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Changing class and gendered identities through re-engaging with education: Tensions revealed in narrative accounts from two studies of adult returners

This paper uses data from two longitudinal studies of post-compulsory learners. The first on adults returning to formal learning via an *Access to HE* course at an FE college; the second on working-class women in secondary education during three periods: post-war; 1960/70s; and 1988 onwards.

The presentation reports and theorises on participants' reflections upon their educational biographies - from childhood memories of schooling, through FE and, for some, to experiences at university.

We explore how engaging with post-compulsory education impacts upon their wider lives. Changes in participants' sense of identity/ies, especially its gendered and classed aspects are explored.

Format of presentation

1. Introduction (RW)
2. First Study (HB):
        (i) Overview
        (ii) Valerie, Susan & Natalie
3. Second Study (RW):
        (i) Overview
        (ii) Jo & Akhtar
4. Conclusions (HB & RW)

Changing class and gendered identities

◆ Group one: Valerie

◆ Group two: Susan

◆ Group three: Natalie

Valerie

When I did go back to university which was, well I was quite mature then, it was 1991 and I was 41. I think my mother felt 'well why is she doing this, she's got her family now, she's got a house, a mortgage, her husband works'.

[Valerie, 1st interview]

Susan

I remember I wanted a bag of chips and I had to count out my pennies and I couldn't have a bag of chips and so I had an overall plan. My plan was to get to university, get a degree and get a job.

[Susan, 1st interview]

Natalie

I remember one of my teachers saying 'it's not teacher training college now, it's university' and I laughed and said 'I don't want to do that'. It was just a scary word because I didn't know anyone that had gone, and I was like 'no I'm not going to university, I'm going to teacher training college' cause that was kind of less scary.

[Natalie, 1st interview]

Jo

31 yrs, single parent, ex-shop worker

Akhtar

32 yrs, single parent, ex-financial
   services manager

Jo - Ideas above her station?

The town I grew up in was quite affluent, but I lived on the one small council estate with my grandmother as my legal guardian...At primary school I had done quite well, and was put forward to go into the 'top set' at secondary school. But when I got there it was, like, I couldn't go in the top set since I lived on the council estate – really! It was, like, 'what do you mean, you're in the top set?' It was important what your mum and dad did! One teacher actually said to me **in class** that I 'came from a dysfunctional family'. I was put in to lower sets.

[Jo, 1st interview]

Jo – Ideas above her station?

I get jibes about studying – but not in a *hostile* way – joking, laughing at me. We had a family holiday, I'd bought the paper (a broadsheet), and was reading it, we'd gone out somewhere for lunch, and it was 'she's *really* clever now, she's reading the *big* papers'. It's just their way…

[Jo, 2nd interview]

Akhtar – No longer fitting anywhere?

We were all a bit in awe going up there, just for the bloody Open Day, to be honest about it. We were all chatting about it in the car going up, thinking 'my God', do you know what I mean, 'do we belong here?', and that was just going to have a chat with people!

[Akhtar, 2nd interview]

Akhtar – No longer fitting anywhere?

A lot of people won't speak to me anymore, from where I grew up, because of the way I am, because I said to myself 'I'm not interested in that way of life anymore', and a lot of them are still embroiled in it. And you have to make a decision and say 'that's not for me anymore'. But the ones who are my *real* friends don't understand it, but they still accept it, because it makes *me* happy. [Akhtar, 5th interview]

Concluding remarks - HB

- Legislation widens participation whilst learner identities endure
  (Archer, 2003; Walkerdine, 2003; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001)

- Extension of education is not linear or 'natural'
  (Reay, 1998a; Reay, David & Ball, 2005)

- Frivolity of education and 'giving something back'
  (Maguire, 2005; Reay, 2003)

- Comfort in your surroundings; rejection of/struggle within pre-92 universities
  (Reay, David & Ball, 2005)

Concluding remarks - RW

◆ Mature students' W/C identity 'a source of pride'; *not* being M/C was valued (Tett, 2000; Gilchrist *et al.,* 2003)

◆ *Superiority* (Britton & Baxter, 2001) vs *Shame* (Skeggs, 1997)

◆ Institutional *habitus* (Reay, 1998b)

◆ Gendered classed identities – ontological challenges and *risk* (Wakeford, 1994; Charlesworth, 2000; Brine & Waller, 2004)

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