

## **Changing identities through re--engagement with education: Narrative accounts from two women learners**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter features accounts of two white British middle class women, 'Maria' (aged 47) and 'Fiona' (52), participants in a longitudinal study of adults returning to formal learning via an Access to Higher Education (HE) programme. The women reflect upon their educational biographies, from schooling in the 1960s through to early experiences at university as mature students, and consider how these have impacted upon their wider lives. Changes in their sense of identity are explored in the chapter, and the value of using biographical research in highlighting the social context of individual lives is examined. However, before considering the life stories of Fiona and Maria (their chosen pseudonyms), I will explain my choice of the narrative methodology and contextualise the findings by reference to my personal and family educational biographies.

### **REFLECTIONS ON MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Like many British people of my generation, I was the first in my family to go to university. That I – or rather we – did resulted from changing social forces, notably the fracturing of dominant work patterns and roles (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), and legislation expanding opportunities for further and higher education (eg DES 1987, DfES 2003). As Christine Halse suggests in her chapter, I too doubt if any of *my* school or university peers are as reflexive over how our family educational background shape our ontological and epistemological positions, and this chapter starts by considering that background.

Like anyone else, including research participants discussed at length below, my educational and wider life biography was, whilst not *determined absolutely*, at least *informed* by those of my parents, so I will outline something of this to contextualise my interest in narrative or life history research. On one level my biography is unique, everyone's is, including Maria and Fiona below. However, we are all ciphers or products of our environment too, and as explored in the final section of this chapter, the exploration of the interplay between social structure *and* individual agency as influences upon lives is why I find biographical research especially powerful.

My mother and father were both born in the 1940s into working class families from London's East End. Unlike their own parents each was successful at primary school, doing well in the 11+ examination determining the type of secondary education children would receive<sup>1</sup>. By the time I left home at 19 for university, my parents would have been

described objectively as 'middle class', albeit 'lower middle class', and 'first generation middle class' at that. Their class position later became more established in occupational roles, housing tenure, social capital and *habitus*, whilst markers of their background were retained – moderated *Cockney* or *Estuary English* accents for instance. Lawler (2005:797) suggested class is essentially a 'dynamic' concept, not a 'set of 'empty' signifiers...waiting to be filled by interchangeable social actors, but as something we *are*' (emphasis in original). Irrespective of structural positioning, people see themselves ontologically as *being* working or middle class, and tensions between subjective and objective components of identity are central to this chapter.

In the late 1990s my parents both took voluntary early retirement during restructuring at work. Like many peers, they were in the appropriate age, geographical location and occupational position to benefit from opportunities presented by changing macro--economic conditions; changes illustrating the shifting social context to the study from which the narratives of Fiona and Maria are drawn. It seems a trite observation, but had my parents grown up in a slightly different location or period, their lives would probably have been *dramatically* different. This reflection is relevant when considering the lives of those participating in the research project, as discussed implicitly and explicitly throughout this chapter.

When my sister and I became settled at secondary school, my mother, then in her mid--30s, entered nursing, and subsequently trained as a midwife, fulfilling an academic potential frustrated raising a family whilst working in successive short--term, part--time, low--skill jobs. Her career culminated as a university lecturer after nurse and midwife training was devolved to that sector. So, whilst I was the first in my family to enter HE, my mother (and sister) did so subsequently, as mature students, as have other friends and acquaintances, offering a vicarious experience of being an older learner, a further personal impetus to my research.

Whilst my male peers and I could have followed our fathers into car manufacture, docking or Fleet Street's printing presses as our inherited *right*, in stark contrast to the previous few generations, hardly any of my acquaintances actually did. The ontological security of working class communities and their extended family structures ruptured during the 1970s and 1980s economic and social upheavals. My school contemporaries, male and female, broke with traditional employment patterns, with many getting non--manual work in London's booming financial services markets – 'The City'. Whilst it would be naive to ignore the influence of nepotism, during this relatively meritocratic period *what* you knew –

your cultural capital – was becoming more important than *who* you knew – your social capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

To me commuting daily to work in London's financial markets appealed no more than becoming a docker or car manufacturer did. I chose to study further, attending sixth form college after school, and then higher education. Unlike most people in the wider study from which Fiona and Maria's narratives are drawn, my family actively encouraged and financially supported my studies.

### **The intergenerational impact of educational experiences**

The impact on my father of a secondary education experience somewhat at odds with his working class background profoundly affected his sense of identity, his familial and community relationships, and his aspirations for himself and his own children (Hoggart 1958; Jackson and Marsden 1962). This ontological challenge resonates through successive generations; in terms of educational experiences and parental expectations, my upbringing and my sister's differed from those of our four cousins. My father's two brothers 'failed' the 11+ exam, leaving school with minimal qualifications and following older male relatives into traditional local industries, whilst my father became a design engineer. My cousins too all left school with few or no qualifications and still work in semi-skilled manual or routine white collar roles, whilst my sister and I became university lecturers. Our lifestyle differed from our wider family's; in contrast to aunts and uncles who remained in the urban working class communities they were born into, my parents left London for the leafier suburbs of Essex, as families in classic sociological studies by Willmott and Young (1960) had.

Whilst not wishing to construct or portray the lives of my wider family and other working class people as 'deficient' to mine, I acknowledge the greater life choices I have. Without over-simplifying the issues, this is a direct (although not *inevitable*) consequence of my father's greater educational success than his siblings; and of mine compared to my cousins. These generational advantages are passed on to our children too, further illustrating education's power to transform the lives of individuals, families and wider communities, and its potential for moving us towards a fairer, more just society.

Reflecting upon my family educational biography/ies led me to teach adults, wanting to improve the lives of people I worked with, empowering them and giving them greater life choices. Seeing the impact on older learners of studying courses leading to university led me to research their experiences. It meant I could help others, to 'give something back' (Brine and Waller 2004, Reay *et al.* 2002) to those without the opportunities I had enjoyed.

The richness of data generated through life history research offers the most valid understanding of the tensions and transformations encountered during the process, and having outlined briefly my own family educational biography and suggested how this has informed my understanding of educational processes, I will turn to consider the life stories of two participants from a recent research project.

## **RATIONALE FOR NARRATIVE AND LIFE HISTORY METHODOLOGIES**

This section examines how to appreciate the wider context of individuals' lives to understand their narrative accounts, and how apparently highly personal stories can illustrate wider processes of social change. This involves, as Sparkes (2003:3) put it, 'illuminat(ing) the social context of individual lives while...allowing space for individual stories to be told. To comprehend the social context of participants' experiences they are placed amongst events shaping their lives and those of others.

Fiona and Maria, whilst sharing characteristics including ethnicity and age, nevertheless come from different structural positions regarding social class ascribed at birth, family or household make-up, and patterns of engagement with paid and unpaid labour across their adult lives. They were chosen from the study to explore the methodological implications of biographical research, drawing out similarities and differences in their lives and their narrative accounts. My particular focus here is how formal education impacts on learning, informing, developing and framing their sense of identity. I explained above how my biographical narrative and that of my immediate and wider family has been shaped by education, and I now turn to those of Fiona and Maria, after outlining the course they joined. Later in this section I also consider issues of power in biographical research.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Access to higher education courses**

Maria and Fiona joined the Access programme with the intention of getting into university the following year. Access to HE courses take place in the UK further education college setting, aiming to redress educational exclusion amongst low participating groups – primarily mature students from working class and/or minority ethnic backgrounds. They provide adults with no or few formal qualifications a route into university otherwise denied to them (Parry 1996). They feature a curriculum concerned with preparation for HE, with study skills, numeracy, literacy and communication skills at their core, in addition to subject specific knowledge. An informal curriculum operates too, with courses aiming to increase students' confidence, and to develop transferable 'soft' skills including time management and effective group working.

## **Background – The wider research study**

In the larger research project, semi-structured interviews were conducted five times with each student (n=20) over two years. The research explored the impact of studying upon individuals, their significant relationships and sense of identity. A longitudinal approach enabled changes in these areas to be tracked over time for one person, and comparisons made across the cohort at any given moment. The interviews regularly asked questions on their (changing) sense of identity, how relationships differed from before the course, and what their hopes and ambitions were. Previous research on Access students (eg Baxter and Hatt 1999, Wakeford 1994) had illustrated the complexity of people's experiences and its impact upon them and those closest to them, and I wanted to consider a similar area, particularly in terms of learner and class identities.

The interviews, which with Fiona and Maria lasted on average about an hour, occurred at college or in the respondent's home. This choice of venue was offered partly to re-dress the power imbalance in terms of role, gender and control over the interview process and direction. Discussions were recorded and transcribed. Similar questions were asked of each respondent for a given set of interviews, and whilst some themes were revisited, others only arose at appropriate times, reasons behind university choice for instance. The interviewees knew I was an Access tutor at the college, and an educational researcher at a local university. Mentioning I too was a mature student balancing academic studies with family responsibilities and part-time work commitments, aided the development of rapport necessary to produce the richly detailed qualitative data sought. Whilst other life histories could have been chosen for this chapter, these two participants, whilst coming from nominally similar social positions, revealed very different past experiences of formal education, of current motivations and future aspirations.

## **TWO NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS**

### **Fiona – A 'pre-feminist' education**

At 52 Fiona was the oldest of the wider study's participants, and a Masters' degree and professional credentials meant she was also the best qualified. Fiona's family was upper middle class – her father had been a doctor, as had his father before him, whilst her mother worked as a receptionist and administrator in his GP's surgery. Fiona was the second of four children, all girls. Despite 'doing reasonably well' at her private school, Fiona grew up with neither the expectation nor aspiration of continuing her formal education beyond then. Although all the men in her family had been to university in recent generations, Fiona was the first woman to do so, and not until her late 20s:

'I went to quite an academic school, but my parents didn't push us at all academically, they didn't really think that girls needed much in the way of education...I remember my father saying 'OK, so you're going to do 'A' Levels, but you don't want to go to university...so it took me quite a long time to get there'.

Fiona, like others had 'hated school', suggesting her dominant memories were of 'coercion, sarcasm and ridicule'. She blamed negative parental attitudes towards education on the period's prevalent values regarding appropriate classed gender roles. After her eldest sister left school at fifteen, Fiona herself started 'A' Levels in 1964 against parental wishes. When her second sister left school in 1972, early feminism's impact had changed expectations a little. Fiona's youngest sister was educated just beyond a significant social cusp regarding womens' changing roles. These shifting social norms meant her youngest sister was, unlike Fiona, encouraged academically attending university in her late teens.

Without children of her own, Fiona suggests current expectations within her wider family were of both her nephews *and nieces* progressing to university, and all had. By contrast, Fiona had been expected to 'leave school, marry the curate and raise a family' by her conservative--sounding parents. Of her sisters she said 'there's no question, if we had been boys we would have been pushed and pushed', like her male cousins were. Expectations of progressing to university are now firmly entrenched in all fractions of the middle classes, and increasingly in the upper working class too following government initiatives to expand participation in HE (for example DfES 2003). It would be exceptional for a woman from Fiona's background *not* to start university at 18 or 19 now.

### ***Fiona's return to education***

Before the Access course Fiona was a social worker 'for about 25 years' but wanted to be a marine biologist, a decision which came to her 'in a flash' whilst diving in the Caribbean on one of her trips. Although single at our first meeting, Fiona had other relationship commitments; her mother and father were still alive, and a source of worry and responsibility to her:

'I've got elderly parents (and) my father was ill last summer. They live 200 miles away, and I got 'caught up' being with them most of the time last summer. I decided I either had to move up there, or have something very definite going on in [city] that would give me a 'cast iron' reason for being down here'.

Despite her filial demands, Fiona felt she had relatively few other calls upon her time. Comparing her position to fellow Access students, she suggested:

'I've got an advantage, in two ways. I'm used to studying before...and I didn't have family demands. In the last couple of months I've started a new relationship, and that's got me thinking...I'm really glad this didn't happen 6 months ago! A whole new level of 'timetabling' has to come in. It's quite difficult, and I'm so full of admiration for people who've got children and do this.

Literature on mature women students (for example, Betts 1999; Burke 2002) cites the difficulties balancing study and family commitments. Despite the further progression of feminism women still generally organise family life, carrying a mental 'map' or 'menu' of household responsibilities (Waller 2006). Fiona's closest friend on the course was a younger woman with two small children, whose mother suddenly became seriously ill, and who left the course to care for her. Fiona reflected upon the fragility of *anyone's* ability to commit to such a demanding programme of study; the impossibility of legislating for all potential eventualities. As she suggested, 'it only takes something like that, and the whole thing comes down, like a house of cards'.

Fiona's personal experience illustrated this. Just before the end of her university first year, her father and her partner of some 15 months both died. Whilst the first death had been anticipated, the second was unexpected and really knocked her back. Others in the wider study also experienced major personal traumas during the two years of fieldwork. For instance, Maria's elderly father became seriously ill during the Access programme, necessitating major input in assistance and respite care for her elderly mother before his eventual admission to a nursing home. Drawing upon Beck (1992), Reay *et al.* (2002) suggest despite people's life chances remaining highly structured, processes of individualization mean solutions are sought on an *individual* not a *collective* basis. A consequence of this is that situations beyond their control, over which people were previously assumed to bear no responsibility, are increasingly experienced as 'personal failures'.

'There are some things it is just so much more difficult dealing with than if you're 18. Sometimes, I'm just so envious of the young ones. It's an assumption because some 18 year olds have a lot of responsibility and stuff, but the ones who just move down to university that's it for the year, and in June they get picked up with their duvets and their music and that's it...If you're embarking on something like this in your middle years, things happen, don't they?'

### **Maria – always putting others first**

Upon starting the Access course, Maria had two sons at university, although none of her wider family had been before. She took the opportunity offered when her youngest son left home to 'do something for me for a change', having 'the time to devote to myself'. Spending a number of years abroad – the family had returned eleven years earlier– had restricted her

personal career plans. Upon returning it 'took a while for things to settle down', and her husband was unemployed for a few years, so Maria worked to support the family. Maria 'would have started the course about ten years earlier' otherwise, and consequentially be established in a graduate career.

She attended Catholic primary and convent schools, an experience she characterised as 'narrow'. The convent closed when she was 17, before her 'A' levels, so Maria's highest qualifications were 'O' levels. She recalls that:

'Instead of being 'sensible' and going off to do another two years elsewhere, I went off to France to be an *au pair*, so my education effectively stopped (then)...I didn't have parents that thought a girl needed to be well educated'.

Maria's family 'had no great horizons – you got a job, got married and that was it'. Her parents were 'very supportive', and although 'not ambitious for their children academically', made financial sacrifices to send Maria to her fee paying convent school.

Using narrative methodology highlights similarities to Fiona's account, although Maria was from a lower social strata; another fraction of Britain's complicated class system. Maria's parents were from 'very different backgrounds' to one another – her father 'a working class Liverpoolian', whilst her mother came from 'a very middle class background', having been privately educated herself. Maria considered her parents 'a very strange mixture', who 'wanted me to have a good schooling, but didn't think past that'.

Returning to study improved Maria's family relationships – she understood her sons' lives better; she could *empathise*, rather than just *sympathise* with challenges they faced:

'It's certainly made me understand a bit more about the goings on at university...about university life from (sons' names) point of view, which has done *me* good, and *my relationships*, certainly with my eldest. He's had his final year this year, it's been tough, and I've appreciated that, whereas possibly I might not have appreciated it quite so much had I not done the year that I have.

Before the course Maria had been a secretary. Comparing being a mature student with her working life, she found it far more demanding:

'When you go to college, the work doesn't finish there. When you're doing a 9 to 5 job, at 5 o'clock when you go home, that's the end of your day. I used to come home and think 'how I'm going to spend my evening?'. Your day is very different when you're studying, and you just have to get on with it...You spend the whole year thinking about the work you've got to do, it's never away from you...it's always there at the back of your mind



Whilst some jobs cannot be left behind upon closing the door at 5 o'clock, Maria's comments reveal her changing self-identity from 'secretary' to 'mature student'.

Maria identified another 'personal' cost of studying in how it limited her activities outside college. An active woman, walking and swimming most days Maria was also a Cub Scout leader and sang with a local choir. She chose to prioritise these commitments in her reduced 'free time', sacrificing other activities including socialising with her husband and friends:

'There's no social life because I still 'do Cubs' and because I still sing, that has taken precedence, so from that point of view there has been an impact...We do see friends, but (not) so much of them, (though) it's not the end of the world'.

I recognised these limitations from my own experience of being a mature postgraduate student with work and family commitments. Maria suggests how she anticipates the sacrifices in her social life are short-term, and how she again prioritises commitments to others, albeit those from outside her family. Maria's career choice reflects this apparent altruism too. She joined the *Access to Health* pathway, seeking to become an occupational therapist (OT), considering working to help others as something important:

'This really has a sense of doing something for someone else, which will be nice, a source of satisfaction...that I'm actually doing something useful'.

## **DISCUSSING THE NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS – EDUCATION AS A TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE**

### **Understanding Fiona**

I briefly explained the provenance of Access courses earlier in the chapter; they were established with a commendable social justice agenda (DES 1973; Parry 1996) seeking to widen HE participation to 'non-traditional' social groups. Knowing my family's educational biographies committed me to this wider political project, leading me to teach and research students studying these programmes. They aim to be *inclusive*, with easy academic entry requirements given their aim of getting people into university within a year. It is a steep learning curve for those with little history of success in formal education, and the less academically capable particularly rely upon a high level of personal support from tutors and fellow students to succeed. This description would not apply to Fiona; unique within my wider study, Fiona enjoyed a high degree of academic success throughout and beyond compulsory schooling. In terms of her prior qualifications, ascribed and achieved social class, and to a degree, age, Fiona is an atypical mature student. Narrative accounts from

across a two year timeframe help understand this and explore its implications, my epistemological rationale for employing a biographical methodology.

Unlike most Access students, Fiona's place on the course had not been planned in advance:

'The Access course was in a sense an accident, but a happy accident, because I planned to do 'A' Levels. I rang up to ask about doing biology and environmental science 'A' Levels, in September...I spoke to somebody on the phone who just said 'have you thought about doing an Access course?'...and there happened to be an Open Day that day, and I went along, had an interview a couple of days later and started the following week'.

Despite early challenges associated with studying new, hitherto unconsidered subjects – she said during our first meeting for example 'I'm finding Chemistry fascinating, but I don't have a 'filing system' in my brain that I can fit it into' – Fiona fared extremely well. She acquired an unheard of maximum possible 28 level 3 credits, despite needing just 16 to pass the course. An ideal student, Fiona demonstrated what Avis (1997:83--4) referred to as the 'motivated and committed' mature student, typical of 'the preferred and celebratory Access discourse', albeit it from a highly unorthodox background. Fiona employed her well-honed educational skills, strong learner identity and cultural capital to great effect on the course.

As well as seeking to progress to university, Fiona was also a *lifelong* learner, learning for its own sake, that is, in *liberal education*, 'where the process of learning is as important as the outcomes' (Brine and Waller 2004:101). She was not after career advancement or accumulating academic capital, as the dominant policy discourse assumes motivates students, as demonstrated through her narrative accounts. Given her new academic direction, one of Fiona's friends dubbed her '*Renaissance Woman*', a tag she enjoyed. She relished studying new subjects, suggesting 'I didn't know things worked like that', and considered herself as 'somebody who's been told that the world is really round, when / *know* it's flat'. This seismic shift in learning, in her ontological perspective, is reminiscent of Kuhn's (1996) notion of scientific paradigms.

### **Understanding Maria**

The importance of Maria's family is demonstrated in her narrative accounts. Although it was a theme for everyone I spoke to, Maria spent longer than any other interviewee in the wider study discussing them, usually without prompting. As a woman of a particular age and class background, the 'wife and mother' role was prioritised over her individual needs – it was her form of ascribed femininity, and this shone through her narrative accounts.

Like the gendered class assumptions limiting her educational opportunities at school, Maria's primary roles as 'mother and home-maker' were socially ascribed. She had followed her husband's job abroad, and had her children overseas. Not working whilst away, Maria commenced paid employment upon returning home as her husband could not find work himself. She was, in Marxist feminist terms (Beechey 1987), her family's 'reserve army of labour', finishing work when her husband found a permanent position. Maria's career ambitions were unimportant to the family. And, despite wanting to return to formal education 'for about ten years', she dutifully waited until her sons left home before seeking self-actualisation at work.

Maria's choice of career reflected traditional gendered caring roles too. Initially seeking 'something in the health service', she eventually settled upon OT. For Maria 'doing something for *someone else*' appealed, putting *their* needs first, but reviewing again the interview transcripts, it appeared that, like several other female interviewees, she had rarely done anything else! Maria's career choice is gendered, a caring role often ascribed to women in the UK and wider afield. Her chosen – or ascribed – form of femininity is akin to the 'community stalwart' (Brine and Waller, 2004), the woman always seeking 'to give something back' – not just to her family, the choir or Cub Scout group, but to unknown others through her chosen career. This gendered class identification exists beyond that of the individual (Reay *et al.*, 2002; Reay 2003), and, through her rich narrative accounts, we can see Maria embody this identity.

Maria felt her eyes were opened as a result of studying on the course. Such developments are usually organic and evolutionary, not revolutionary or instantaneous. This partly explains why *longitudinal* research methods were employed here, to explore the process *as it occurred*. It is similar to taking a snap-shot at a particular time, of 'lives in progress' (Ball *et al.* 2000), limiting difficulties associated with research participants recalling events with memories 'coloured or redefined by subsequent experiences' (Betts 1999:126).

Maria's developing awareness of politics and social affairs came through both the formal curriculum studied and meeting students from a range of backgrounds. The *process* of Maria's developing social awareness can be tracked throughout her comments across the period of fieldwork, as illustrated below:

'I'm *beginning* to change...It opens up your mind to an awful lot of things that you probably wouldn't bother thinking about before'.  
1<sup>st</sup> interview

'Mostly the changes have been having my eyes opened to a different world. No, not so much a *different* world – because I think the world is the same – but

*understanding* more perhaps about how things work...finding out about things which perhaps you just ignored or never really thought about before’.

2<sup>nd</sup> interview

‘I certainly read a newspaper in a different light. It probably opens your mind to a lot of things that you didn’t bother thinking about before, especially things like sociology...I read a whole article whereas before I might have only read the headline’.

3<sup>rd</sup> interview

‘I probably think more. There’s a lot of issues that come up that you don’t ever think about, but when you’re presented with them...it’s interesting what you learn, and there’s no doubt about it, you do learn an awful lot’.

4<sup>th</sup> interview

Maria’s account of her deepening social understanding offers insight into a changing personal identity, illustrating the power of biographical research to capture and (re)present this phenomenon. Learning from both the formal curriculum and the wider social, political and economic context of the course contributed to her developing world--view. For example, before the Access programme she knew few people living on state benefits, whilst she now *knew* people of the ‘type’ she studied in sociology modules on her course. Marion Bowl’s (2003) study of an Access group also includes examples of this, but from the perspective of the disadvantaged student themselves. The sub--title of her powerful book *Non--traditional entrants to higher education* is an extract from one participant, Selma, a working class single mother from a minority ethnic group. She said ‘they talk about people like me in Social Policy’, and ‘I feel I’m *living* social policy rather than just reading it from textbooks’ (p. iiix) (my emphasis). Whilst Maria was not reading about *herself* in textbooks, her learning was contextualised and understanding strengthened by having people ‘like’ Selma in her class, people from backgrounds she had not encountered intimately before. Maria will become a more empathetic occupational therapist through having her social horizons broadened accordingly.

## **CONCLUSIONS: PROFESSIONAL AND OTHER IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

The best narrative and life history research demonstrates how lives are led under the dual influence of social structures and personal agency, and the impact of this intersection shines through Fiona and Maria’s stories. Whitty (2002) likens using micro-- research methods to examine social phenomena as looking through the eye of a vulture (see also Waller and Simmons 2009). The vulture’s lens enables it to ‘zoom--in’ upon a small area in its field of vision, whilst *simultaneously* maintaining a coherent image of the wider landscape. Using this image we can understand how, for example, Fiona’s experience of limited family support when at school results from dominant social values of the time. Likewise, when reading Maria’s account of always putting others first realise she too is acting according to socially

expected gender roles. Sparkes' (2003:3) suggestion that biographical research can 'illuminate the *social* context of individual lives' (my emphasis) is clear within their narratives.

Whitty's image resonates with Wright Mills' (1959) idea of private troubles highlighting public concerns, demonstrating the value of knowing an individual's personal history to better understand their social situation. Bourdieu's extensive writing on this topic (for example, 1984), used Bertaux's (1981) notion of 'representativity' in demonstrating how individual actors carry wider histories and social contexts, including class, *habitus* and other dispositions, as illustrated by Maria and Fiona. Meanwhile Ferrarotti (1981), also drawing upon Sartre's (1960) philosophical treatise, highlighted the need to simultaneously comprehend an individual's narrative *and* its public context, in 'a heuristic movement 'back and forth' from biography to social system, from social system to biography' (Ferrarotti 1981:22).

The longitudinal, life history methodology adopted in my study enabled an exploration of sensitive issues in the participants' past, present and anticipated futures, that is 'the three temporal phases of life' (Abbs 1974). The intimacy invoked by the approach helped develop the rapport necessary for participants to 'open--up' and discuss these phases. I told research participants something of my life too, partly to assuage guilty feelings about learning so much about theirs, and partly to encourage frank talking from them. Whilst the interviews gave me a degree of power in regarding my knowledge of the participants, it presented ethical concerns over exploiting their goodwill through 'doing rapport' and 'faking friendship' (Duncombe and Jessop 2002). I also fretted how to represent their narratives, including ethical considerations over what to reveal and what to leave unsaid. They agreed to participate, and to continue to do so, and were protected by a degree of anonymity, though problems persist with the notion of 'informed consent'. Could interviewees have predicted the impact of their participation in my project? I knew I intended no harm by my research, but some participants may have had concerns over this, concerns revisited when seeking to update Fiona and Maria's stories for this chapter.

### **Update**

Thinking what to write here I decided to contact the two women again, to catch--up on events since we last spoke some five years previously. After several attempts I spoke with Fiona by telephone, and she invited me to her house to talk. As we drank coffee in her sunny conservatory, we discussed how our lives had changed since our last meeting. I explained my doctoral research including how I interpreted and represented her narrative accounts, mentioning how she and her peers featured in several academic publications, some of which I remembered sending her previously, though without seeking or receiving feedback. I sensed a different power dynamic operating now. Unlike in my project's data

gathering phase I now felt genuinely accountable for my thinking, fearing her saying I had 'got it all wrong'. What would I do if she did – how would I deal with this? What if Fiona asked me not to write about her again? However, these challenges remained theoretical as she seemed happy with my account. I was pleased to discover she had graduated successfully, narrowly missing a first class degree, and was contemplating further study, possibly even a PhD. She actually cited my research as having inspired her to undertake her own, and I felt proud.

Meanwhile, I called Maria's house but was told that whilst she still owned it, she no longer lived there. Her lodger said she had moved to Cyprus, and I asked him to pass on a message that I would like to speak to her. Again, the power dynamic was unlike before. I felt unable to press for her contact details, or probe as to what she was doing abroad; asking that my email address be passed to Maria seemed the best I could get from her lodger. She did not contact me, and I hope it was because my message was not conveyed, rather than because she rejected the chance to talk. I decided not to challenge that assumption, for instance by calling Maria's home again or writing to her, though I may send her a copy of this book, to see if that prompts a response, for my own sake rather for inclusion here.

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<sup>1</sup> Following the 1944 Butler Education Act, British children sat an examination towards the end of their primary education, determining which one of three distinct types of school they attended. Whilst the precise figures varied between regions depending upon the provision available, some 20-25% of children went to grammar schools, 70-75% to secondary modern schools and around 5% to technical schools. See chapter in this volume by Jacky Brine for further discussion of the impact of this policy.