* in a manner informed by social factors, including the influence of power, especially perhaps in the economic sphere. These are concepts central to an individual's sense of self-identity and their assessment of the effect of gender, class, ethnicity, family or relationship status and indeed all other aspects of social stratification.

For *all* students then, some process of self-evaluation and assessment of the likelihood of success of any chosen course of action is necessary. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) remind us that ('young') people are forced to address 'who they are' *when entering* FE. My thoughts at this juncture are that the mature students in my study have, to a large extent, done this *before entering* FE, since their decision to do so inevitably requires a greater element of reflexive evaluation than it does for, say, the vast majority of school-leavers. This is because for school-leavers, entering college is possibly one of a more limited set of choices.

But, for the new students on the Access course, the impetus to dramatically alter their lives had generally been too strong to be ignored. As Giddens (1991:73) suggests:

'(t)aking charge of one's life' involves risk, because it means confronting a diversity of open possibilities. The individual must be prepared to make more or less a complete break with the past, if necessary, and to contemplate novel courses of action that cannot be simply guided by established habits. Security attained by sticking with established patterns is brittle*, and at some point will crack*.' (my emphasis).

For the students in my study, I am interested in what causes the 'cracking' of the 'security' – what led the individual to make the decision to return to study?

Ball et al (2000) distinguish between 'active' and 'inert' choices to enter Further Education. Many of the teenage study group in their book were 'guided', either by parents and/or teachers at school into 'staying-on'. By contrast, most Access students meanwhile made the decision to *return* to education, in some cases after a 'break' of decades, themselves. They have often waited for the appropriate time to return to study. The trigger for this could well be changes to family circumstances - a child starting school or leaving home for instance (Geraldine here), a break-up of a relationship (Max), the death of someone close (Jim), or simple frustration at the lack of employment opportunities (Elizabeth and Sasha particularly, but all of them to varying degrees). The reason(s) that people joined the Access course *now* is something that I am exploring in the interviews, and will be seeking to report on elsewhere later.

What risks are most relevant?

Beck (1992) refers to 'the rise and spread of the culture of individualism and economics of individualization' in contemporary society. It is this increasing individualization, arising at least in part from the fragmentation of the working classes with respect to employment situations that I am looking to focus on here first. Traditional working class communities based around manufacturing and heavy industries are virtually a thing of the past. Those from such backgrounds, particularly the men, often struggle to find meaningful employment in a rapidly changing world dominated by the growth of the service sector and forces of economic globalisation. In terms of Hutton's (1995) 'thirty, thirty, forty society', many Access students are from the disadvantaged 'low skill-no skill' groups, those most at risk in terms of the vagaries of the market economy. From the five selected for consideration here and outlined above, all but Jim would probably be classified thus. Castells (1998:161) called such demarcation the divide between 'valuable and non-valuable people and locales'.

Most Access students recognise the need for decisive action in the form of embarking upon a course of study to enable this 'problem' to be addressed. Jim for instance suggested he sought '…a complete change in lifestyle, a complete change in direction in my life…'. In a sense, they are often seeking to avoid being exposed to excessive future risk or uncertainty in the job market, but in order to do so, they have entered into *a whole new area* of risk and uncertainty, albeit for a limited, but not insignificant, period of time. And some of course risk not only their own situations, on a variety of levels as outlined below, but those of their

family too – especially in terms of time and money. I will briefly consider three areas of risk, the importance of which is already becoming clear in my research: financial, academic failure and damage to relationships. These were the three most cited sources of concern in the interviews.

Financial risk

In respect of future economic rewards, Davies and Williams (2001) claim that students tend to consider the decision to return to study in a fairly instrumentalist manner, as a form of 'private investment'. For many mature students, study on the course is usually seen as a means to change - and hence improve - their lives, especially in terms of bettering their position in the job market. Underlying this is a general belief that the 'return' on such an 'investment', usually in terms of greater career choice and earning potential, is high. Sasha for example sees her future without the course as doing 'soul-destroying jobs that I don't like, simply because I need the money'. Geraldine also 'wants to use (her) brain…(and)…to do something with a bit of job satisfaction'. Both feel a degree to be the best means of achieving a more enjoyable working environment. In the sample of the interview cohort chosen for consideration here, greater job satisfaction was generally rated above increased earning potential in terms of reasons for seeking to undertake a degree course. From the interviewees as a whole, there was a strong desire to 'put something back' into society, and most sought public sector careers as longer-term goals.

However, in terms of government policy formulation, these factors do not really feature highly. The whole system of student funding is geared towards an individual being motivated to study *in order to earn more money*. None of the five interviewees here particularly expressed this aim though. Where this *is* the case, as Davies and Williams (2001) amongst others maintain, the apparent confidence of policy makers in their funding regimes is not usually shared by the students themselves. As Egerton and Parry (2001) have highlighted, assumptions underpinning policy decisions relating to student finance and other areas are generally founded upon notions of younger graduates who can look forward to a longer working life. In addition to this, Davies and Williams note that there are further consequences in terms of uncertain outcomes arising from participation in HE. These include the subsequent fiscal and other implications particularly relevant to mature students. For example, they earn less on average than other graduates, are more likely to find subsequent employment in the public sector, are more likely than average to go to a new university and, perhaps of greatest relevance in the short term at least, are likely to have greater opportunity costs in the form of loss of earnings. Any 'investment' in terms of time, effort and money spent studying then is likely to be less secure, to be of greater short term cost and carry more economic risk than for younger students.

Academic Failure

Davies and Williams (2001) amongst have claimed that fear of academic failure is probably less common for younger students than mature ones such as my Access cohort. This is perhaps because 'A' Level passes, especially if at high grades, are frequently seen as validating their presence at university. Qualifications such as the Access certificate are perhaps compared unfavourably against this 'A' Level 'gold-standard', not just by the more 'traditional' universities, but the public at large. To quite a few Access students, being seen as 'not good enough' is a real fear, and one that itself often has its routes in an unsuccessful academic history. Confidence is central to a student's biographical construction, how they see themselves. Even so, confidence and success outside an educational setting does not guarantee the same inside it. As Peters (1997:199) suggests, whilst mature students may be 'powerful people…outside the academic institution', they may experience disempowerment, often resulting from a lack of confidence or perceptions of 'risk', upon entering it. For many, the potential for failure is chancing more harm to an already low self-esteem. Sasha for instance, a woman who has enjoyed success in other areas of life, suggested:

> "I've always convinced myself that I'm thick…I want to prove to myself that I can do this…(the course) has bought up all that (negative) stuff from school…the 'failure feeling'…I think I have to work twice as hard as anyone else. So even if I pass, I think it's not normal…it's confidence problems really…I'm quite scared about the effect it will have on me if I don't (complete) the course…it took quite a lot of guts for me to do this. I'm petrified I'll fail. It took me a long time to pluck up the courage really - to risk failure…it would be really difficult…where would I go next?"

Max meanwhile was perhaps a little more positive about the possibility of being unsuccessful academically, claiming: 'I feel I would have still gained a lot, even if I fail (the course)'. He clearly sees the benefits of going to university: 'I want to be more intelligent…I want an education'. On the other hand, Geraldine is apparently doing it as much for other people, to challenge their perception of her, as for her own sense of self-worth:

> 'If I can complete the Access course anyway, whether I get to university or not, at least there's something down on paper to say I'm not stupid…'cos I get really angry at people who think that, because I've got a Bristolian accent, I must be quite stupid…I'm 36 years old and people still talk to me like I'm a little girl'.

Perhaps these contrasting approaches could suggest that Max and Geraldine have less at risk in terms of potential damage to an already fragile self-esteem.

Personal relationships

Many Access students are concerned about the impact of studying upon their family and existing social networks. The responsibility of children particularly complicates the position for many of them. Elizabeth for instance demonstrated an awareness of the potential costs to family life when she claims: 'I'm quite lucky that I haven't got children. I can't imagine how difficult it would be if I did have'.

Speaking of her long-standing social circle, Sasha suggested '(a) lot of my friends are quite threatened by me doing the course, and would probably rather that I wasn't doing it.' And Max claims 'I struggle to fit everything in. I've got children who I see at the weekend, and a part-time job…if there's much more work (at university) then I'm going to have plenty of difficulties'. For Wakeford (1994:246), such concerns, focussing as they do upon potentially negative consequences, embody reflective notions of 'social risk'. As she suggests: '(T)he dominant experience for interviewees was that entering an Access course and progressing on to higher education led them to identify certain hazards or dangers to their social relationships.'

In her study, Wakeford found that the biggest actual area for change and renegotiation of relationship is, perhaps unsurprisingly, between spouses and partners, especially where it is the woman who has become the student. 'Traditional' roles of 'housewife' and/or 'mother' are frequently jeopardised by changes in status or sense of identity. Notions of where priorities should lay - with studies or domestic duties - underpins much of this. For many, this probably becomes an area of increasing difficulty as academic studies progress and the 'honeymoon period' of the first term ends.

Just how 'risky' is it to study on an Access course?

Ironically, for some of the cohort, studying on such a programme is actually seen as a way of reducing a possibly greater risk – that of failure at university. I asked all of the interviewees whether they would have accepted a university place if it had been already offered before joining the Access course. Most said that they would not, that they did not feel ready. The Access programme is seen as a way to re-acclimatise to education. Elizabeth for instance talked of 'developing herself' before going on to university. Peters (1997) writes of how supporting activities within a pre-HE writing skills course provided students with 'scaffolding' activities to assist their further academic development. An Access course has such a role as a primary purpose, in terms of the formal curriculum, with the 'core activities' of study skills, numeracy and communications. There are also the course aims of increasing students' confidence and encouraging generic skills such as time management, handling study-related stress and working effectively in groups. Many of the interviewees suggest that this aspect of the curriculum is important to them, and that they chose the course partly because of such transferable skills it offered.

Clearly, the precise nature and level of risk or uncertainty faced by a mature student embarking upon (or as some describe it, 'investing in') a course of academic study varies from one person to another, and cannot be quantified, *even by the individual themselves*. As Giddens (1991:111-2) claims, '(t)he calculation of risk…can never be fully complete, since even in relatively confined risk environments there are always unintended and unforeseen outcomes.' Its

impact upon the construction of the actor's biography is therefore evident, but varies over time and is difficult to evaluate fully at any given moment.

The categories chosen for discussion now do not necessarily determine where risks *actually lay* for people, but where they are *perceived* to be. That said, for the Access students here, in the role of risk in terms of biographical construction, the old adage that 'a thing defined as real will be real in its consequences' is appropriate. The individual student needs to frequently reassess the level of risk or uncertainty that s/he faces. At the same time, the individual constructs their biographical narrative, what Giddens (1991) called 'the self as a reflexive project'. As Giddens suggests, real levels of risk are not necessarily *greater* for people today, but the impact upon identity is more profound. Students will possibly feel very differently about these issues later this - and next - academic year. Giddens (1991:76) wrote that '(t)he reflexivity of the self is continuous, as well as all-pervasive…the individual becomes accustomed to asking, 'how can I use this moment to change?''. I am hoping to record any such changes within the students in my study, which is why I have opted for a longitudinal method of repeated interviews over two years.

Thoughts from Jim illustrate this point. When asked why he was doing the course, he, like most others in the study, claimed he 'sought a change in his life', and wanted more of 'a challenge' through his work. For Jim and the rest of the student cohort, despite all the inherent uncertainty and risk that it led to, the Access programme followed by a university degree was the chosen way of achieving it. However, he is all too aware that this route is full of potential hazards:

> 'Being a student *can* be considered more difficult than going to work everyday…(there), once you're into a routine and understand your job, it becomes second nature to you, whereas things are *forever changing* when you're doing 'academic things'.'

As I suggest above, for each of us, *some* changes to our lives, and our subsequent 'biographical narratives', are actively sought. Others meanwhile 'happen to us', often against both our will and our ability to predict or control them. As John Lennon wrote, (ironically just prior to his death) 'life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans'.

But we do have some degree of choice, of influence, over our futures. Miles (2001:132) proposes that, '(i)n contemporary society an individual effectively treads a tightrope between risk and opportunity.' The general rapidity of changing circumstances experienced today is a further complication in this 'balancing act', one that is especially keen for the Access students in my study, given their choice of a particularly risky course of action. I have decided to follow them, so that I might document and analyse the impact it has on their lives and sense of 'self'. And I am keeping a careful note of just what it is doing to me too.

Bibliography

BALL, S., MAGUIRE, M., MACRAE, S. (2000) Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16: New youth, new economies in the global city Routledge/Falmer

BAXTER, A. and BRITTON, C. (2001) *Risk, Identity and Change: becoming a mature student*, in International Studies in Sociology of Education, 11 (1), 87-102

BECK, U. (1992) Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity Sage

BLOOMER, M. and HODKINSON, P. (1997) *Moving into FE: the Voice of the Learner* Further Education Development Agency cited in BALL, S. et al op cit

CASTELLS, M. (1998) *End of Millenium* Blackwells cited in BALL, S. et al op cit

CRAIB, I. (1998) Experiencing Identity Sage

DAVIES, P. and WILLIAMS, J. (2001) *For Me or Not For Me? Fragility and Risk in Mature Students' Decision-making*, in Higher Education Quarterly, 55 (2), 185-203

DOUGLAS, M. (1992) (ed) 'Risk and Blame' Routledge, in DAVIES, P. and WILLIAMS, J. op cit

EGERTON, M. and PARRY, G. (2001) 'Lifelong Debt: Rates of Return to Mature Study', in DAVIES, P. and WILLIAMS, J. op cit

GIDDENS, A. (1991) Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age Polity

HEFCE (2000a) Widening Participation: special funding proposals 1999-2000 to 2001-02 (August) Circular 00/35 HEFCE

HEFCE (2000b) Funding for widening Participation in Higher Education: new proposals 2000-01 to 2003-04 (November) Circular 00/50 HEFCE

HUTTON, W. (1995) The State We're In Cape

JAMES, D. (1995) *Mature Studentship in Higher Education: beyond a 'species' approach*, in British Journal of Sociology of Education, 16 (4), 451-466

LASH, S. and URRY, J. (1994) Economies of Signs and Space Sage

LUPTON, D. (1999) Risk Routledge

MILES, S. (2001) <u>Social Theory in the <i>Real</i> World</u> Sage

PETERS, H. (1997) <i>An Exploration of a Group of Mature Students' Perceptions of and Approaches to Writing at University, Carried Out on a Twelve Week Pre-Entry Course,</i> in <u>Journal of Access Studies</u>, 12 (2), 198-211

SHAH, S. (1994) <i>Kaleidoscopic People: Locating the 'Subject' of Pedagogic Discourse,</i> <u>Journal of Access Studies</u>, 9 (2), 257-270

SKEGGS, B. (1997) <u>Formations of Class and Gender</u> Sage