'But you've done well, haven't you?'

An exploration of the educational and social experiences of lone parent students in higher education

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Abstract

This study explores the educational and social experiences of 17 undergraduate lone parent students studying across a wide range of subject disciplines in a post-1992 inner-city university. The study was conducted in 2010 using qualitative, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. At the time, the number of lone parent households was increasing and the political agenda aimed to reduce welfare dependency and increase lone parents' employment rate. During this period, New Labour Government policy also emphasised the benefits of higher education and of opening up of opportunities for a new and diverse group of students who traditionally have not attended university, with lone parents among them.

Posited within a social justice framework, this study seeks to identify the factors that motivated lone parents to become higher education students and examine their perceived (re)constructed future identities.

The study draws on feminist theoretical perspectives on the intersectionalities of gender, class and 'race' and Bourdieu's conceptual tools of habitus and economic, social and cultural capitals to examine how social backgrounds, educational history and the structures of the academe influence and shape the lived experiences of lone parent students.

The number of academic studies on the educational experiences of 'non-traditional' mature students has increased considerably, with parent students becoming a growing subject of interest for academic research. However, few studies have focused on lone parent students in higher education as a distinct group, let alone the differences among the lone parent students themselves. This study seeks to address this absence.

The key findings of the study reveal that the majority of the lone parent students were resisting the social stigma of their lone parent identity and had chosen to enter university to form new social networks, new identities and new futures. However, despite the lone parent students' resilience, the structural demands of the academy (such as course timetables, assessment deadlines and subject requirements) together with the university culture presented considerable challenges to their ability to manage childcare, employment and study, as well as their changing habitus.

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Abbreviations

BERA	British Educational Research Association
BSA	British Sociological Association
DBIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DTI	Department for Trade and Industry
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit
EOC	Equal Opportunities Commission
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FECs	Further Education Colleges
FEI	Further Education Institution
GCSE	General Certificate in Secondary Education
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
NIACE	National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
NUS	National Union of Students
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UUK	Universities UK

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Field of Study

This study explores lone parent students' educational and social experiences while studying in higher education (HE). Two notable trends influenced the background to this study – the changing composition of the family (Harris et al. 2006) and the increasing number of mature students entering HE in the UK over the past decade (UUK 2015). It should be noted, however, that current statistics show a decline in the latter trend since the start of this study. As a group, lone parents are defined in UK government policy as all those with dependent children who do not live with a partner, be they unmarried, separated, divorced or widowed (HM DWP 2014; ONS 2015). The latest statistics show that almost two million of the UK population are lone parents with dependent children (ONS 2015). The data also shows that, since the policy focus changed from *increasing* participation (Robbins 1963) to *widening* participation (WP) in HE (Dearing 1997), the increased participation of 'non-traditional' mature students in HE over the last two decades has generally comprised a higher proportion of women than men (McVitty and Morris 2012). Similarly, the majority of lone parents (9 out of 10) are also women (ONS 2014).

Despite this growth in 'non-traditional' mature groups entering HE (Thompson and Bekhradnia 2013) and the obligation on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to report the characteristics of their student groups to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2009), statistical data on mature student groups is limited to age, ethnicity, sex, disability, employment status and home address. At present, formal statistical data providing details of the family type of HE students is not available. Lone parent students, who are the focus of this study, are most likely to be found among sample groups in

research studies on parent students (Callender et al. 2014; Moreau 2015; NUS 2009). More is known, qualitatively, about parent students than is known about lone parent HE students.

In contrast to their low-visibility in HEIs, lone parents are highly visible in public policy and are often politically constructed as unmarried *'welfare-scroung*[ers]*'* who engage in *'deviant'* activities (Walkerdine et al. 2001:189). With fewer people getting married, the number of unmarried lone parents grew *'from below 40% in the mid-1990s to 54% in 2012'*, while 60 per cent of all lone parent households are, in fact, produced by a relationship breakdown (Tinsley 2014:5). Lone parents have been regularly demonised and blamed for practising sex out of wedlock (Phillips 2011), claiming welfare benefits (Thane 2011) and/or rejecting the two-parent family unit (DWP 2014; Harris et al. 2006). However, the educational and social difficulties faced by some lone parents, such as a lack of finance and *'low parental qualifications'* (DWP 2014:7), do not necessarily occur because of *'low aspirations and educational failure…* [or] *worklessness'* (DWP 2010:9; DWP 2012:22) as often stated by the Department for Work and Pensions. Instead, many have to overcome the constraints of childcare and welfare provision in order to attend HE for the benefit of themselves and their children (Green 2003; NUS 2009). This has been confirmed by extensive qualitative research into the HE experiences of 'non-traditional' mature students or parent students (a category which includes some lone parents), as presented by Marandet and Wainwright (2009), Moreau and Kerner (2012) and Reay et al. (2005b) studies.

With few studies focusing specifically on lone parent students in HE, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring not only their educational experiences but also how they manage to balance their family, social lives and studying. The intention is to delve deeply into the lone parent respondents' social identities to gain a better understanding of what motivated them to make the transition into HE. For example, had family, friends, WP

initiatives or social stigma influenced their decision? The aims and objectives of the study are outlined below.

1.1.   Aims of the Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate how undergraduate lone parent students manage their studies and their dependent children and/or employment, in order to gain greater understanding of their educational and social experiences. The specific aims are to:

- examine how lone parents negotiate studying and caring commitments.

- investigate the educational experiences of lone parents undertaking an undergraduate degree course as full or part-time students.

- identify the impact of gender, social class and 'race'/ethnicity on lone parent students' learning experiences, peer-group relations and learning identities.

- contribute to both the small but growing body of research and the wider debate about lone parents' educational experiences of HE, as well as to help inform university policy and practice.

Given lone parent students' dual roles of parenting and studying, this study draws upon a feminist qualitative methodology to identify the different strategies that they use to negotiate conflicting priorities at home and at university. It also seeks to understand their perception of how well they 'fit' with the social and cultural structures of the university, such as the learning environment, academic staff and their peer relations. Therefore, as I problematise the lone parent students' experiences, I aim to disturb previously held assumptions about their social backgrounds, previous educational

experiences and achievements and bring new insight into the ways in which they resist powerful discourses in order to obtain a higher education degree.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the context of the study in relation to the mass widening of HE participation, the changes to family formation, the denigration of lone parents and the array of government policies aimed at moving lone parents into work. This chapter also provides the rationale, an introductory outline of the study and concludes with the structure of the thesis.

1.2. The Massification of Higher Education

1.2a   Widening participation and the skills agenda

In order to understand fully the context in which lone parents become HE students, it is necessary to highlight some of the historical transformations of the higher education sector and the broader social changes that have occurred. Once mostly occupied by 'traditional' students, HE now operates on a mass scale that provides opportunities for 'non-traditional' mature students, the demographic in which lone parent students are located. Historically, 'non-traditional' students are those that have been conceptualised as being different from the 'traditional' white middle-class A-level entry students and, thus, in need of higher levels of academic support (Leathwood and Read 2009) (discussed further in 1.2b below).

Three committees can be seen as having driven the 'massification' or expansion, of HE since the 1960s: namely the Anderson Committee (1960), the Robbins Committee (1963) and, the Dearing Committee (1997). The Anderson Committee (1960) was

established to review the process by which potential full-time university students were awarded scholarship fees and grants by their Local Education Authority to meet living costs and found inconsistencies in the awards made by different local authorities. Maintenance grants and tuition fees varied and were made at the discretion of local authorities and ranged from outright refusal to generous awards, a disparity which the Anderson Committee deemed unjust (Willetts 2013). The Committee removed the local authorities' discretionary payments and implemented a new standardised national system via the Education Act (1962) to be administered by all local authorities. Anticipating that the trend would be for HE to grow, due to technological advances and the growing demands from young people seeking entry to university (Willetts 2013), the committee established a new means-tested student grant system based on *'equality of opportunity'* for all, which covered the student's university fees, the duration of their studies and living costs (Ross 2003b:36).

Secondly, the Anderson Report provided the foundation for the Robbins Committee on Higher Education (1963:1) whose undertaking was to:

> *review… national needs and resources… and to advise ….on its long-term development* [and] *…whether there should be any changes in [the current] pattern [or] whether any new types of institution are desirable and whether any modifications should be made in the …development of the various types of institution.*

The Robbins Committee, however, went further than that remit, also looking into what national provision and resources would be needed for future global competitiveness. The Robbins Committee (1963) made the case for increasing the pool of untapped talent by drawing on under-represented groups of young people who, with the appropriate entry qualifications, could benefit from HE. The committee also devised a longer-term strategic approach aimed at adults who needed HE qualifications and/or training. It strongly advised universities to work collaboratively with Adult and Further Education colleges (FECs) to

develop vocational courses that could encourage married women who had taken a break from employment to raise a family to enter HE.

The Robbins (1963) Report recognised that gender inequalities in the labour market were changing and that entry into employment and education from the post-war era onwards had become increasingly important to women, as opposed to relying solely on marriage, domesticity and caring for children for fulfilment (Harris et al. 2006). Despite looking ahead twenty years, it appears that the committee underestimated not only how many females would achieve the qualifications required to enter university, but also the increasing number of *'highly stigmatised'* (Kiernan et al. 1998:276) divorced or unmarried mothers who might prefer work over (re)marriage. While Robbins' highly influential report set the agenda for HEIs for the next 30 years, his *'imagined futures'* (Aynsley and Crossouard 2010:129) for greater HEI diversity mostly transpired for the middle-classes and middle-class women, with levels of working-class HE participation remaining low (Leathwood and Read 2009; Ross 2003a).

Thirdly, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Sir [subsequently Lord] Ron Dearing (1997), was set up over thirty years after the Robbins Committee Report. The Dearing Committee's (1997:1) remit was to:

> *Make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years, recognising that higher education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research.*

Both Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997) were concerned about the readiness of Britain to compete with and gain economic advantage over its global competitors. In part, their motives were driven by the change in employment from manual and unskilled or semi-skilled work to jobs in new technologies, products and services (Croll 2004) and the

need to invest in a highly-skilled workforce through the provision of lifelong education and training.

The cultural, societal and familial changes that occurred from the time of the Robbins (1963) Report and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, such as the increased numbers of both lone parents and women in paid employment and the rise in single households, presented Dearing (1997) with new perspectives. A particular challenge for the Dearing Committee was to consider not only the widening (rather than increasing) of participation and the allocation of financial support for low-income students, but also how to fund the continuing increase in student numbers without deterring potential students from a 'non-traditional' background from entering HE. The Robbins Committee (1963:210) had previously put forward recommendations for a system in which universities and students would enter into a contract where recipients of government funding who were *'in a position to command a higher income in virtue of taxes paid'* were to repay all of their university grants. However, those whose incomes were lower would only repay a proportion of that amount. While Robbins (1963) ruled out an immediate introduction of loans, one of the major recommendations in the Dearing (1997) Report was the introduction of an upfront tuition fee financed by a student loan scheme. This meant that, for the first time, HE students had to take individual responsibility for paying for their education. However, Recommendation 5 of the Dearing Committee's report on *'Higher Education in the Learning Society'* (1997:111), appealed to government to restore some state benefit entitlements for full-time students managing their studies in difficult circumstances, such as *'those who temporarily withdraw from higher education due to illness and those with dependent children'*. Additionally, the Committee requested an extension and doubling of the Access Fund for those requiring financial support in order to attend university, a measure that might have encouraged lone parents to enter HE. It

appears that the Dearing Committee looked to strengthen Robbins' (1963) forecast by increasing the number of adult students entering HE.

Dearing's (1997:7, 1.3) desire to *'create a society committed to learning throughout life'* paved the way for the New Labour Government's directive approach to *'other routes and second chances…* [for] *those mature learners who missed out at 18'* (DfES 2003(a):71). The main purpose of the policy was to widen participation in order that fifty per cent of young and mature people aged between 18-30 would be in university by 2010 (DfES 2003(a)). The policy, stating that *'education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege'*, aimed to include other marginal 'non-traditional' groups, such as ethnic minorities and people with disabilities (DfES 2003(a)). To meet the 50 per cent target, institutions were encouraged by means of financial incentives to widen the participation of HE students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds and, thus, be more inclusive. Despite the emphasis on HE becoming more inclusive, the proportion of students from middle-class backgrounds is still *'much higher'* than students from a working-class background (Lyonette et al. 2015:10). Most striking is the unpredicted gender shift in HE, where, in the 1960s, the number of full-time women students in English HE stood at only 25 per cent (Willetts 2013), while, by 2014, there were 36 per cent more women studying at undergraduate level than men (Hutton et al. 2014). However, the participation of mature students aged 25 and over in English universities has recently declined (ibid.), as discussed in the next section. This decline has mostly occurred among the part-time mature student group and coincides with the increase in tuition fees (Callender 2014), as well as other factors, such as the welfare reforms that have had a particularly adverse effect on lone parents. Faced with the problem of how to finance universities in a time of budgetary constraints, the New Labour Government (1997-2010) introduced the first increase in student fees through the 2004 Higher Education Act, which implemented a

maximum charge of £3,375.00 per academic year (Callender and Jackson 2008; Hutton et al. 2014). Simultaneously, new policies were implemented to move lone parents into work (Bell et al. 2007). Still faced with how to fund HE, the New Labour Government established Lord Browne's (2010) *'Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance'*, which sought to find ways to reform undergraduate programmes, but it was the Coalition Government (2010-2015) that implemented its recommendations for tuition fees to be increased further to a maximum of £9,000. The White Paper *'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System'* (DBIS 2011:4) stated that all students, including 'non-traditional' part-time students, should be entitled to student loans in order to pay their tuition fees (Browne 2010) and proposed a *'Pay as You Earn'* loan repayment scheme for graduates earning over £21,000.

Callender argued that the increase in tuition fees would be detrimental to disadvantaged groups, suggesting that *'if the government is really committed to its 2012/13 policy objectives of re-skilling and up-skilling its workforce …it will need to take some radical action'* to support part-time students (Callender 2014:9). However, the tuition fees and student loan system has been maintained by the current Conservative Government, with the emphasis remaining on moving lone parents off benefits (DBIS 2011) and into work and/or work related-initiatives (De Agostini et al. 2015), as discussed below.

1.2b   'Non-traditional' students

Since the recommendations, made by both Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997), that HE be expanded, a key focus of WP and Lifelong Learning (LLL) policy has been the up-skilling of the workforce by 2020 (Leitch 2006; NUS 2009) through targeting of more mature

sectors of the population who 'traditionally' have not participated in HE. As a group,

mature students are categorised as 'non-traditional' students, a classification that

encompasses lone parent students who, along with the majority this group, are less likely

to have followed a traditional route into HE. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

(2013) definition of a mature student is someone aged 21 and over or 20 years and over

studying either in FECs or in Scotland. However, in their study on parent student, the

National Union of Students (NUS) (2009:8) argued that, in the context of student parents,

HESA's age definition was unrealistic because it was unlikely for a parent to have had a

family and then to have returned to education by the age of 21. Instead, the NUS proposed

two age categories for students with children, defining those aged up to 25 years as *'young'*

student parents and those over 25 are *'mature'* student parents. Many mature students

are likely to have entered university via an Access or Foundation Degree route:

> *80 per cent of current mature students who entered higher education holding an Access to HE qualification undertook that course when they were over the age of 24; the same is true for over half of those holding other Level 3 qualifications including A-Levels* (McVitty and Morris 2012:1).

'Non-traditional' mature students are often employed, hold 'non-traditional'

qualifications (Lyons 2006) and embark on studying for their first HE degree at a later age

than younger 'traditional' students, who are usually aged between 18 and 20 (Smith 2008).

Moreover, due to *'situational, dispositional and institutional 'barriers''* (Tett 1999:108),

such as a lack of capital and/or a lack of a familial history in HE, 'non-traditional' students

are often constructed as challenging and as having little understanding of HE (Archer and

Hutchings 2000; Brubaker 1993; Jackson 2012). Brine (2006:650) noted that lifelong

learners are constructed into two categories – learners who are either *''high knowledge-skilled' (graduate/postgraduate)'* or *'low knowledge-skilled'*. Lifelong learners who do not

have a continuous educational trajectory and/or whose everyday lives sit outside of the

'traditional' *'high knowledge-skilled'* category are conceptualised as 'non-traditional' within the *'low knowledge-skilled'* category or *'those that do not know'* (Brine 2006:651).

'Non-traditional' mature students are not a homogenous group and, furthermore, there are always risks when classifying people. For example, as the experiences of a group as a whole tend to become the definable and recognisable feature for all those within it, some people become less visible. Thus, Collins (1997:375) states that, *'over time…, group realities transcend individuals' experiences'.* Similarly, it can be argued that, the experiences of 'non-traditional' student parents with a partner transcend those of lone parent students. For instance, when lone parent students have been included in studies on mature students and students parenting in a partnership (see for example, Moss 2004; Osborne et al. 2004; Reay et al. 2002; Wainwright and Marandet 2010) or in educational policy documents, their experiences often dissipates within the sample group. Despite the commonalities between these two types of student parents, such as juggling time and space to fit childcare in with study and/or employment, lone parent students bring up dependent children single-handed, and they lack their own voice with which to talk about their circumstances. Jackson (2012:59) summarises what it means to become marginalised or silenced:

> *Marginalised groups can become excluded and silenced, leading to the oppression of Others, or to a need to play by the rules of those in power.... To be 'equal' or included* […] *may mean having to become part of a dominant group, to move from the 'other' to the 'One'. Equity and inclusion are often located in the realm of power, privilege and oppression.*

In general terms, the very act of including lone parent students in HE also marginalises them, as many HEIs appear to be reticent to adapt their teaching and learning practices to meet differential needs (Thomas and Quinn 2007). HEIs often refuse to provide timetables sufficiently in advance and/or to vary seminar or assessment times, both of

which would ease the burden of having to rearrange childcare (Mallman and Lee 2014). Read et al. (2003:262) noted that, although categorising brings *'synchrony'* between the *'sub-populations of 'non-traditional' students,'* it tends to ignore differences specifically among mature students, such as social class, maturity, 'race' or family type. Rather, cultural framing tends to reify 'non-traditional' mature students into being uniformly *'dependent or needy'* in relation to academic support (Leathwood and Read 2009:100; Moreau and Kerner 2013).

HE has long been regarded as the place in which mature students can expect *'higher levels of educational attainment and skill acquisition* [that] *will also contribute towards …economic growth; facilitating social mobility; and minimising social exclusion'* (Pollard et al. 2008:2). However, while enrolments of mature students studying on Foundation Degree courses between 2007/08 and 2011/12 had risen from 14,975 to 27,145 (HESA 2011/12), since then, discernible patterns of decline have been identified mostly among part-time mature student groups (Callender 2014). A report by the HEFCE (2015:35) suggests that, between 2010-11 and 2013-14, the number of full-time and part-time mature students participating in both undergraduate and postgraduate study in the UK and European Union (EU) fell from over *'1 million to under 800,00'*. The picture remains unclear because some mature students apply directly to universities rather than through the UCAS enrolment system. The decline described above was greater among part-time mature students and, moreover, included some mature students who did not take up their undergraduate offer and/or left during the early stages of their course (Hutton et al. 2014). The reduction in mature student numbers has potentially significant implications, as it threatens the skills agenda and the work of HEIs such as increasing the diversity among student groups and, as highlighted by the NUS (2009), it could seriously prevent potential lone parent students who are in need of a higher-level qualification from entering HE (Tinsley 2014).

The following section discusses the changing nature of the family and the denigration of lone parent families.

1.3. Family Formation and the Vilification of Lone Parents

1.3a   Changes in the construction of the family

The number of lone parents in the UK increased from 570,000 in 1971 (Haskey 1994) to approximately 2 million in 2014 (ONS 2015). By 2014, lone parents with dependent children accounted for 25 per cent of all families, of whom 91 per cent are women, while only 9 per cent are men (ONS 2014). The UK is not alone in the high proportion of women caring for dependent children alone. In 2001, 90.2 per cent of lone parents in Nova Scotia, Canada, were women (Reed 2005), while in 2013, women accounted for 77 per cent of all lone parents in the US (Momentum 2014).

However, the variety of family configurations in the UK also increased (ONS 2014), with cohabiting and lone parenthood becoming the two fastest growing family types between 2004 and 2014, at 29.7 per cent and 11.9 per cent respectively, compared to a moderate 2.2 per cent increase in married couples. Stepfamilies and extended, adopted and same-sex parented families have also become more widespread (ibid.).

The rise in the number lone parents with dependent children has rarely been met positively, with social attitudes towards these changes in the pattern of the UK's family formation oscillating from condemnation to countenance (Thane 2011). Notably, the news media tends to serve as the primary communication site for reinforcing political discourses that *'instruct us how we should think of and react to aspects of the social world'* (Duncan

and Edwards 1997:3), such as constructing *'ideas about the 'right' kind of parent'* while portraying lone mothers as deviant and workless (Hadfield et al. 2007:257).

Historically, under the 1834 Poor Law, lone mothers were assessed as to their eligibility for financial assistance. Unlike widows, who were considered more deserving of state assistance, unmarried mothers were humiliated, harshly treated and, deemed unworthy of society's support (Glennerster 2007). With *'1 in 20 births'* occurring outside of marriage from the 1920s onwards, *'children remained legally illegitimate'* up until 1926 (Thompson et al. 2012:35). Lone mothers were often classified by authorities as insane, *'mentally defective',* and *'moral imbeciles'*, and were either pitied by family members and/or condemned to workhouses or mental institutions (Hollis 2003:3; Kiernan et al. 1998:98; Williams 2011). It appears that lone fathers who had children outside of marriage were not subjected to the same level of stigma as lone mothers. Symbolic portrayals of unmarried mothers as *'sinners'* or *'scroungers'* maintaining children in fatherless households acted to ward off further perceived threats to the traditional family comprising married heterosexual parents and their dependent children, with divorce extremely rare in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Thane 2011:11).

Legislative reforms enacted in 1969 gave married women more freedom to divorce or separate from their husbands (Kiernan et al. 1998). While widowhood had been the main reason for becoming a lone parent, marriage was now no longer a prerequisite to either having sex or children and, subsequently, led to unmarried mothers contributing to the rise in the number of lone parent households (Thompson et al. 2012). However, with the availability of contraception, women were often reminded not to *''leave it too late' to become mothers'* (Hadfield et al. 2007:255). The persistence of gendered social expectations, in which women were positioned as carers of children, together with the

uncertainty of their newly found freedom and a lack of finance, meant that some women were afraid to make decisions in areas of their lives such as education, fertility and employment (Kiernan et al. 1998). Unsurprisingly, despite their liberation and some loosening of public attitudes towards lone parenting, many women chose cohabitation in preference to struggling financially on their own. Lone parent families have been and continue to be the object of government welfare reforms, which reinforce constructions of them as burdensome and culpable for their predicament (Atkinson et al. 1998), while lone fathers remain practically and persistently invisible in political and public discourse (Miller 2012; Rowlingson and McKay 2005).

Lone parenthood is not a new phenomenon and, despite some positive changes to their situation, it appears that material circumstances for many lone parents have not improved significantly. The following section discusses the vilification of lone parents as welfare 'scroungers' and the various policy initiatives that have been enacted to move lone parents into paid work.

1.4. Work versus State Benefits

1.4a   'Back to work' policy

The political focus of progressive governments has been to impose stricter penalties, which has led to a series of interventionist and conditional measures to discourage lone parents from claiming state benefits and to increase employment. These policies, often lead the majority of lone parents to choose to forego educational opportunities and, instead, opting for low-paid low-skilled part-time jobs (Bell et al. 2007),

a situation reminiscent of unforgiving nineteenth century attitudes towards lone parents (Thompson et al. 2012).

The introduction of the Lone Parent Obligations (LPO) in 2008 (Coleman and Riley 2012) prevented lone parents from claiming Income Support (IS) if the youngest child was aged 12 or over, an age which was further reduced to 7 and over by 2010, and to 5 and over by the Coalition Government (Avram et al. 2013). The DWP reiterated that *'claimants* [must] *to do everything that can reasonably be expected of them to find work or prepare for work in the future as a condition of receiving support'* (2011:5). The punitive vicious circle caused by this clear trend in policy can be seen in the fact that, as with lone parent families, the number of two parent families relying on state benefits to supplement their income from low-paid jobs that they had been obliged to take also grew. Prior to the UK Welfare Reform Act of 2012, three out of every five two parent families were in receipt of state benefit or tax credit (Thompson et al. 2012) and, by 2012, 40 per cent of all working families were receiving some form of state benefit (MacInnes et al. 2015).

Policy proposals to reduce *'worklessness'* among lone parents and increase employment through the mandatory Work Programme (DWP 2010:27) did not necessarily lead to well-paid jobs (Bell et al. 2007) or preclude a return to state benefits (Evans and Thane 2011; Gingerbread 2012c), as evidenced by Thompson et al.'s (2012) report on working families. Their findings suggested that, lone parents recognise the financial and wider social benefits that employment brings and would prefer to work (Gingerbread 2012a). The reality is that many lone mothers are often found working in part-time low-paid jobs which do not meet the Minimum Income Standard, which represents the income required to stay above the poverty line (MacInnes et al. 2015). Gingerbread (2012a:1) also reported that, with highly competitive short-term part-time jobs on the rise and given the demands of juggling work with young children, of those lone parents *'who succeed in*

finding work, a substantial minority (20 per cent) will move out of employment again within 12 months'. Tinsley (2014) noted that lone parents with a degree were more likely to be employed than those with either solely GCSE qualifications or no qualifications at all. Armstrong (2006) observed that, in the UK, inequalities between women are class related, with educated middle-class women more likely to be in higher-paid employment.

It appears that welfare reformers were more concerned about work-related activities (Hawkes 2014) than catering to the a *'rising demand from mature students'* for opportunity to improve themselves through education (Browne 2010:22) as predicted by Lord Browne. The requirements to *'prepare for work'* effectively removed the *'rights'* of lone parents' to an education (NUS 2009:2) and contradicted WP policies aiming to increase the diversity of 'non-traditional' students in HE. Lone parents who want to study are thus either pushed further into debt or deterred from studying altogether (Hinton-Smith 2008c) with both eventualities, contributing to the decline in mature students entering HE (HESA 2013/14).

To continue to receive benefits, lone parents must now demonstrate their availability for employment by attending *'mandatory Work Focused Interviews (WFI)'* (Tinsley 2014:9). New welfare support for unemployed lone parents to actively seek employment and/or prepare for work were outlined for the *'2015/16 spending round in the June 2012 Spending Review'*, which proposed the provision of free childcare for up to 15-hours per week for 3 to 4 year olds (Tinsley 2014:10). However, this measure does not necessarily support those returning to education. In the context of welfare policy, lone mothers can survive financially in three possible ways: financial support from the child's father; state benefits and/or paid employment. Statistics show that employment among lone parent families rose from 43.8 per cent in 1996 to 64.4 per cent in 2015 (ONS 2015). It appears that this increase may be the result of the Lone Parent Obligations policy, the

main purpose of which was to withdraw IS to incentivise lone parents to seek employment (ibid.).

The next section sets out the rationale for this study and a summary of the methodological and theoretical approach used to explore the experiences of lone parent students within an HE setting.

1.5. Rationale for the Study

The rationale for studying lone parent students stems from my past educational experiences both as a 'non-traditional' mature student and as an academic course leader at the Faculty for Education Studies, where I observed the disparities between different social groups attending further and higher education institutions. Many of the students that I worked with would be categorised as 'non-traditional' (see1.2b), including lone parents, users of mental health provision, students with mild to moderate learning or physical disabilities, mature adults with few or no formal qualifications, working-class students, and students for whom English is a second language. Working with these students, I witnessed first-hand some of the challenges that many 'non-traditional' mature students (mostly women) face, as they managed their daily lives in order to attend university in the belief that, without a higher-level qualification, they would be destined to work in low-skilled jobs (Reay and Wiliam 1999). This, typically, was the perspective taken by mature students who, in general, tended to draw upon their lived experiences when contributing to discussions in lectures and seminars in ways that their younger peers could not. Additionally, the mature students often complained about receiving little or no academic and/or administrative support from the university. I also noticed that the mature student groups were often operating under specific time constraints, which meant that

they frequently arrived for class late, left early and/or did not attend at all. Considering the frequent contributions many mature students made in classes and the great significance in gaining a higher education and obtaining a degree for their future goals, employment and/or financial situation, I was interested in why some mature students often missed the end of each class. This professional interest led me to conduct further enquiries into their behaviour by speaking to the other mature students who often collected additional handouts on behalf of classmates not in attendance. It seems that, due to the daily demands of childcare, study, state benefit obligation and, in some cases, employment, the students consistently leaving early were mostly lone parent students finding it difficult to commit to a full day at university. I was also mindful of the university's *'Policy on the Admission of Children to University Premises'*, which restricts children from entering the university campus aside from on a few specific occasions. I had never realised that a risk assessment must be conducted before a child can enter the campus and only when under the supervision of *'a responsible adult'*. Clearly, this policy can affect lone parent students' experience of university life.

For the most part, much of the predicament of being a lone parent students went unnoticed, and often resulted in them having little personal contact with lecturers or mature and younger students. Wilcox et al. (2005) state that successful outcomes at university depend on how well students develop their learner identity or a 'sense of place', which is achieved through friendship and being able to participate in the university's social activities. I soon realised that the lone parent students' dual role, namely as both student and parent, meant that they were juggling not only the various parts of their external lives in order to attend university but also their modules and weekly classes. I also noted both their silence on this matter and their desire to keep their private spheres separate (Edwards 1993) from their university lives for fear of being judged as incompetent and/or not in control of their professional duties (Lynch 2008).

Although aware of some of the reasons for the inconsistencies in attendance, as an academic, I felt powerless to help because only senior managers could succour any improvement to the structural barriers faced by these lone parent students. As such, there was very little I could do to support them further. My response, like that of many of my colleagues, was mostly to ignore the students' personal lives (private sphere) and to deal with the 'instrumental' outcome by providing informal support where necessary for both lone parent students and students parenting in partnership in order to help them gain their university degree. It became apparent that, despite experiencing separation, abuse, the death of a spouse, unsatisfactory relationships (Evans and Thane 2011) and/or being the poorest of the social groups found in HE, many lone parent students were prepared to take on more debt (see Callender and Jackson 2008) in order to meet the combined cost of childcare, tuition fees and travel.

I realised that there was a dearth of literature on lone parent HE students in the UK (Hinton-Smith 2008; Horne and Hardie 2002) with most studies focusing, in general, on 'non-traditional', mature and/or women students (Reay 2003; Skeggs 2002) as well as student parents (Brooks 2012; Marandet and Wainwright 2010; Moreau 2015). Despite being included in some of these studies and their high public profile, the voices of lone parent students were only regarded as providing information complementary to the wider investigation of the experiences mature parent students', rather than the focus of research itself.

This study differed from previous studies because it viewed Bourdieu's theoretical concepts through a feminist lens to obtain a more in-depth analytical understanding of how intersectionalities of gender, class and 'race' inequalities (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006), both inside and outside the university environment, influenced and shaped lone parent students' daily experiences, educational motivation and learning identities. Seeking to

explore whether the lone parent students saw HE as a way of resisting and escaping from stigmatised identities and (re)constructing their identities, this study examined research questions missing from previous research studies. I felt that it was important to draw attention to lone parent students' experiences in order that policymakers recognise and address their different support needs, as the link between learner identity and overall HE success (as stated above) is significant for both student and institution.

The findings from this study builds on previous research and contribute to knowledge relating to lone parent students' HE experiences. Moreover, the use of one-to-one interviews allowed me to delve deeper into the lone parent students' individual perceptions of their reasons for entering university, their education and learning experiences whilst studying on the course, and their post-graduation ambitions, none of which, to date, have been the focus of any single study.

1.6. This Study

This study used a qualitative methodology to seek a deeper understanding of the life experiences of 17 diverse lone parent students studying across a range of disciplines in a post-1992 London university. This form of data collection was considered effective in seeking and for obtaining a deeper understanding of these lone parent students, of whom some were prepared to 'risk' welfare sanctions and, in some instances, employment in order to study at university. Data was collected using semi-structured one-to-one interviews, which allowed for 'flexible' arrangements and interaction with the respondents. The university in which the study took place had a long history of WP and was one of the largest UK HEIs with a tendency to recruit 'non-traditional' student groups

(Ross 2003a). As such, many of the students attending the university at the time the data was collected were from families with no previous HE background (Thomas and Quinn 2007).

As the study is framed by concerns about the inequalities that lone parent students face in their pursuit of a higher education, I adopt a feminist theoretical perspective to explore wider educational and social debates relevant to HE participation. A feminist lens is helpful in framing the educational stories of the respondents, who, to date, have had little voice in the *'knowledge production'* of educational policy (Hirsh and Olson 1995:193), and thus, facilitates the critical analysis of issues related to inequality and power (Letherby 2002).

I also draw on Bourdieu's conceptual tools of habitus, capitals and field (further discussed in Chapter 2) to analyse similarities and differences related to the respondents' educational and class backgrounds, their understanding of university structures and their choice of subject. Bourdieu's concepts bring together the many ways in which familial habitus and social, cultural and economic capitals can influence access and educational outcomes in the field of HE (Bourdieu 2001).

1.7. Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six further chapters. Chapter 2 reviews existing literature and sets out the theoretical framework for exploring lone parent students' educational and social experiences in HE. Chapter 3 discusses the research design, methodological process, issues related to ethics and the power relations between the researcher and the researched.

Data chapters 4, 5 and 6 report the findings and provide a theoretical discussion of the emerging themes. In particular, Chapter 4 explores the reasons the respondents gave for entering HE, while Chapter 5 focuses on the respondents' perceptions of being an HE student whilst managing childcare responsibilities. Chapter 6 analyses the political and public discourses in which lone parents are positioned and critically examines how the respondents envisage that a HE degree will help them to (re)construct their identities and change perceptions of them.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, draws together the respondents' accounts of their transitional experiences and summarises what they felt would have improved their university experiences. This chapter also discusses the implications for the institution's policy and practice and, importantly, points to areas for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter builds on the introductory chapter by reviewing the academic literature on lone parent students in higher education (HE) as they negotiate the demands of studying with dependent children. As there are very few research studies, either in the UK or internationally, that focus specifically on lone parent HE students, the chapter begins by focusing on these studies. This is followed by a review of some of the key themes to emerge from the literature on both lone parent HE students and broader studies on both parent and mature students. The third part of the chapter outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this study, which applies a feminist lens to Bourdieu's conceptual tools of capital, habitus and field to explore lone parent students' experiences and identities.

2.1. A Review of the Literature on Lone Parent Students in HE

This section discusses research studies that focus specifically on lone parent HE students. However, given the limited number of UK studies on lone parent HE students, some studies focusing on parent students in the UK that include lone parent students in their research are also reviewed.

2.1a   Research studies specifically focusing on lone parent students' HE experiences

A comprehensive search revealed very few studies that explore the educational and social experiences of lone parent students studying on undergraduate HE programmes. There are studies that focus on lone parents' lives in general, but not on lone parent students in the UK. These include some large-scale, mixed-method and quantitative studies, which highlight issues such as the impact of material constraints, including restrictions on state benefits and/or low-paid employment, on lone parents' lives (Armstrong 2006; Duncan and Edwards 1997; Kiernan et al. 1998; Kiernan and Mensah 2009; Rowlingson and McKay 2005). In addition, since the 1990s, some studies have also emphasised the stigma that has helped to shape lone parents' identities (Phoenix 1991; Tyler 2008; Wilson and Huntington 2006). Less is known, though, about lone parent students' higher education experiences and social backgrounds or the wider educational challenges they might face in their pursuit of a university degree.

The search found six studies from the UK, US and Canada that focused specifically on lone parent students in HE. These include two UK studies by Horne and Hardie (2002) and Hinton-Smith (2008a), three US studies by Haleman (2004), Buteau (2007) and Yakaboski (2010), and Reed's (2005) study from Canada. The six studies, bar one, used various forms of interviews and all, but one, focused on lone mothers. All six studies were primarily small-scale.

In the two UK studies, Horne and Hardie (2002) interviewed seven lone mothers studying at a Scottish HE institution (comprising of one graduate and six students in their second and third years) to gain an understanding of *'the factors that contribute*[d] *to the under-representation of […]* [lone parents] *in higher education'*. Hinton-Smith (2008) used fortnightly thematic email prompts to interview 77 women and 2 men studying across a

range of subjects and an unspecified number of universities over a twelve-month longitudinal period. Hinton-Smith questioned, in general, the lack of *'formal* [HE] *provision'* (p.68) of needed services, such as childcare, particularly, for those lone parents with little or no family support. Both studies were concerned with the wider political barriers, such as the introduction of tougher sanctions which required recipients of state benefits to be *'available for work'* or face benefit reductions (NUS 2009:2), which increased the 'risk' of students leaving university prematurely. Although the two UK studies from Horne and Hardie (2002) and Hinton-Smith (2008) focused mostly on finance, Hinton-Smith's (2008) study also provides valuable insight into how a course timetable might, ultimately, affect student retention as well as the HE learning experiences of lone parent students once they have entered university.

In sum, the findings from the two UK studies draw attention to material and structural constraints relating to finance, state benefits, advice and guidance, employment and childcare that potentially affect lone parent students' HE attendance and retention in general. However, these two studies did not fully explore the differences between their participants' family and social class backgrounds and/or, specifically in Hinton-Smith's study, the universities that they attended.

Below, the discussion moves on to international studies and, specifically, to studies on lone parent students mainly focusing on welfare reform.

The four international studies, in particular Reed's (2005) Canadian study, also focused on financial and material barriers, but the three US studies from Haleman (2004), Buteau (2007) and Yakaboski (2010) used a feminist lens to discuss the ways in which gender and 'race' identities tend to influence the lived experiences of lone mothers. The

four international studies highlight the negative and gendered image by means of which lone parents were constructed as '*problematic or dysfunctional*'.

Reed's (2005:2) Canadian study used secondary documented data to hypothesise about the costs and resources available for lone mothers enrolled on undergraduate degree programmes. Specifically, Reed (2005:4) points to the gendered discourse on parenting, in which the financial needs of lone parent students were found to be greater than those of other students. In contrast, Haleman's (2004:769) ethnographic research used focus groups to examine *'the post-secondary educational experiences of 10* [diverse] *…single mothers'* (five black, four white and one mixed-race, and aged between 19 and 34 years) in the US, all of whom were all recipients of federal and/or state benefits. Haleman wanted to understand whether, while pursuing an HE degree, the lone mothers were also challenging negative assumptions about them. Buteau (2007:110) interviewed 14 undergraduate lone mothers aged 24 to 40 who were all in either full-time or part-time employment before they started university. All experienced disruptions to their study, which included a delayed start, dropout and/or transfer to a different college. Like Haleman (2004), Buteau noted how a university education helped the lone mothers resist the stigma and negative depictions of them, prevalent in both the media and wider society, as being uneducated, living on state benefits and lacking the motivation to work.

The final of the four international studies, Yakaboski (2010:464) was concerned about the poor retention and 'invisible' barriers that prevent some lone mothers from *'fully integrating'* at a US university. Yakaboski (2010) conducted two focus group interviews with 21 undergraduate lone mothers who were mostly of African American heritage to explore their gendered HE experiences. This study concurs with some of Horne and Hardie's (2002) and Hinton-Smith's (2008) findings, which indicate that wider political,

institutional and cultural barriers kept some lone mothers financially dependent on federal or state benefits and forced them to juggle competing time commitments.

In sum, the four international studies discussed above used a feminist lens to make sense of the identities and everyday realities of their lone parent student participants. For example, Haleman (2004) and Buteau (2007) emphasise how the lone mothers were at university to reverse the negative descriptors of them. While Haleman (2004) drew on 'race' to illustrate how some black women entered university to counterbalance inequality, Reed (2005), Buteau (2007) and Yakaboski (2010) focused on gender. While these studies garnered an understanding of the social identities and the financial and structural barriers faced by lone parent students, the absence of class theory in these studies meant that they missed the *'nuances and ambiguities of class positionings'* (Ball 2006:6).

To date, with only six studies on lone parent HE students published since 2000 and only two of those six from the UK, lone parent HE students remain an under-researched group. Like this thesis, the studies reported above comprise mostly small-scale qualitative interviews mainly conducted with women students. The existing research that exists on lone parent HE students' focuses mostly on the lack of financial support and continued reductions in state benefit. Unsurprisingly, as mothers are mostly responsible for childcare, five of the studies tend to focus on inequality relating to lone mothers HE access, retention and support and, with the exception of Hinton-Smith, placed limited focus in their research on lone fathers (Moreau and Kerner 2012; Wainwright and Marandet 2006). Moreover, while, some research from other countries (Haleman 2004; Yakaboski 2010) also problematised the gendered and 'raced' identities and the social stigma of being a lone parent, none of these studies explored class identity.

The next section discusses research on both parent students and mature students in order to review some key themes that have emerged across both this broader literature and the six studies specifically focusing on lone parent students.

2.1b   Broadening the literature review: key themes

Some qualitative research on UK parent students (Brooks 2012a; Marandet and Wainwright 2010; Moreau and Kerner 2013) and/or 'non-traditional' mature HE students (Lister 2003; Tett 2004) has included lone parent students and is relevant to this study. The majority of the research studies, with the exception of Miller's (2012) study, which reported specifically on fathers per se, focused on the challenges faced by many women parent students across a range of universities and produced similar findings to the six studies discussed above. These include a lack of finance and affordable childcare, juggling university timetables with school hours and employment. However, the reduction in nursery provision and restrictions on children entering university campuses concur with Yakaboski's (2010) and Buteau's (2007) US studies and, focusing on WP and mature students, Lister (2003:128) reported that, in particular, it was mostly *'women, …lone parents and carers'* who were living on low-income. Again, researchers report that there were conflicts between government welfare policy, HE institutional structures and practices and a decline in the number of mature students entering HE (Callender 2014; Christie et al. 2005).

Despite evidence that fathers are contributing more to caring for children than ever before (Cheal 2002; Miller 2012), Hinton-Smith (2008a) and Moreau and Kerner (2013) reported that the number of lone fathers participating in research about their

circumstances is strikingly low. It appears that engaging lone fathers, and in general, fathers in educational research and/or community-based family support has been problematic for some time (Ghate et al. 2000). One possible explanation for the invisibility of lone fathers in research is that, in general, the majority of fathers tend to exclude themselves from places that provide childcare, which is where research participants are often recruited. This is because fathers often believe that those services repeatedly portray a gendered maternal construction of nurturing that is closely attuned with femininity rather than paternal masculinity (Emmers-Sommer et al. 2003; Smith et al. 2005). Childcare support networks dominated by lone mothers often left lone fathers feeling unwelcomed and excluded. Ghate et al. (2000:1) reported not only that lone fathers found it difficult engaging with other fathers, but also that some of the activities on offer, such as *'crafts and alternative therapies'*, were often viewed by fathers as *'unmanly'* and that they preferred practical *'do-it-yourself'* type activities.

In contrast to her previous study on motherhood, Miller's (2012) research explored the experiences of fatherhood in itself, rather than, lone fathers specifically. Miller stated that some fathers felt inhibited in speaking freely about gender-related issues because parenting messages are often aimed at mothers rather than fathers. The author asserted that the interview process provided fathers with the opportunity to talk emotionally about parenting issues (Miller 2012). In research on young parents, Smith et al. (2005) reported a lack of response from young fathers to a national questionnaire on family learning provision, suggesting that young mothers were more responsive to questions on this subject. However, the authors found that the young fathers who participated in the research did report feelings of low self-esteem and low self-confidence, which was similar to the young mothers who participated in the research (Smith et al. 2005).

There are some intrinsic commonalities between the findings of the above studies and Smith et al.'s (2005) findings. The next section discusses some of the most dominant themes to emerge from both the six studies specifically conducted on lone parent HE students and the relevant broader research literature on parent students and mature students: juggling finance and childcare; reasons for attending university; academic confidence; and, support networks.

2.1c   Balancing and juggling finance and childcare

Research suggests that lone parents and mature students often enter university after changes in their personal circumstances, such as the death of a spouse, desertion, divorce, incarceration or leaving an abusive relationship (Bowl 2001; Hinton-Smith 2009; Huff and Thorpe 1997). Finance and employment were cited as the main reasons for entering HE, while finance and childcare consistently featured as a problem for lone mothers in the UK, US and Canadian studies. Hinton-Smith (2008:7) sought to understand further *'the impact of HE participation upon the lives of lone parents and their children'* in the UK and found, as did Horne and Hardie (2002), that, despite the success of WP, HE policies mostly fail to provide adequate childcare support for lone parent students. Reporting similar findings, Reed (2005) concluded that, despite government childcare provision, Canadian welfare policies did not sufficiently support lone parents who choose to enter into HE. For example, even though childcare was fully funded, Reed's (2005) study showed that, even after transport costs to school and work were taken into consideration, some lone mothers still faced financial difficulties. Financial constraints and the high demand for childcare on campus were problems also identified in Yakaboski's (2010) US study, while the lone mothers in Buteau's (2007) US study expressed a preference for

weekend classes as this made childcare easier to find. The majority of the lone parent students who were juggling school hours around university timetables felt torn between welfare requirements and the risk of not completing their degree.

Research on WP repeatedly shows that finance and caring for children were both the biggest challenges and the key deterrents to some mature students progressing to HE (Callender and Wilkinson 2012). Using a mixed-methods approach, similar to Hinton-Smith's, which comprised, for example, a self-completed postal questionnaire and face-to-face interviews, Alsop et al.'s (2008) study on mature student care-givers (and an unspecified number of lone parent students) found that finance, childcare, studying and meeting employment or state benefit requirements impacted on their learning experiences. Despite mature students becoming more pervasive in HE, many HEI tend to place all mature students in one homogeneous group (see Chapter 1), thus, placing lone parents at a disadvantage. For example, both Hinton-Smith (2008) and Haleman (2004) found that lone parents were often juggling childcare and paid or unpaid work, and that additional costs caused by timetable changes had a major impact on their finances (Ibid.).

In sum, many lone parent students felt that an HE degree could improve their employment prospects and help them attain financial independence from state benefits (Haleman 2004; Lynch 2008). However, the two main barriers threatening lone parent students' HE outcomes tended to be finance and childcare. Moreover, as previously highlighted in Chapter 1, for some lone parents who leave state benefits, the persistently high costs of childcare could potentially see them continue to struggle financially as they might not earn enough when combining employment with childcare (Bristow and Holland 2012).

2.1d   Reason for attending university

The lone parent students in both Horne and Hardie's (2002) and Buteau's (2007) studies spoke about being role models for their children and that their success would have a positive influence on their children's future. Haleman (2004) also found that a university education was seen as an opportunity for lone mothers to move out of state benefits through better-paid employment. Similar reasons were given by parent students in (Brooks 2012b; Moreau and Kerner 2013; Wainwright and Marandet 2006) studies, but in particular, lone parent students (Bristow and Holland 2012) believe that a university degree would help them become financially independent through higher-paid employment (Hinton-Smith 2008a) and, thus, reduce their dependency on the state (Wainwright and Marandet 2010).

However, Moreau and Kerner's (2013) study on parent students, which included some lone parent students in the sample, found that personal development, interest in the subject and contributing to the community were more important for participants than achieving greater financial reward or vocational opportunities (see also Griffiths 2011; Griffiths 2002; Haleman 2004). Buteau (2007:111) reported that the lone parents in her study had hoped that a university education would help them to gain *'a higher level of respect from potential employers'*. Hinton-Smith (2012) and Buteau (2007) report lone parents speaking about surviving university and/or needing to complete their degree to secure a better standard of living. Using a mixed-method approach, Lyonette et al. (2015) investigated the structural barriers and personal constraints that tend to restrict how lone parent students experience higher education, examining whether a diverse group of student mothers could achieve parity, in terms of social mobility, with other students of similar age who do not have children. The authors reported that despite, for example, some mothers achieving improved social mobility through enhanced employment

opportunities, inequalities persisted, with results showing lower social mobility compared to that enjoyed by students without dependent children. Although the majority of mothers were studying to improve their employment prospects, they were also hoping to increase their self-confidence (Ibid.).

The next section discusses what the literature reveals in terms of how well lone parent and mature students are able to adjust to the university environment and increase their academic confidence.

2.1e   Academic confidence

The theme of academic confidence encapsulates the challenges that many 'non-traditional' mature students face when they enter the classroom and begin to re-engage in writing essays. Consistent with studies on 'non-traditional' mature students in general (Mallman and Lee 2014), the literature indicates that, due to childcare and employment commitments, some lone parent students have been found to experience substantial constraints on their time (Lyonette et al. 2015; Marandet and Wainwright 2009) with many found to be unfamiliar with the academic culture before they entered HE. Hinton-Smith (2009) found that some lone parent students had previously felt that HE was not an option for them due to unfavourable experiences at school. After a break from education, and even though the path to HE was neither immediate nor direct, most lone parent students entered university as mature students. However, despite showing real commitment to their studies, some were overwhelmed by the time and emotional investment required. Describing universities as *'greedy'* institutions, which set task-driven activities requiring

great time commitment, Hinton-Smith (2008:67) argued that many lone parent students were likely to find difficulty coping during the early stages of entering HE.

Earlier studies (Daniels 2010; Huff and Thorpe 1997; NUS 2009) had reported that the demands of family, and university as well as having taken a break from education, initiated varying levels of academic confidence in some mature students enrolled in Access courses hoping to achieve the standard HE entry qualifications. Moreover, some 'non-traditional' working-class students have been reported to be at risk of further exposure to their often broken learner identities (see Brine and Waller 2004; Powdthavee and Vignoles 2007; Wilson 1997 for further discussion). Buteau (2007) reported that some women students were concerned about failing, citing the triple status of mother, student and employee. Low academic confidence or the lack of qualifications was often gendered (Robson et al. 2004) and/or classed. This was often reported as being experienced by lone parent students who were dealing with the stigma of a broken relationship (Hinton-Smith 2012; NUS 2009), whose re-entry into education tended to reinforce their *'weak or bruised identities'* (Brine and Waller 2004:103). Also noted was the way in which mature students' wider social practices, such as parenting, caring, voluntary or paid community work, were often excluded from the knowledge used in their tertiary education (Daniels 2010). As such, low academic confidence among many mature students was reinforced by the held belief that lecturing staff were the producers of knowledge and that the knowledge produced by mature students themselves was, therefore, less valid (Moss 2006). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (2011:43), the *'success of all school education'* depends on an individual's educational experiences at the earliest stages of their upbringing. Thus, the academic confidence established during an individual's early stages of life is continuously reproduced throughout their education.

Buteau's (2007) US study also suggested that, from their previous experiences of school and the advice of others, such as former teachers, family members and/or employers) lone parent students showed considerable strength, knew what to expect and understood that no exceptions would be made for them. However, they also carried with them a fear of failing and disappointing others, which might account for the sacrifices that they made in pursuing so assiduously their goal of a university. In a study of students completing an Access course, Hayes et al. (1997:1) found that the mature students' performance in their final degree was comparable with that of the younger students, while their attitudes were likely to be *'more consistent with the avowed aims and purposes of higher education'*.

Drawing on interviews taken from a commissioned report, Davies and Williams (2001:191) analysed the decision-making patterns identified in potential and new students, mostly over the age of 25, across a range of subjects in nine HEIs. The authors' findings suggest that investing in HE was far more challenging on both an individual (for students) and institutional levels than the government had predicted. Furthermore, despite the confidence gained from their involvement in various access routes to HE and/or vocational training, many 'non-traditional' mature students were *'redefining their educational identity'*. Feminist academics have argued that, despite the increasing diversity of HE student populations, the constructed *'ideal learner …continues to be based on masculinist conceptions of the individual'* and must be accountable for their own learning (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003:599). There appears to be a clear divide between the still masculinised cultures and practices within HE (Leathwood and Read 2009) and the diverse range of parent students attending the newer universities.

Moss (2006) reported that some women students were constantly in a process of rearranging their external lives to fit in with their studies. Moreover, some women

students (usually mothers) have been found to be faced with the challenge of being both a student and parent and are often viewed as lacking academic confidence relative to men (Robson et al. 2004). Robson et al. (2004) reported that women students tend to hold back from discussions with assertive, often white, male students and/or lacked confidence when confronted with academic writing, particularly if required to write in the third person.

In sum, as a university is perceived culturally as a place of higher learning, an important issue emerging from the evidence discussed is that the structural inequalities often disadvantaging this specific student group tend to relate to gender and age, whilst other class and/or 'race' identities might go unnoticed, in both the university itself and wider society. Unlike previous studies, this study seeks to obtain a deeper understanding of both lone parent students' identities and their desire to succeed in HE.

The next section discusses both the internal and external support networks on which lone parent students might rely as they juggle their dual role as parent and student.

2.1f   Social networks

This section highlights how the majority of lone parent students tend to experience HE differently from other mature student groups, due in part to a combination of university policy and the fact that lone parent students often lack reliable support networks.

As Leathwood and Read (2009:134) argue, the constructed identity of a *'lone individual – 'man'',* or the *'Bachelor Boy'* referred to by Hinton-Smith (2012:59), who, free from family constraints, can construct his own destiny through HE, no longer 'fits' with the

identity of the new student struggling to balance childcare and other domestic activities. Yet, despite the changing nature of HE, the prevailing university culture remains predominantly male (Hinton-Smith 2012). Hinton-Smith's (2008) earlier study found that lone parent students who felt excluded from social events experienced loneliness, finding it impossible to socialise at university or meet new people due to conflicting priorities, such as collecting children from nursery or school, and/or the policies restricting children's entry to university campuses (Brooks 2012a). Lone parent students mostly relied on extended and immediate family members or pre-university friends, which was particularly important for lone fathers (Ibid.). Yakaboski (2010) and Marandet and Wainwright (2010) argued that barring children from US and UK university campuses, respectively, has been shown to be problematic and potentially costly for some lone parents, as they must pay additional childcare in order to fully integrate into HE life.

Although other mature women students might also experience loneliness, lone parents were even less likely to participate fully in university life, as many of the extra-curricular activities occurred outside scheduled class times and, they did not have an extensive social network within the university on which to draw (Cheal 2002). Aside from financial constraints, the absence of a partner or supportive family members to help them was particularly critical for lone parent students (Christie et al. 2005). Moss (2004) notes that having less space and time in which to study due childcare meant that some mothers could find themselves isolated and less confident compared to some middle-class 'traditional' students. Hinton-Smith (2009) stated that networking is critical to retention and can be a powerful way to eliminate emotional stress. However, from an institutional perspective, the mature student must manage their additional priorities to 'fit-in' with traditional institutional practices if they want to succeed (Mallman and Lee 2014).

Hinton-Smith (2008) also identified a lack of support from the ex-partners of lone parent students, while the mature women students in Edwards' (1993:111) research spoke

about the *'unequal access'* they were given to some areas of their home for studying, as compared to their male partners. The women made studying virtually invisible to their partners, by making use of unoccupied spaces and setting aside times, such as, late nights for coursework. Bourdieu (2004:286) states that those allowing themselves to be dominated, are *'condemning themselves to what is in any case their lot'* and/or, as highlighted above, are (re)constructing identities to fit with their environment. Additionally, Alsop et al. (2008) found that female partners adjusted their lives to 'fit' with their male partners' student status.

These findings highlight the fact that attending university on a full-time basis potentially affects lone parent students' social networks, both inside and outside the university, although part-time study could also influence how well they are able to integrate and socialise with other students (NUS 2014).

2.1g   Summary of the literature review

Overall, research on the experiences of both parent students and mature students in higher education has mainly been qualitative studies, most of which provide only a snapshot of the issues faced by lone parent HE students. While these studies have focused mostly on how the universities themselves could improve the overall experiences of parent students by reducing structural barriers through improved timetabling, flexible assignment deadlines, childcare provision and/or financial support (Marandet and Wainwright 2010), the corresponding in-depth analysis of lone parent students' educational and social backgrounds has not received the same attention.

The next section discusses the theoretical approaches chosen to explore lone parent students' educational and social identities.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical approaches drawn on for this study, which are a feminist lens and Bourdieu's conceptual 'tools'.

2.2a Utilising a feminist lens with Bourdieu's concepts

Beasley (1999: ix) states that *'feminism… inconveniently* def[ies a] *simple explanation…* [and that] *feminism's complexity and diversity provide obstacles to those wishing to gain a satisfactory grasp of its meanings'*. Here Beasley is referring to the various cultural and political positionalities such as Liberal, Radical, Socialist, Marxist and black feminist perspectives (see Pilcher and Whelehan 2010 for further discussion), that challenge political convention relating to women. Despite having no precise definition or a unified approach for contesting the political discourse regarding women's *'social and/or material inequities'* (Ibid.:49), feminists are united in two main goals. One of these goals is to expose and end the subordinate position of women in society, while the other seeks to redress social and economic inequalities (Beasley 1999; Lorber 2010) as well as to challenge inequalities within educational policy and practice (Watkins 2009). Often feminist theories are commonly used in educational and social research to critically analyse institutional policy and practice in order to explain how the social inequalities experienced by various marginalised groups are (re)produced and maintained (Jackson 2012). Acker (1988:473) explains why it is important to analyse such differences:

> *Class and gender discrimination and exploitation are integral to the oppression of women in industrial capitalist societies, and thus, an understanding of the connections between class and gender is essential to the effort to develop a theory of society that addresses the oppression of women and the privileging of men.*

Feminist goals are critical to the manner in which this study problematises educational and social issues from the lone parent students' perspective. Recognising that there are likely to be differences among them, careful analysis is required in order not to over-represent or (re)construct one group of lone parent students' experiences over 'Other' lone parent students' experiences, as noted by Phoenix and Pattynama (2006). Although intersectionality can help to identify and explain the socially constructed *'multiple markers of difference'* (Ludvig 2006:246), such as the economic, social and cultural capitals found among various social groups, it is not necessary to incorporate all social divisions (e.g. gender, 'race', class, age and/or disability) that may appear during the data analysis.

Bourdieu (2010) argued that unequal life chances are made possible through the construction and ordering of social groups into interchangeable classificatory distinctions such as age, gender, 'race'/ethnicity and social class. Some feminists believe that identity categorisation is difficult to define, where, for example, the category *'woman has been problematised within feminist writing'* (Reay 1997:225) because *'the axes of differences cannot be* [easily] *isolated and desegregated'* (Ludvig 2006:246) despite one dominant feature appearing among the social groups. Other factors must also be considered (Ibid.). In this study, the focus on difference relates specifically to the intersectionalities of gender, 'race'/ethnicity (Collins 2009; Crenshaw 1991; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006) and social class, which are powerful markers of distinction that are not only confined to our bodies in ways of walking, talking or eating, but also to our educational practices (Bourdieu 2010).

Informed by the literature review, my aim in this study is to delve beneath the surface, to understand how social markers have been incorporated into the lives of the lone parent students to help shape and define who they are. Bourdieu states that *'these principles of division are common to all agents of the society'* and are broadly determined by the dominant class, who share similar experiences and histories and, thus, *'make*

possible the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world' (Bourdieu 2010:470). Some feminists complement their own feminist thought by utilising Bourdieu's concepts (Shi 2010). In this thesis, a feminist lens was applied to three of Bourdieu's main concepts of capital, habitus and field to critically analyse the ways in which the respondents' identities interact to (re)produce educational disadvantage or privilege.

Feminist research studies (e.g. Reay 2004a; Skeggs 2004) have also drawn on Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' to investigate issues of gender, class and 'race'/ethnicity within the educational and social spheres. Having noted that *'class as a concept and working-class women as a group have almost disappeared from the agendas of feminism and cultural* theory', Skeggs (2002:2) argues that the removal of class analysis from empirical research is a confirmation for the middle-class that their identities *'are now institutionalised, legitimated and well established'* (Ibid:7). By both refocusing the feminist lens on class and utilising Bourdieu's concepts, Skeggs showed how class identity influenced working-class women's everyday lives as they disassociated themselves from their class backgrounds for fear of being pathologised as *'bad mothers'* (Skeggs et al. 2008:3). Also emphasising the neglect of class analysis by some academic studies, Lawler (1999:14; 2005) drew on Bourdieu's concepts to analyse the disruption to the habitus of some working-class women as they relocated their class positions. Likewise, Makoe (2006) made use of Bourdieu's concepts to explore the learning experiences of black South African distance learners. Focusing on the link between education and the ideology of equality, as applied in some French schools, Makoe looked to uncover how economic and cultural power dynamics are reproduced in a South African context. Similarly, this study intends to use a feminist lens to explore the ways in which 'class-capitals' (my terminology), influence and shape the lone parent students' identities.

According to Watkins (2009), ascribing to motherhood gave some women *'an identity … occupation and social structure'*. From this principle, some feminist studies that are grounded in social constructionist theories about women's oppression (Lorber 2010) argue that the construction of motherhood might be one of the main roots of social inequality. Despite his lack of reference to gender, Bourdieu (2003:68) argues that the *'practical and symbolic work…* [that bestow] *love into loving dispositions […] falls more particularly to women, who are responsible for maintaining relationships'*. As established in the literature review, the majority of lone parent students described a lack of both regular and affordable childcare and institutional support.

The two frameworks (a feminist lens and Bourdieu's conceptual tools) will be used to generate some understanding of not only the shared and individual experiences and identities of the respondents, but also the diverse political and institutional barriers and practices that constrain them, such as those found in HE, government and the family. A dual approach enables a deeper understanding of the social backgrounds of the lone parent students and of how structural inequalities reproduce themselves within the educational field, tending to benefit not only the privileged middle-class (Ball et al. 2002a), but also those who are encumbered by paid work and/or childcare responsibilities.

As with the feminists discussed above, who have used Bourdieu's *'tool kits designed to help… solve problems'* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:31), I also intend to analyse the *'internalised, embodied, social structures'* (Ibid.:127-128) in which the lone parent students' find themselves, in order to understand how the transmission of capital continues to perpetuate social inequalities.

The next two sections discuss Bourdieu's specific concepts of capital, habitus and field.

2.2b   Capital

From a Bourdieusian (1985b:723) perspective, socially constructed spaces are the basis for the *'differentiation or distribution'* whereby individuals or groups are assigned to positions according to both their 'e*conomic* capital', such as monetary assets or financial income, and three forms of *'cultural capital'.* These three forms comprise the embodied state (dispositions of the body and mind), the objectified state (access to cultural goods) and the institutionalised state (academic qualifications). Thus, individuals deprived of capital are limited by their educational attainment and opportunities or routes to enter HE, which is an example of the inequality between groups *'from differing social classes'* (Bourdieu 1985a:47) and/or between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' HE students. As such, a feminist lens will be used in this study to explore with the lone parent students' their educational histories and experiences before they entered HE, an area not fully explored in the six specific studies previously discussed.

While so*cial capital* relates to an individual or a group's networks or connections within different organisations, *symbolic capital* legitimises and converts all forms of capital into power (Bourdieu 2010). Because these capitals can be applied to both educational and wider social issues, Bourdieu warns that none of his concepts are hierarchically ranked or *'assert the superiority of one over the other'* (McNay 2004:176). This is because each concept fluctuates throughout a person's educational history and, thus, each should be considered independently and analysed thoroughly (Thomson 2010) before educational and/or sociological problems can be understood.

By analysing the various forms of capital in relation to the educational and social backgrounds of lone parent students, this study aims to provide some insight into the unequal distribution of capital among the lone parent student respondents. For example,

it has been noted that the dominant class has a higher percentage of capital, which allows them to reinforce their sense of place by utilising the rules in which the game is played (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Bourdieu 2010), one clear example of being entitled to a higher education (Croxford and Raffe 2014). By drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field (discussed below), I intend to explore the different strategies used by lone parent students and/or the resilience they develop in order to successfully navigate the university systems and structures, rather than seeing them as *'pre-constructed'* powerless individuals (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:229).

2.2c   Habitus and Field

As well as capital, Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus and field are interlocked in the following *'formula': '[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice'* (Bourdieu 2010:95). The formula shows that Bourdieu's key concepts of habitus (our embodied dispositions) and the interaction of capital (our historical positions) within a field (our social location) result in individual practices.

Bourdieu (1993b:86) claimed that he sought to *'revive that old word'* habitus because of its close relationship with how we understood habit, referring to the long history of this concept in Western thought, which scholars of Aristotle translate as *'hexis'*. He also noted the work of Durkheim, who refers to habitus in '*L' Evolution pedagogique en France'*, which states that *'Christian education …need*[ed] *to mould a Christian habitus with a pagan culture'* (Ibid.). As such, habitus is something acquired, meaning that it is *'incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions'* (Bourdieu 1992a:86). While these dispositions are embodied like a *'property, a capital'* that can be reproduced (Ibid.), it is in *'fields'* that the habitus is shaped and structured. Thus, educational success

for many of the lone parent students will depend on the historicity of their familial habitus within the education field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007), such as the amount of capital acquired or their understanding of the various 'rules' or HE 'culture' (McLeod 2005). Subsequent chapters in this study explore the social persistence of the stigma imposed on some lone parents by considering the *'connection between agents and practices* [via]...*a system of dispositions'* (Rawolle and Lingard 2008:731). For example, this study will be useful for exploring not only the disparities between different social groups but also the ways in which the lone parent students' identities intersect with familial, individual and institutional habitus in the field of HE.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (2007:140) warned that, despite individuals being *'active producers',* habitus feels *''at home' in the field it inhabits'* (Ibid: 128). In order to analyse the (dis)positions of the lone parent students' familial backgrounds, it is of critical importance to understand how habitus integrates the past into the present within an individual *'practical knowledge of the social world'* (Bourdieu 2010:470) by bringing together habitus, capital and field. Bourdieu's concepts will be used as *'a guide … for posing and solving sociological problems'* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:xi), such as how well the lone parent students' habitus do or do not match practices in the HE field (Maton 2010). For example, much of Bourdieu's work relates to the field of education and how the dominant culture, based on its historical positioning and differential capital (economic, social and cultural as discussed above), is able to produce and reproduce its *'class habitus'* (Crossley 2010:93). In this study, I explore how the lone parent students' *'class habitus'* (Ibid.) and/or *'sense of* […] *place'* (Bourdieu 2010) both inside and outside university, either copes or complies with aspects of the university's dominant culture, particularly if there are few social networks and no history of HE in the family (Thomas and Quinn 2007). Therefore, one of the aims of this study is to gain an understanding of how the habitus

begins its structuring process to fit its new surroundings, specifically for lone parent students in HE.

Bourdieu's concepts have been commonly criticised for being deterministically driven and failing to account for individual agency or inter-class differences (Calhoun et al. 1993). While LiPuma (1993) argues that, as a theory, class is insufficiently developed by Bourdieu, the concept of habitus is not only determining but also generative and, despite social group differences (Lawler 2004), has different possibilities (Reay 2004b). This is because habitus differentiates and divides by making *'distinctions between what is good and what is bad, between what is right and what is wrong, between what is distinguished and what is vulgar, and so forth, but the distinctions are not identical'* (Bourdieu 1998:8). The durability of the habitus within a given field means that, despite its structuring, individuals tend to *'consciously or unconsciously contribute to* [the] *reproduction …*[of] *the structures of which their habitus is the product'* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:140). As such, dispositions are (re)produced between groups and identities appear natural, as in, the gendered roles involved in nurturing (Ibid.).

For Reay et al. (2001), institutional habitus is a key component in helping to make sense of the university practices that influence how groups of students from diverse backgrounds interact with the institution in order to maintain middle-class values. Both Bourdieu's theory and Reay et al.'s study bring to mind the lone parent students in Horne and Hardie (2002) and Buteau (2007) research, who perceive HE as representing a possibility for (re)creating their lone parent identities and enabling their future financial independence. However, some feminists have consistently pointed to the political and institutional challenges faced by many parent students because they delayed furthering their education (Moreau and Kerner 2012; Read et al. 2003) and/or the fact that gaining a degree does not necessarily end economic or class inequalities (Lawler 1999). An

important issue for this study will be to understand why, despite the financial risk and the gender pay gap (ECU 2014), lone parent students felt that an HE degree was worth struggling for (Haleman 2008; Reed 2005; Buteau 2007).

In sum, using a combination of a feminist lens and Bourdieu's concepts, I can begin to understand how differences within or among groups become visible, how educational habitus and levels of capital determine the *'position-taking'* in terms of both social spaces and who belongs in HE (Bourdieu 2003:7). This combined framework helps to explain the gendered, classed or racial inequality that feminist academics have consistently highlighted (Francis et al. 2012; Lawler 1999; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Maylor and Williams 2011; Reay 1999), and why some groups are less valued than others (Bathmaker et al. 2013).

Despite the relevance of the reviewed literature, this study takes a different approach to the six studies on lone parent HE students discussed above. For example, although some of the previous studies draw upon a feminist lens to analyse issues of gender and 'race', they lack deeper theoretical discussion relating to the lone parent students' educational and social backgrounds. By using a feminist lens with Bourdieu's concepts, one of the aims of this study is to delve into the familial backgrounds of the lone parent students in order to understand, through one-to-one interviews, why, despite the struggle and high risks, they felt that a university degree would help them to (re)construct their lone parent identities.

Such knowledge will, hopefully, contribute further to feminist values by enabling recommendations for changes to the policies and practices of the university and wider HE and political establishments. Chapter 3 discusses the methodological approach from a feminist and Bourdieuian perspective.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Methods

This chapter provides an outline of the qualitative research methodology and the methods used in this study. The first part of the chapter discusses the feminist epistemological and methodological framework that underpins the study, including my own reflexive positionality. The second part sets out the qualitative research design, the setting in which the research was conducted, the interview, pilot study, sampling, recruitment, ethics, reflexivity and the data analysis processes that were used to obtain the empirical data from the lone parent students.

3.1. Epistemological Framework for Researching Lone Parent Students

This section sets out the feminist epistemological and methodological approach that this study used to illuminate the lone parent students' university experiences.

3.1a Feminist epistemology

My previous understanding was that epistemology, in Griffiths' (1998:35) words, *'the theory of knowledge'*, was based on the precept that scientific knowledge was the most valid because it was separated from the knower and could be measured and repeated (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2014). However, as my interest in feminist research grew, feminist theorising cast doubt on my perception that the scientific discovery of 'truth' without imposition (Ibid.) offered the best way of producing knowledge. Doucet and Mauthner

(2007) assert that, theoretically, this type of knowing could lead to the privileging of some social realities as facts while obscuring or discrediting other claims to reality. This, according to Nagy Hesse-Biber (2014:19), could result in *'material reality* [being] *replaced with abstractions that bear little resemblance to the phenomenon originally under examination'* (2014:19). A central tenet for feminist researchers is the necessity of contesting scientific claims to knowledge and facilitating change, particularly in terms of the construction of masculine hierarchy, values and the power relations between the knower and the known in research (Hekman 1997). In other words, the feminist critique of male bias and gender inequalities has exposed the manner in which knowledge about women or disadvantaged groups has been distorted (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002) and kept absent from research dominated by male scientists (see Cohen et al. 2008; Ramazanoglu 1992). Feminists have also questioned who can know, what they know and who validates what they know about women's experiences and their subjugated position, if research is predominantly constructed by men (Hughes 2002).

As stated in chapters 1 and 2, lone parent students are largely ignored by education policymakers and are often hidden in academic literature. This study, therefore, has adopted a theoretical framing that enables the researched to play a central role in constructing knowledge about their lived experiences, which has implications for policy and practice concerned with social justice. Given the limitations and the power relations identified in scientific research, a framework steeped in the Cartesian dualisms of positivism, where the *'conscious being (mind) and its objects of knowledge (matter) are separated'* (see Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002:27 for further explanation), will not provide a meaningful interpretation of the lone parent students' university experiences. An important aspect of Cartesian dualism in dividing the mind (conscious) from the body (matter) is that it enables us to learn about people, but not necessarily from people (Heald

2008). A feminist epistemological framework that, rather than stand the researcher to one side as an epistemically privileged observer, situates the researcher with the researched in the research process (Sarikakis et al. 2009) appears appropriate in order to make sense of the lone parent students' educational experiences. The concept of epistemic privilege – the authority to make knowledge claims regarding everyday experiences – used by feminist epistemologists gives lone parent students the opportunity to be heard in the research (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2014). This approach, where researcher and researched construct *'multiple realities'* (Lichtman 2013:13), provides for a more focused understanding of how macro, meso and micro-political structures intersect to either privilege or disadvantage lone parent students (Archer 2003b; O'Shaughnessy and Krogman 2012; Reay 2003).

Social constructionist theorists see the world as constructed through interactions (Burr 2007) that occur *'outside and inside of agents'* and institutions (family, schools and universities) (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:127), where identities are shaped and reshaped. Brooks (2012) proposes that students' learning identities are not 'fixed' and are, instead, constructed across historical contexts, as opposed to the objective rational position noted by Deutsch (2004), which often constructs them as measurable objects.

As an aim of this study is to shed light on lone parent HE students' lived realities, the epistemological stance of this research is not about objectively achieving a *'mirror reflection'* of the respondents' 'true' reality *'out there'* in the social world (Miller and Glassner 2011:52). Rather, it is an attempt to untangle myself, as a researcher, from some of the constrictions of *'fact-gathering'* (Kuhn 1996:15) that are often practised and/or imposed on *'rationalist/empiricist'* scientific research (Harding 1997:383). Instead, I take a feminist stance that is reflexive about my researcher role/identities and the respondents' situatedness while they (re)construct their lived realities.

The next section discusses from a feminist perspective, the methodological approach used to gather data for this study.

3.2.   Methodological Approaches

There are two very distinct methodological approaches used to collect data in empirical research. These are quantitative, relying on statistics and, qualitative which does not rely on statistics. Both of these methodologies emerged from an interpretivist or positivist paradigm and, depending on the type of research, educational researchers tend to either draw on one or the other, or combine both (Cohen et al. 2008). However, methodology is not only about the theoretical understanding of how a researcher obtains knowledge (Griffiths 1998), it is also about providing a justification for the methods or techniques used (see 3.3e on the interviews in this study) and the process of collecting, developing and analysing data.

The section below discusses the reasons for choosing a qualitative-interpretivist approach.

3.2a   *Qualitative-interpretivist or quantitative-positivist*

The above discussions on my positonality and feminist epistemology provided the main basis for rejecting a quantitative positivist approach for this study. Lichtman (2013:12) claimed that some researchers believe that debating the differences between interpretivist and positivist approaches is probably *'much ado about nothing'* and that, while others might agree that too much energy is spent debating differences, some take the view that only quantitative research is *'proper or real'* research (Ibid.). Other reasons

have also influenced my choice of approach in this study, some of which are outlined below.

Sprague and Zimmerman (1989:75) highlight how *'feminists and others have pointed out that by representing findings as a simple revelation of "what is" positivists obscure the social processes behind the* facts'. Haraway (1988:581 and 584) argues that this type of knowing is *'god*['s] *trick of seeing everything from nowhere…promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully'*. Similarly, Bourdieu (2004:95) also points to *'scientific work'* that takes a *'point of view on all points of view…*[the] *point of view of God'.* Haraway (1988) and Bourdieu's (2004) conceptualisation supports my view that, if I adopted a positivist stance, it is highly possible that I could become detached from the respondents (Ritchie and Lewis 2004) and suppress my own questioning ('thinking') by consenting to what Agger (1991) refers to as rationality ('(un)thinking'). The rational mode of (un)thinking is a taken-for-granted view where knowledge generated from positivism is accepted – without question – as legitimate authoritative information that provides common-sense everyday meanings. In Bourdieusian terms, *'like* [a] *fish in water'* that does not see the water in which it is immersed, the socialised-self has *'internalize*[d]*'* the world of which it is a product (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:235). In other words, like water, social structures become invisible and, thus, hidden from the social-self because the social-self no longer perceives some of the barriers by which it is constrained (Ibid).

To accept the social world as it is, without thinking critically about other possibilities, is, as described by Bourdieu and Wacquant (2007:236), in itself to accept an incomplete or unknown reality, because we *'…cannot really know, because it does not know itself'* or understand what has been done or what has been revealed to us. In researching lone parent students' experiences, I do not take the 'godlike' approach as Haraway (1988:581, 584) and Bourdieu (2004:95) illustrated above, nor am I *'the only one capable of producing*

the 'geometral (sic) *of all perspectives''* (Bourdieu 2004:95) about their experiences.

Some feminists seek to understand, through a qualitative interpretivist approach (Eichler 1997), how the person being researched understands their socially constructed life (May 2011). As the intention of this study was to explore the subjective experiences of a small sample of lone parent students, a qualitative interpretivist approach was chosen for its capacity to capture experiences from *'inside the person and to understand from within'* and, thus, enable the researcher to theorise on the data collected (Cohen et al. 2008:21). For example, a feminist qualitative methodology made it possible to bring an 'exploratory' interpretation to delve deeper into the different 'hidden' practices, values and beliefs of the lone parent students' habitus (Bourdieu 1990), as opposed to using a quantitative 'scientific' approach, which is about testing theories or making hypotheses (Brayton et al. 1997). A quantitative, positivist approach, which is driven by theory and generates large samples from which generalisations about human behaviour (Cohen et al. 2008) are made, would be unsuitable for researching the complex lives of lone parent students. As Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002:37) emphasised:

> *Challenging supposedly rational, neutral and authoritative patriarchal knowledge entails challenging the impartiality of scientists and their institutional hierarchies. Identifying science as ideas and social practices influenced by male dominance, and practised by people with emotions and political interests, challenges ways of connecting ideas of gender, women's experience and the possible realities of gendered lives.*

From the outset, one of the study's aims was to avoid generalisation, as there is no single known reality, and, instead, to look for the socially situated accounts of the respondents' university experiences (Burton and Bartlett 2009). A key strength is that a qualitative research design gives the lone parent students a voice and allows them to become 'visible' by presenting qualitative information in the form of text that goes beyond statistical reporting (Wainwright and Marandet 2010). It appears that, while a qualitative

interpretivist approach is appropriate for understanding the lone parent students' own subjective experiences, at the same time, it might make it more difficult to interest policymakers in the knowledge obtained from the respondents, as they seem more open to statistical knowledge (Wainwright and Marandet 2010).

To meet the research aims, a qualitative research methodology was chosen because it enabled the research questions outlined below to be addressed (see 3.3 of this chapter). It also enables for a deeper interpretation of the lone parent students' experiences (Cohen et al. 2008) than surveys or questionnaires, because, unlike quantitative methodology, qualitative methodology is based on the premise that it is through people's interaction with their social world that reality is constructed (Burr 2007). As such, I explore the different ways in which lone parent students' educational histories, familial backgrounds and habitus have helped to construct their learning identities and understanding of the benefits of higher education in relation to their future goals. Using one-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews, I firstly explored how lone parent students managed their daily lives (viz. childcare, domesticity and/or employment) alongside studying and, secondly, how gender, social class and 'race' identities intersected to influence their lives, both inside and outside the university setting. The purpose of gathering and analysing the data was to disseminate the findings to potential readers at a micro-level within the institution (lecturers and students), at a meso-level (policymakers) and at a macro-level (educational research).

The following section outlines my positionality within the research process, the research methodology and the interpretation of the data.

3.2b   My position in the research

This section provides an account of my position within the research. As I am interested in issues of social justice, a feminist epistemology and methodology has challenged me to reflect on any assumptions relating to the lone parent students' socially constructed lives (Riach 2009).

In reflecting on my positionality in the research, I note Deutsch's agreement with Mies (1983 cited in Deutsch 2004:885), who stated that, as a woman researcher, *'attempting to conduct "value-free research"* [w]*as a type of "schizophrenia"'*. Like Mies and Deutsch, I believe that, as a 'non-traditional' student, I would also struggle to stay 'value-free' in my attempt to collect data from the respondents. Moreover, as I designed the research and collected and analysed the data, it is I who chooses which information is used to 'tell' the multiple identities and realities (Adkins 2009) of the respondents' stories. Yet, despite my efforts not to influence the research outcome, my ontological and epistemological positions have some bearings on the topic and research process (Sarantakos 2013). To limit this, I aim to develop *'"a new gaze," a sociological eye'* and become a *'director of consciousness'* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:251, 252), which entails breaking from common-sense thinking and/or from those who produce narratives for political gain (Sarantakos 2013). For example, despite having the opportunity to control the research process or manipulate the data, I adhered to the principles of researcher integrity as outlined by the British Research Association (BERA 2011) and tried not to succumb to *'easy undertakings'* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:252).

My intention is to present a valid interpretation of the respondents' experiences of HE rather than influencing, generalising or invalidating their experiences (as discussed above), as seen in the way that *'male-centredness'* has dominated the knowledge produced about the social world (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002:28).

Similar to the researched, as a product of *'knowledge construction'* (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2011:129), metaphorically, I am like a 'fish [out of] water' (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:235), meaning that my habitus exists in an unfamiliar field. When it is matched to a field in which it does not need to weigh up the risks, the familiar does not seem strange (Mills 2000). Thus, given my degree of familiarity with the respondents, there is a possibility that I could (re)interpret their stories to 'fit' my own experiences. This is because I once belonged to the community that I am researching, namely lone parents who are studying while they bring up their children on their own (Marandet and Wainwright 2010). Rather than looking to influence the research based on my own experience, I aim to use the literature to interpret and develop new themes as they evolve from the data. Miller and Glassner (2011) warned of shared experiences being time specific. Similar to Skeggs (2002), I can no longer claim to be in the same place as the respondents because I no longer belong there, but nor does my past simply melt away. Nevertheless, despite my local accent and being a black woman from a working-class background (Bourdieu 2010), I appear to possess aspects of 'middle-classness' (Crozier and Reay 2011), such as economic, social and cultural capital. As my disposition continuingly modifies itself to straddle *'across class boundaries'* (Skeggs 2002:35), I feel that I belong to neither one class nor the other.

I am cognizant of how my identity could influence the focus of the study and, thus, that it should not be hidden (Harding 1991). By bringing both the researcher and the researched into being, the researcher's own biography also becomes relevant to the research process (Nencel 2014). Harding (1991) expressed concerns about the role, social background and experience of researchers who produce knowledge, while other feminist researchers have criticised the lack of 'matching' and the historic marginalisation of ethnic groups in research dominated by white researchers (Collins 1986; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006). In this context, while the issues of (social background, experience of researchers and researcher diversity) might appear independent of each other and, thus, be discussed

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separately, they are conceptually related. The role, social background, experience and multiple identities of the researcher are important elements for ensuring the 'right' 'match' between the researcher and the researched. One argument for 'matching', as Mercer (2007:3) states, is that a researcher who shares certain characteristics, such as gender, class or 'race'/ethnicity *is an insider'* and has empathy for and belongs to that social group. Moreover, if the researcher is part of the social group that they are researching, despite some differences, they are likely to have role experience.

An advantage of 'matching' is that it can help to reduce hierarchical ordering and bias in participants' accounts, whereas those that do not share particular characteristics do not belong and are outsiders (Mercer 2007). However, 'matching' the researcher to specific groups has its disadvantages (Francis and Archer 2005), with, for example, 'matching' sometimes overlooking differences within and between groups, such as the intersectionality of gender, class, 'race', religion or age across all spheres (Tinker and Armstrong 2008). Importantly, like other research studies, this study highlights the difficulties in recruiting lone fathers (Hinton-Smith 2008a; Moreau 2015). Notably, these studies were conducted by women researchers, relating to Fawcett and Hearn's (2004:201) question, *'can men* [research] *women, or vice versa'*.

Similar to Skeggs (2002), I argue against the need to align my social position with the lone parent students because, despite sharing certain characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and cultural understanding, there are others aspects of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), such as social origin and/or age, that might not be shared between the researcher and the researched. For example, I might not have anticipated the respondents' reaction (Miller and Glassner 2011) to my employment status and the social background to which I ascribe. Furthermore, I might not have recognised the needs that some respondents displayed and, if they had remained hidden, I could have unconsciously

assumed that the complexities of their lived experiences were less valid than my own or vice versa.

The next section discusses, from a feminist perspective, the methodological approach used to gather data for this study.

3.2c   Epistemological and methodological issues

It would be misleading to suggest that feminist epistemology is without criticism (see Brayton 1997) or that qualitative methodology is intrinsically feminist (Eichler 1997). While some feminist researchers often employ a qualitative interpretivist approach to interrupt the *'mainstream/'malestream'* dominance in social research (Oakley 1998:707) or to highlight how individuals and/or groups interpret and construct meanings about the social structures around them (May 2011), other feminist researchers might favour a quantitative positivist approach. Precisely due to the requirements for detachment and a preference for researching larger samples rather than smaller ones (Cohen et al. 2008) and/or for political, theoretical or pragmatic reasons, feminist researchers may combine both approaches (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2014).

It is also important to note that, from a feminist perspective, for qualitative educational research to be valid, it has to show that the method used to collect the data has answered the research questions via the stories being told. However, the validation of the data in qualitative research can be problematic, as the researched do not always simply respond to the researcher's questions and, instead, sometimes follow their own instincts in terms of what they feel should be said (Puwar 1997). In contrast, despite the use of closed questions in many questionnaires, the validity measurements in quantitative positivist research are based on *'credibility', 'transferability'…'representation',*

'understanding' and *'interpretation'* and are, therefore, often viewed as more trustworthy (Ritchie and Lewis 2004:273).

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002:42) state that *'feminist* [researchers] *have a political responsibility to tell accurate stories'* on behalf of the knower and that it is crucial that the authority to claim such knowledge is explained. In this study, the process of representation was sought through the lived experiences of the lone parent students, with their voices recognised as those of valid knowers of their own personal experiences. As this process required sensitive handling, it is difficult to connect evidence to the respondents' 'truth' claims. As Perakyla (2011:414) notes, *'the core aim of conversation analytical research is to investigate talk-in-interaction, not as a representation of other social phenomena, but as a phenomenon in its own right'*. Although this study did not set out to validate the lone parent students' educational and social experiences by seeking 'truth' from what was told to me in the interview, the data gathered in that specific context comprises the perspectives of the respondents and is a 'true' reflection of their lives (Perakyla 2011). However, they may have given a different account on another day. I hope to ensure the credibility of the research by allowing for a more transparent approach. Through the reflexivity and data verification processes undertaken with my supervisors, I was able to check the accuracy of the data and, as far as possible, eliminate any bias and assumptions found.

The third section of the chapter discusses the following: the research design and questions; the choice of research method; the site; the piloting, sampling, recruitment and interviewing processes; ethics and reflexivity and, data analysis.

3.3. Qualitative Research Design

To fulfil the overall research aims set out in Chapter 1 of this study, I reviewed relevant literatures and, in doing so, the body of work helped in the formulation of three main research questions. These were:

- How do lone parent students manage their studies around caring commitments?

- What are the educational experiences of lone parents undertaking an undergraduate degree course as full-time or part-time students?

- In what ways do gender, social class and 'race'/ethnicity impact on lone parent students' learning experiences, peer-group relations and learning identities?

3.3a   Choice of research method

My decision to use interviews was based on the nature of my enquiry, which was linked to the research questions as well as a range of other factors such as my interests, values and available resources (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). After considering the research questions in relation to the sample group, a qualitative interview method was the preferred choice for building upon existing knowledge, in that, as Nagy Hesse-Biber (2011:114) notes *'interviewing is a particularly valuable research method'* for gaining insight into respondents' social worlds. Fonow and Cook (2005:2214) explain how *'researchers must become more aware of the rationale for the selection of methods and of those methods' strengths and weaknesses in studying specific settings and topics'*.

In short, the strength of using interview as a research method is its effectiveness in obtaining in-depth information about a social phenomenon from small samples (Nagy Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011), as opposed to the large-scale quantifiable data obtained in quantitative research (Robson 2002). The informal reflexive approach used here contrasts

with the traditional hierarchical forms of interviewing where the respondents are in a subordinate position (Punch 2001).

Another strength of interviewing as a methodology is its flexibility and ability to accommodate the individual accounts of the lone parent students and enable data to be gathered during a one-off face-to-face interaction (Burton and Bartlett 2009). For example, interviews, as a methodology, allow the researcher to probe deeper into issues that might lie hidden in the lone parent students' past, and which could influence their present and future habitus (Bourdieu 2004). Ritchie and Lewis (2004:58) state that *'a key feature of in-depth interviews is their depth of focus on the individual'*. While Burton and Bartlett (2009:22) state that:

> *The researcher seeks to understand and portray the participants' perceptions and understanding of a particular situation or event. Interaction is ongoing and there is a continuing chain of events which gives insight into how people live with the research emphasising this process.*

Although specific themed questions were developed for this study, the use of semi-structured one-to-one interviews allowed for a more open conversation between (me) the researcher and (respondents) the researched than that achieved through the answering of pre-determined questions as occurs in structured interviews (May 2011). In this study, it also gave respondents the privacy to talk openly about their experiences, which would not be possible in a focus group.

The feminist studies (Brooks 2012a; Lister 2003; Moreau 2015; Reay 2003) reviewed in Chapter 2 drew mostly on small sample qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews for their research on 'non-traditional' student-mothers or parent students (some of whom were lone parents). However, given the lack of clarity on qualitative research sample size, sample sizes have tended to vary (May 2011). Following Nagy Hesse-Biber (2011), I took into account the research questions, the available resources and the

context in which the research was being conducted when determining this study's sample size.

Face-to-face interviews are not the only method for producing qualitative conversational data. Some feminist researchers (Bourke 2009; Brooks et al. 2014; Reid 2004) support the use of qualitative participatory-centred research (PR), which might involve a range of methods, such as diaries, music, drawing, poetry, photographs and/or listening to the radio, in addition to the traditional interview method. In PR-centred research, participants take a more active role in the making and telling of their stories rather than the research being 'done' for them by experts (Riecken et al. 2005). One of the aims of PR-centred research is to *'democratize and demystify'* research for the participants in order that they recognise how their engagement in the research process has helped to direct it (Riecken et al. 2005:1) from start to finish. Participants identify the problems that are important to them and collaborate with the researcher on the design process, the analysis of the data (such as agreeing or disagreeing on the study's priorities), and how the findings are reported at micro, meso and macro policy levels. While I have chosen a feminist methodological approach, which includes understanding gender, reflecting on power relations, and both respecting and seeking to recruit people whose voices are not normally heard in research studies, I decided against taking a participatory approach in this study. The nature of collaborative work can be time consuming and demanding, not only for a lone researcher but also for the research participants. As Bergold and Thomas (2012:2) state, PR *'is a very demanding process that evolves when two spheres of action— science and practice—meet, interact, and develop an understanding for each other'.* For those reasons, I ruled out the use of a participatory approach in this study, because the time limitations for both the participants and for me would have made it challenging to complete the study. Moreover, as discussed elsewhere (see 3.3.e below), given the tremendous time constraints that the lone parent students were already under with caring

and studying, I did not want to put further demands on them. Thus, I decided to ask no more of the participants than to take part in a one-off face-to-face interview.

Some researchers have successfully used qualitative longitudinal telephone and/or email interviews (Hinton-Smith 2012) to explore lone parent students' HE experiences. Although these methods are useful for reaching participants across many universities, the distance between the researcher and the researched can make it difficult to establish a rapport, as bodily gestures, eye contact or verbal and non-verbal meaning can be lost (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2011).

Importantly, the literature review (see Chapter 2) has influenced my ontological and epistemological perspective on the type of methods to use to explore the lone parent students' educational and social backgrounds. As such, it is important here to assess the effectiveness of the research tool (see 3.3c the pilot study), in terms not only of the generation of a variety of viewpoints about a topic (Ritchie and Lewis 2004) but also its adaptability to accommodate the limited time that lone parent students' had available between university and family commitments. Cohen et al. (2008) suggested that it is imperative that the research 'fit' with the complexities of the sample group's lives, thus, allowing the research questions to be the central focus of the interview, instead of the focus being on time.

3.3b   The research site

As discussed in chapters 1 and 2, this study explores, in some depth, the educational and social experiences of 17 full-time and part-time lone parent respondents who were studying at various stages of an undergraduate degree across a range of subjects in an inner city, post-1992 University. The research was conducted between 2010 and 2011 and was

restricted to one institution. The university is located in a culturally and socially diverse area, which is reflected in the profile of its students. While the area houses some sections of the community living on an income below the poverty threshold (ONS 2012), it also has relatively high house prices that reflect a process of gentrification (Ibid.). The institution was chosen because I worked there and it fitted the Widening Participation (WP) profile of similar large post-1992 universities, thus providing easy access to the 'non-traditional' lone parent students required for the research.

As a post-1992 university, the institution is ranked below some of the more prestigious pre-1992 universities and is seen by a majority of students as a second or third-choice university (Ball et al. 2002a). The lone parent students were studying across a range of undergraduate degree programmes/subjects (see Appendix 10), including the following: Advertising and Marketing Communication with Public Relations; Tourism and Environment; Applied Psychology; Criminology; Mathematics; Events Management and Marketing; Marketing, Music and Media; Management; Caribbean Studies and Psychology; Early Years, Education Studies; Public Relations; Accounting and Finance; International Relations; Community Sector Management; and, Human Biology.

3.3c *Pilot study*

In 2010, I conducted a pilot study with two lone parent students previously unknown to me, with the aim of critically assessing the efficacy of the methodological design in preparation for the main study. The two lone parent respondents were one white female and one black male. In the presentation of the interview data, pseudonyms were used in place of the respondents' names.

Although pilot studies are not a guarantee for the success of a full-scale study, I found that by conducting some enquires before the main study enabled the identification of some of the limitations, resulting in some minor modifications to the interview topic guide.

After the pilot study, I felt that, given the lack of research studies on lone parent students, it was important to focus on hearing the lone parent students' constructions of their lived realities (Cohen et al. 2008). For this study, I narrowed my interest to both how lone parent students negotiated their study and childcare responsibilities and how gender, class and 'race' intersected to disrupt their lived realities. This decision meant that the interviews were more succinct because I was able to use the schedule space and time for a more in-depth conversation. Additionally, the pilot study highlighted the need to keep the conversation flowing and to deal with any unforeseen interruptions to the interview by remembering to put a sign on the door (Ritchie and Lewis 2004). During the pilot study, I spent too long explaining some aspects of the issues to be discussed, which resulted in my moving respondents too hastily through the interview to ensure that I covered the pre-set themes. Reflecting on the pilot study process helped with finding new ways to pre-empt common problems and weaknesses, such as putting the respondents at ease in the early stage of the interview, building trust and rapport through common interest in the topic and identifying key contributions they could make to the study, an aspect which Nagy Hesse-Biber (2011) has also reported.

The process of transcribing the recorded interviews was labour-intensive and challenging (Cohen et al. 2008) and helped me make a few minor adjustments to the semi-structured questions for the proposed study. During the pilot study, I gathered some rich data, which I was able to incorporate into the main research. Including this data was made possible because, firstly, the data was relevant and conducted within the same period,

secondly, because the respondents met the selection criteria and, thirdly, the semi-structured interviews broadly remained the same as those used in the main study.

For the pilot study data, I developed my own coding framework (see Appendix 2) and used the Microsoft Word search function to find themes. However, this task of reducing and analysing the data made me realise that, when I increased the sample size for the main study, I would need the support of (QDAS) qualitative data software (Lichtman 2013). Subsequently, I attended NVivo QDAS training, during which it became apparent that that I would need a substantial amount of time to thoroughly analyse the data obtained in the main study.

3.3d   Sampling and recruiting respondents

For pragmatic reasons (described above) and time constraints, the respondents were all recruited from one post-1992 University that was an exemplar of WP, as discussed above (see 3.3b).

The strategy for recruiting students included posting flyers on notice boards (see Appendix 3) and emailing a letter to key gatekeepers (senior managers and academic course leaders) from across the university about the area of research and the interview selection criteria for the 1-hour long recorded interview (see Appendix 4). Senior managers allowed me to make 5-minute presentations to students about my research at the beginning of lectures.

The sample criteria required respondents to be lone parents with at least one dependent child. The Student Union and some support staff also assisted with recruitment, by either forwarding contact details or encouraging students who expressed an interest in participating in the study to contact me. I did not expect such positive responses from

senior managers and lecturing and support staff, but their assistance helped enormously with the recruitment of participants. Although there was a risk that those students who responded to recruitment requests from staff might not reflect the wider student population (data shows that people who participate in public life are often from white ethnic groups and/or higher socio-economic backgrounds) (Brodie et al. 2009), the data in this study reflected the diversity of the university's student groups. However, the sample did not include lone parent students from the Asian population.

The initial idea was to interview 18 lone parent students as it was adjudged that, for this type of study, this number would be manageable within the timescale and would provide sufficient data to address the research questions. From the 35 students who made contact via text messages and voicemails, a final group of 16 mothers and 1 father was selected from those attending the university across the three academic years. They were also required to have completed the short demographic information sheet (see Appendix 5), the purpose of which was to capture their background details, which would be used to formulate the interview questions and inform the data analysis.

Despite asking the lone parent respondents for details, such as their number of years at university, the number and ages of their children, their mode of study, gender, their age, the subject area they were studying and their ethnicity, the respondents were not asked to identify their social classification (see Appendix 5 – Participant's Demographic Research Questionnaire). Instead, I made the decision to explore issues of social class through discussions about the respondents' educational and social background during the interview process. From the in-depth discussions with respondents (either through direct questions or analysis), I was able to identify their social class position, as shown below in Table 1 – Respondents' key characteristics (see also appendices 8 and 9 the transcripts).

The reasons for this approach are, firstly, academics that write about social class often describe it as subjectively problematic and contentious (Lawler 2005) and, to consider class, solely from an objective 'tick box' perspective, particularly in terms of, educational qualifications, employment or housing, could well lead to wider sociological and cultural identities and political issues being lost (Ibid.). Secondly, with changes in the way we work across all fields of employment from *'manual, unskilled or semi-skilled occupations …[to] professional, managerial and other non-manual occupations'* (Croll 2004:391), our self-identification of social class does not necessarily reflect the jobs that we do. Moreover, when left to choose, people are likely to elevate their social class status (Savage 2015). Finally, the *'cognitive structures which* [the diverse groups of respondents] *implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, 'embodied' social structures'* (Bourdieu 2010:470), which often signify cultural differences among individuals' understanding of the UK's *'obsession'* with social class (Savage 2015:38). Savage (2015:39) notes that, *'in most nations, the majority of people are content to define themselves as middle class – neither terribly affluent nor enormously deprived – in Britain, to be middle class can be, and often is, taken to mean to command claims to cultural snobbery and privilege'*.

It was important to ask the lone parent respondents questions about their class identity and then analyse the verbal/non-verbal information emerging from their description that influenced their course of action in pursuing a university education. The social class column in Table 1 below was completed after in-depth discussions in the interviews with the lone parent respondents about their families, jobs and reasons for being at university, etcetera during (see Appendix 1 – Research Discussion/Interview Topic Guide).

The recruitment of participants often involved students identifying other students that fitted the selection criteria. Ritchie and Lewis (2004) warn that this 'snowballing' (where new recruits are generated by existing ones) can compromise the diversity of the sampling group. With respondents drawn from across the university, the diverse sample group achieved during the recruitment process was not compromised. However, finding lone fathers was particularly difficult, as others have discussed (see Moreau 2015). While during the initial recruitment, I received five texts from lone fathers who expressed an interest in participating in the research, but after follow-up telephone calls and text messages, only one lone father agreed to be interviewed. 'Snowballing' did not occur in this instance because he had lost contact with many of his university peers.

I emailed a short paragraph to respondents to explain that 'the purpose of the interviews will be to gain further understanding of your experiences as a distinct group [at the university]'. They were advised about the method to be used, that the interview would last 1-hour and that their data would be treated anonymously and confidentially (see Appendix 6).

Table 1 below outlines the key characteristics of the respondents. The respondents are identifiable only by a pseudonym and a coded descriptor of their chosen identities, for example, Louise (mixed-race African/Portuguese, working-class).

Table 1. Respondents' Key Characteristics

Pseudonym	Years at Uni	No. of children	Children's ages	Mode of Study	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Social Class
Anne	4	1	10 & 12 yrs	F/T	F	35	White English	MC
Chloe	3.2	1	8yrs	F/T	F	26	Black British/Caribbean	WC
Dyshe	3.5	2	8 & 14yrs	P/T	F	36	White Albanian	WC
Gillian	0.4	1	10yrs	F/T	F	45	Black Caribbean	WC
Grace	2.6	2	12 & 7yrs	F/T	F	32	Black British/African Caribbean	WC
Greg	4.6	1	2yrs 9mth	F/T	M	25	Black British/African	MC
Jo-Leona	2.2	1	10yrs	F/T	F	36	Black British	WC
Julie	1.4	1	3yrs	F/T	F	25	White English	MC
Kerry	1.6	1	4yrs	F/T	F	21	Black British	LWC
Leah	2.5	3	21,17,10	F/T	F	47	White British	MC
Louise	3.2	2	6 & 13yrs	F/T	F	32	Mixed-race African/Portuguese	WC
Marianna	5	1	2yrs	P/T	F	36	White Spanish	WC
Nellie	0.3	1	7yrs	F/T	F	40	White French European	WC
Sharleene	0.2	1	7yrs	F/T	F	24	Mixed-race British/Caribbean	WC
Shona	1.2	1	6yrs	F/T	F	26	Black Caribbean	WC
Sue	2	5	19, 17, 17, 9, & 6yrs	F/T	F	37	Black African/ Caribbean	WC
Teena	3.1	3	21, 19, 16	F/T	F	45	Black Caribbean	WC

The characteristics of the lone parent students in Table 1 are not a precise and

accurate reflection of the wider lone parent HE student population. However, previous

research studies (NUS 2009) and statistics from the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2014) have shown that 1 in 10 lone parents with at least one dependent child up to the age of 16 living with them are men.

In summary, the 17 (mostly full-time) respondents were all undergraduate students consisting of one black male, six black females, six white females and four mixed-Heritage females, of which four described themselves as middle-class, twelve as working-class and one as lower working-class. Not all of the respondents were born in the UK, with five respondents born and schooled in Jamaica, Albania, Spain, France and Portugal. Two respondents, born and schooled in the UK, also went to schools in Nigeria and the Caribbean, while the remaining ten respondents were all born and schooled in the UK. Their ages were between 21 and 47 and the majority had one child.

3.3e   Interviewing

The data presented in this study originated from recorded interviews with 17 lone parent students (see Table 1). All of the interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Recording conversations is the least intrusive and most convenient way of capturing interview data verbatim without the complication of taking detailed notes (Burton and Bartlett 2009). Conversation is said to be the one of the most basic forms of human interaction and, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009:xvii) state *'if you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk to them?'*

To interview the 17 lone parent students, I devised a semi-structured topic guide to fit within the 1-hour time schedule (see Appendix 1). Nagy Hesse-Biber (2011:123) states that in-depth interviews help the feminist researcher to *'gain rich data from the perspectives of selected individuals on a particular subject'*. However, Ritchie and Lewis

(2004:48) explained that a researcher must first establish, by conducting a review of the literature, some key strengths and areas for the further development of the interview questions, as well as noting any *'personal theories or hunches'* emerging from those studies. In order to generate in-depth data from these questions (Lichtman 2013), subsidiary questions were developed by looking at different types of issues that were not addressed in the literature review and, which were then connected to the main questions in order to produce a detailed topic guide (Ritchie and Lewis 2004).

Important steps were taken to ensure that the topic guide was carefully constructed but flexible in the ordering of its questions. Therefore, some conversations varied in length depending on the openness of the respondents in discussing their lived experiences, (Cohen 2008). Despite using an organised topic guide, I found that each of the interviews was different. Maguire (1987:xv) noted that *'one of feminism's enduring lessons, and challenges, is that feminism is a way of being in the world that intimately connects theory and practice in everyday life'*. The sequence of questions would differ depending on the rapport established between myself and the respondents and the tone and fluidity of the conversation (Cohen et al. 2008). Some respondents reacted spontaneously to questions or listened carefully before they responded, while others would interject before a question was fully presented. As part of the research design and my reflective practice, post-interview, I documented in my research diary some aspects of the interactions during the interview for each of the respondents in order to capture any reflective moments.

After the pilot study, I was conscious that my conversational style should not be too constricting or formal. I subsequently adopted an informal style that allowed me to share some of my previous experiences, which proved useful in developing rapport and reciprocity with the respondents. Sennett (2004:43) noted that *'an interviewer is meant to use his or her experience to understand others, rather than listen for echoes of his or her*

own life'. Sennett (2004:37) also states that, *'to probe, the interviewer cannot be stonily impersonal'*.

The use of technology to record the conversation not only meant that I could listen again to the tone of language used during the interview, but also that I could focus on establishing a rapport and making the respondents feel at ease (see Tinker and Armstrong 2008). Lichtman (2013) found that, in interviews, participants tend to reveal personal information if the researcher also shared some personal information, which, thus, develop trust between the researcher and researched.

Keeping in mind the interviewer-interviewee social relationship highlighted above, during the interview, I described the research in detail, gave some insight into my work and explained why I was interested in researching this topic. The aim was to conduct the interviews in a respectful, friendly and non-judgemental manner in order to maintain the interviewee's integrity (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

Law argues that research is not always neatly packaged and taht, in order to make the invisible visible, it is necessary to recognise the 'messiness' of social realities and refrain from the expectation that the chosen methods are ideal for capturing provisional realties (Law 2003:11). This was evident in some of the interview sessions, where some respondents would return to a topic that they had previously spoken about. In this situation, I either moved the conversation forward and/or probed deeper into what appeared to be an unfinished account of a situation (Lichtman 2013). While probing helps to clarify underlying issues, if the probing is not carefully crafted into the conversation, this can lose the interest of the respondent or the meaning and context of what was said (Ritchie and Lewis 2004). However, given the respondents' time limit, it was unrealistic to presume that, if I failed to keep to the 1-hour scheduled time, they would be willing to stay longer or return to continue the interview at another time, particularly, as the majority

were only available between classes. Two respondents, however, did agree to be interviewed outside of their university-scheduled timetable, which was illustrative of their determination to have their voices heard.

While there are many advantages, there is also criticism about the ethics and validity of interviews (Cohen et al. 2008; Perakyla 2011), which can be undermined by the interviewer – interviewee relationship. Cohen et al. (2008) reported that some feminists highlighted the ethical 'risk' of building relationships with the researched that could invalidate the data due to the relationship being either intimate or a 'pretend' friendship. For example, where the researcher is in the field qua researcher and not as a friend, the researcher is constrained both when gathering sensitive data on close friends and when trying to be a 'fictional' friend. Either way, the research is exploitative and the researcher's integrity and honesty is, thus, questionable (Cohen et al. 2008).

Excerpts from data used in the findings section are verbatim quotations drawn from the interviews with all 17 respondents, who were previously unknown to me. Bar one, all interviews were conducted in a small quiet office on the university campus, chosen because there would be few interruptions and the respondents could 'safely' tell their stories in confidence (Puwar 1997). The other interview took place in the home of the lone parent father due to his lack of finances to pay for the journey to and from London. My safety was assured prior to the interview, both by the respondent confirming that a female adult would also be present in the house to care for his daughter during the interview and, the fact that I had informed family and friends of my location.

Despite the difference in roles between the interviewer and the interviewee, there was a mutual interest in the issues, which brought with it a sense of trust and security (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2014). For example, I was surprised to find that, at the end of the interview, some of the respondents did not rush to leave, but were, instead, keen to stay beyond the

scheduled interview time to reflect on their stories. According to Riach (2009:358), it is important not only for the researcher but also for the researched, as they are reflecting both *'in the moment'* and also *'after the moment has passed'*. Riach (2009) refers to these moments as comprising a pedagogical reflective practice that allows *'temporal distance'* from the activity.

As noted earlier, I did not want to intrude further on the respondents' time and, as such, they were not involved in how I interpreted their narratives. Although they were aware that they could obtain a copy of their interview transcripts, none requested a copy of either their transcript or the final thesis.

3.3f   Ethics

Adhering to the principles, ethical codes and guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2011), the British Sociological Association (BSA 2002) and the University's own guidelines, the study was approved by the University's Ethics Committee. May (2011:60) argues that ethical approval should not be based on the *'terms of what is advantageous to the researcher or the project upon which they are working'* but, rather, on *'what is right or just'* both for the respondents participating in the research and for society as a whole. The researcher should be alerted to any ethical issues involving the myriad possibilities that can affect the research interview process, such as the respondents' right to withdraw, their privacy or their access to transcripts and the final report (Brooks et al. 2014). There was no request from the respondents to have their transcripts removed from the research, with, instead, some respondents wanting their identity revealed, in such cases, I reiterated the ethical codes of conduct in relation to confidentiality and the right to remain anonymous, which the respondents accepted (BERA 2011).

Keeping to ethical codes inevitably requires some degree of reflexivity. Letherby (2002:1) states that *'feminists' work combines particular analytical, ethical and political dimensions'*, which require *'analytical reflexivity'*. Through reflexivity, I have learnt about my *'limitations and imperfections'* (Bourdieu 2004: vii) meaning that, as a researcher, I did not elicit and/or (re)produce knowledge about the diverse group of lone parent students in ways that would contribute to their 'Othering' (Read et al. 2003). As a researcher, I am responsible for interpreting the respondents' accounts, which can present challenging cultural differences, thus, making me aware of the power relations that can arise when producing knowledge about different groups. As Skeggs (2002:35) states, *'being positioned as a legitimate knower'*, could have led to some respondents only communicating what they believed I wanted to hear (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) or seeing the research process as an opportunity to reveal sensitive information about their past.

While one respondent did comment during the research process that she felt 'safe' to disclose things that she had never spoken about before, I remained mindful of the emotional stress that could have been evoked in some respondents because of difficult past relationships. However, although some researchers may often find themselves dealing with sensitive issues and may feel overwhelmed in coping with the participants' emotional stress, there are *'no documents* [that] *can ever tell us exactly when or where'* to draw that boundary (Ryen 2011:41). To avoid as much as possible any surprise outpouring of emotions, throughout the interview, I continuously checked for any signs of distress and reiterated to the respondents that they were free to stop at any time. Before commencing the recruitment and interview processes, I was aware of the possibility of some students studying on modules that I teach responding to the invitation to participate in the research. Before I conducted the main study, I used the pilot study to help me to think through some of the potential scenarios and strategies to manage the situation if I did have a prior academic relationship with some of the respondents, such as agreeing with my line

manager that I would not mark a respondent's coursework. All of the respondents in this study were unknown to me when the study began.

3.3g   Data analysis

The data presented in chapters 4, 5 and 6 was collected in the 2009/10 academic year and corresponds to questions that were explored during the interviews. As discussed previously, I used a feminist lens with a Bourdieusian framework to look for common themes and emerging patterns, in order to generate theory from the data.

Once the interviews had been transcribed, I began the process of analysing, reducing and coding the data according to the emergent themes, in order to then upload the data into the NVivo version 11 software (see appendix 7). These themes were:

- Academic Support, Learning and Learning Communities
- Childcare Support
- Experience at University
- Family Background
- Finance
- Identity
- Managing Day-to-day
- Previous Education Experience
- Reasons for Attending University
- Recommendations for Policy and Practice
- Social Life
- Work
- Other

Krippendorp (2004:22-4 cited in Cohen et al. 2008:476) suggests that *'texts have no objective reader-independent qualities; rather they have meanings and can sustain multiple readings and interpretations'*. To avoid misinterpretations occurring in the data analysis, I organised the NVivo coding frame according to the interview topic guide and (re)arranged the codes alphabetically and thematically to ensure that the analysis was possible (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2014). While Lichtman (2013) admits to finding NVivo a difficult programme

to learn, I believed that it provided a wide range of possibilities. While I found the programme unusually awkward initially, having persevered, I found it had the potential to provide real analytical insight. For example, NVivo allowed me to write memos and view the identity and number of respondents coded to the tree node. This process facilitated a detailed credible account of the similarities occurring in respondents' responses to questions and helped me to crosscheck my interpretation of the data (Burton and Bartlett 2009).

Interpretation of the data was undertaken only after the repetitive process of reading and rereading each transcript and listening to the interview recordings several times over. Some of the coded themes were either refined or discarded, which resulted in the reduction and re-coding of the NVivo tree nodes in order to develop new themes (see appendix 7).

One of the issues affecting the analysis of conceptual theories is that intersectionalities of gender, 'race' or social class can be problematic in the sense that social identity and social structure cannot easily be *'separated out and do not exist in isolation from one another'* (Archer and Francis 2007:37). This is particularly important because class can prove difficult to analyse (Savage 2015), as individuals often (re)interpret their social status according to their habitus and/or location, such as the type of university that they attend.

During the coding process, my supervisors requested copies of selected transcripts, tree nodes and the notes on theories that I had attached to the transcripts, all of which were to discuss. Following these useful feedback meetings, I would listen again to the recorded interviews to ensure that I had transcribed the data correctly and had created free nodes to capture themes relating to identity, resistance, determinacy and dependency, which subsequently led to new codes emerging and some tree nodes being

merged. By the end of the process, I had thirteen tree nodes, some with multiple branches, which would have been even more complex had I extended the number of participants.

Permission was sought from participants to contact them should the need to clarify information arise. However, I realised that, bar one respondent, during the transcribing process (for transcripts see Appendix 8), I did not contact the respondents in order to make sense of what I understood of either their experiences or their post-interview reflection. I do agree, however, with Skeggs (2002:29) when she argued *'why should I expect them to reach the same conclusions, produce the same analysis?'* Therefore, I take full responsibility for the interpretations presented in chapters 4, 5, and 6, which are based on feminist perspectives that seek social justice and value women's experiences as equal to men's (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2011).

3.4.   Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to present the methodological framework through which the lone parent students' lived experiences would be told. As one aim of feminist research is to support social justice and equality for women and marginalised groups, I draw upon feminist epistemology and qualitative methodology to explore the lone parent students' educational and social experiences. One of my intentions was to think reflexively on how my role as a researcher, my social and cultural background and my political interests could influence or even dilute the 17 lone parent students' stories were I privilege my own history (Skeggs 2002). In order to analyse how each of the respondents managed their daily lives around studying, childcare and, in some cases, employment, a qualitative research design using interviews was chosen to capture their lived realities.

In light of the overall aims of this study, the research method chosen was the most appropriate for obtaining a 'subjective' understanding of the lived experiences of the lone parent students. However, although I was confident in my decision to use qualitative interview methods, the data was collected at a time when the students were close to their assignment deadlines. Thus, in hindsight, I would have preferred to conduct the research interviews over two phases – a focus group followed by one-to-one interviews. Moreover, the time and space between two data collection stages would have enabled me to arrive at a wider understanding of some of the collective issues that lone parent students face, as they would have provided different perspectives on their (re)entry into university. However, the validity of such methods has been questioned (as discussed in the interview section), particularly when the researcher becomes familiar with the researched (Cohen et al. 2008; Nagy Hesse-Biber 2011), which was not the case in this study.

Below, chapters, 4, 5 and 6, present the findings from the analysis of data obtained in the interviews. Chapter 4 focuses its discussion on the many reasons that the respondents gave for 'becoming a lone parent student'.

Chapter 4

Becoming a Lone Parent Student

This chapter discusses the respondents' accounts of their reasons for becoming higher education (HE) students. Bourdieu and Passeron (2011:43) suggest that *'learning is an irreversible process'* because the habitus formed during early childhood within the family and the classroom, tends to (re)produce the social conditions to which it was originally predisposed. Therefore, to understand further how cultural discourses might have helped to shape the respondents' social identities, this chapter also explores their educational histories and trajectories in relation to gender, social class and 'race'/ethnicity. As such, the main themes are divided into three sections. The chapter begins with a focus on the respondents' accounts of their earlier experiences of education, while the second section discusses their reasons for pursuing a university education. The final section then unpacks some of the factors that had influenced their choice of university.

4.1. Earlier Experiences of Education

Given the respondents' varied backgrounds, it is important to first identify some of the impact that schooling had on their decision to become HE students. In particular, this section discusses their previous educational histories to establish how social and economic factors, independently and/or collectively, influenced the respondents' attitudes to and engagement with education. Consequently, one of the research questions underpinning this thesis was whether early upbringing and/or other social factors influenced educational outcomes, namely who goes where and who gets what (Bourdieu and Passeron 2011).

4.1a   Educational history and attainment

The findings show that a range of social factors such as economic and social capital had played a crucial role in the majority of the respondents' educational outcomes. Additionally, shifting economic conditions, social and cultural changes (such as work patterns), changes in family circumstances and having to adjust to new living arrangements and/or country of residence meant that some of the respondents' educational histories were fraught with temporary disruptions, as Cheal (2002) also found. For example, six respondents (Gillian, Dyshe, Marianna, Nellie, Greg and Louise) had completed their formal schooling in Jamaica, Albania, Spain, France, Nigeria and Portugal, respectively, while Teena (black Caribbean, working-class), who was schooled in both the UK and the Caribbean, completed her final school years in the UK. The eleven remaining respondents were all schooled in the UK. However, irrespective of where the respondents completed their schooling and/or despite on-going policy discourses about some working-class groups' continuing disengagement, low-aspiration and underachievement (Archer et al. 2010), their accounts of the disruption and continuing challenges to their education shows their desire to succeed against the odds. For example, Teena and Greg (black British/African, middle-class) attended schools in both the UK and other countries. While Teena found HE a challenge: *'It's been a real challenge […], what am I doing killing myself to get this degree. […] I* [am finding] *it very hard'*, a degree was obligatory for Greg: '*I have to have a degree whether I need it or don't need it, it has to be done'*.

Teena recalled having to leave school in England to accompany her mother to the Caribbean before returning to England: 'm*y parents had a big bust up and I spent a year and a half in the Caribbean […] between primary and secondary school'.* After the move and her parents' divorce, Teena *'came back to a different area, different school, different friends and a fractured family […]'.* Despite this the emotional upheaval, *Teena* went on to become an FE college lecturer: '*I got reasonable grades so I answered an advert for […]*

teaching at the college that taught me'. Similarly, the work patterns of Greg's parents meant he attended schools in three different countries: 'm*y education is very complicated. I went through primary and half of my secondary school in England. I also went to schools in America [...] and in Nigeria [...] and started university in Nigeria [...]. After 2 years in university in Nigeria* [I] *came back to England'.* Yet, despite, Greg's 2-year university experience in Nigeria, his disrupted educational history meant that he did *'not have an undisputed right to occupy the* [university] *space'* (Puwar 2004:1) and had to operate within the marginal *'reserved'* spaces available to non-traditional learners (Ibid.). Greg stated that *'I came back to England then [...] because I didn't have college certificates over here [in England] I needed to have some way of going into university. I started a Foundation course'.* Both Teena and Greg's routes into HE were clearly unconventional.

While Greg, Gillian and Dyshe completed their formal schooling outside the UK in order to acquire the grades necessary to study at university, three others (Louise, Marianna and Nellie) did not. Louise (mixed-race African/Portuguese, working-class) spoke of her disappointment: *'in Portugal, I wanted to go to university but the system [...] is strict [...] they require quite high grade for different courses, I was really disappointed'.* Marianna (white Spanish, working-class) also had a similar story:

> *It depends on how many people want to apply to that university and that career. And that year many people wanted to apply for journalism so the standard was very high. I couldn't get in I got six and the standard was eight so [...] I start working but my parents were not happy.*

Taking a non-traditional route was not unique to respondents who were educated outside of the UK. Although some respondents had completed their formal schooling in the UK and had left with no qualifications and/or low grades, they continued into FE. At school, Sharleene (mixed-race British/Caribbean, working-class) felt disengaged: '*I didn't want to stay at that school any longer'.* She explained: '*I went to college and did my AS*

[then had] … *a little break between my AS Level and A2 Levels* [because] …*I got pregnant. So for me it wasn't like the traditional thing'.* The story behind leaving school without qualifications or with low grades was, therefore, a far more complex story for all of them than the DWP (2014) bold claim that any disruption to an individual's education was partly due to disengagement or low aspirations, as Archer and Francis (2007) have also noted.

Similar to Teena, Grace (black British/African-Caribbean, working-class) talked of imposed life events, such as finding herself part of a new extended family with children on both sides, after both of her parents remarried. In fact, her father had remarried three times, with Grace being the only child of her brothers and sisters born to her mother and father. Feeling uninspired at school, Grace stated that *'I wasn't a very good student at school. I didn't ever go and do anything extra than what was really required of me'*, which limited her progression *'I was put into the lowest group for maths. The highest grade I could have achieved was 'E' and I think that's what I'd got'.* Grace later studied A-levels at an FE college. Repeatedly, family interpersonal conflicts and/or a lack of economic and cultural capital left most of these students trying to reconcile family tensions with their education.

Sennett (2013) discusses the invisible threads and unseen support holding extended families together. Grace's extended family ties had helped to motivate her to continue education where *'my mum was very supportive in that you have to get an education'* [and] *'a real relationship with my younger brother* […] *that's my dad's side* [helped]. W*e talked to each other all the time so yeah we're close'.*

It appears that for some of the black respondents, leaving compulsory schooling in order to work was more likely than continuing into post-compulsory education (see section 4.2b of this chapter regarding black families valuing education). It became clear to Sue's (black African/Caribbean, working-class) that her family's finances had changed when her

mother told her that she did not want her to continue in education after the age of 16 and told her to find a job. Sue recalled not: *'do*[ing] *well at school'* but did not associate achieving good grades at school with specific types of jobs and expressed shock when she realised that '*I thought that I passed my GCSE, but w*hen *I was applying for Uni, I realised that I did foundation exams, which was upsetting for me. I didn't feel good […] I thought oh my God'.* Sue's disappointment with her educational underperformance mirrors one of the children in Reay and Wiliam's (1999:345) study, who felt she *'[w]ill be a nothing'* without higher grades. For Sue and other respondents, discursive messages about being *'low knowledge-skilled'* (Brine 2006:651) and having *'low aspirations'* or *'not valuing education'* (DCSF 2007:5) could have a negative impact on them and prolong conditions of social inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron 2011). For example, some respondents made future decisions based on schoolteachers' predictions of their educational success (Francis et al. 2012), but were often left disappointed when their final school grades did not match their desired futures (Sennett 2013), as Sue found when she decided upon HE to improve her job prospects.

While some respondents' spoke negatively about unsympathetic teachers, their lack of progression, exclusion or having left school early, disengagement and lack of academic success at school were often related to issues within the family home. For example, children often choose their GCSE options in year 9, but Chloe (black British/Caribbean, working-class) left school before year 9 ended to attend a pupil referral unit (PRU), which had negative consequences for her:

> *[Be]cause of what I went through [...] I got kicked out [of school] in year 9* [for] *disruptive behaviour and got sent to a centre. You only go in for your lessons, like two, three days a week not even that [and] that kind of affected me.*

Gillborn (2008) reported that black students were more likely to be over-represented in the statistics for permanent or 'unofficial' exclusions from state schools.

Several of the black respondents in this study had experienced either exclusion, threats of exclusion or had been consigned to a group in a lower setting. Shona (black Caribbean, working-class) talked of teachers warning her that she could be expelled for disruptive behaviour and bullying and that it was unlikely she would pass her A-levels:

> *I was in a very bad place mentally. I was the only black female in my class* [and] *I got bullied a lot* […] *so I became a type of bully. [...] my teacher said if you don't fix up you are going to be expelled. They gave me a lot of chances. They said I wouldn't pass my 'A' levels. That just put me off so I decided to go.*

Kerry (black British, lower working-class) shared some commonalities with Chloe and Shona when she explained that her relationship with some teachers deteriorated because *'my mum and dad split up and my behaviour wasn't very good. I would get in a lot of trouble'* in school:

> *[...] I was in the highest-level group to begin with [...] and my head of Year pushed me* [to] *do better [...] but other teachers* [were] *telling me that I am not gonna do well and that I can aim for a 'C' if I can. They always send me out of the lesson and not … be a part of it. I thought I done well in my mock exams but I got a 'U'. I ended up getting eleven GCSEs […]* [in] *maths, science, two 'A's in English. I didn't expect to do so well. I left school and went to college. [...] I got involved with a boyfriend, didn't go to college* [regularly] *and then I got pregnant.*

Francis et al. (2012) point out that the media regularly report on the underachievement and exclusion of boys whilst supposedly assuming that all girls were achieving and that there was thus no longer a need for concern. However, Kerry, Shona's and Chloe's extracts resonate with Francis et al.'s (2012) findings that, black and minority ethnic along with white working-class girls continue to be excluded and underperform in relation to other groups. Kerry vowed to never return to education and tried working in various jobs, including her mother's business:

> *I never once thought that I* [would] *ever go back* [to] *study again. I worked in a nursery […] and I work with my mum* [she's] *got her own business. I never found what I wanted to do, so I thought the only way* [was] *[…] to study for it and get what I really want to achieve.*

After finding various jobs uninteresting, Kerry's attitude to studying changed and she took advantage of the educational opportunities that she had previously avoided (see further discussion in 4.2c). Savage (2015:334) argues that, in contemporary society, while the elite commands visibility, those with limited capital *'recedes from view'*, which tends to obscure the disparities between social groups. Quinn (2010:123) states that students' often achieve readiness for HE only after withdrawing from education, as they, *'reformulated their priorities […] when material conditions within the family are more able to support their study'*. Echoing Quinn (2010), the respondents' above stories above are familiar ones within the educational and social fields where familial uncertainty, school experiences and limited opportunities to obtain various forms of capital, limits, how when or how much they participate in education, as in Kerry's case.

Habitus is also central to an analysing of inequality. For example, although the habitus has the power to modify itself, such modification is limited to the amount of economic, social or cultural capitals a person has at their disposal. The division between the levels of capital for some of the working-class and middle-class respondents meant that some working-class respondents were educationally disadvantaged and had little choice but to enter university via a non-traditional route. In contrast, the middle-class respondents were differently situated, in economic and cultural terms, to the extent that even if their university entry was delayed, they had greater flexibility as to when they would enter and more certainty about what subject to study (Reay 2004a). For example, Julie (white English, middle-class) left school with high GCSE grades but wanted to gain performance skills before entering HE. Her class background meant that university was never an impossibility: *'I did singing, flute and violin. I wanted to go into performance so I went to* [FE] *college […], had my daughter at 22 years […] then I thought I'd look for universities'*. Despite her Hungarian family background, Anne describes herself as (white

English, middle-class). Although she was schooled in the UK, she primarily felt like *'an outsider'* and, thus, she left school without the appropriate qualifications. Anne explained that *'I wanted to be seen as English'* and her experience at both primary and secondary schools suggests that she wanted to 'fit in' with the social norm.

Anne explained why:

English isn't my first language, […] [and] my parents spoke Hungarian to me but I would answer in English because I wanted to lose my accent [...]. You know how you could sense that you are not treated the same or you are looked down upon, or you are excluded […]. Once my language picked up I was on a level with my peers […] and I knew what it felt like to be a part of things.

This extract illustrates elements of a process of group assimilation, rather than integration, in order for an individual to feel included (Bourdieu 1990). Overall, the majority of the respondents did not speak of racial issues or having to 'fit in' at school, but as Archer et al. (2010) highlight, there are likely to be hidden racial tensions within institutional structures. Despite Anne's middle-class background, she felt that it was better to 'fit in' and lose her accent than to be ridiculed. Although, as with class or gender, the *'sociohistorical construct'* of 'race' (Ladson-Billings and Gillborn 2007:10) could change qualitatively over time, there remains a tendency to essentialise 'race' in *'biologistic'* terms (ibid.). Nevertheless, Anne was able to escape the outsider status that was associated with her Hungarian background by passing as white English and, presumably, her middle-class identity helped her with this. However, Shona who was the only black female in her class could not escape being embodied as a black woman.

In sum, this section captured the difficult relations that had helped shaped some of the respondents' earlier education. Interestingly, even when accounting for social class, 'race' and gender, there were more shared educational experiences between the respondents and within the group than differences. For example, some respondents were trying to balance a sense of self whilst seeking to engage academically at crucial stages in their

education. Importantly, some respondents had experienced early disruptions in their home life and schooling and had struggled to obtain the necessary qualifications to entry into HE. HE was particularly challenging for the working-class respondents who had not achieved the required grades from school or qualifications in the UK. The next section explores the respondents' reasons for pursuing HE.

4.2.   Reasons for Pursuing Higher Education

The findings in this section showed that, although respondents gave multiple reasons for attending university, four key themes emerged. The first three of these themes relate to the respondents' perceptions of the financial, material and promotional benefits of a university degree, the familial influence on their decision to attend university, and finally 'doing it for the children', which explores the emotional obligation to be good role models for their children. The final theme, 'bettering' oneself and uncovering untapped potential, relates to the respondents' desire for self-improvement and increased social mobility.

4.2a   *Financial, material and promotional benefits*

The majority of the respondents' accounts can be seen in part to reflect previous and current governments' agendas, which have stated that higher education is the key to *'a rewarding* [and] *[…] worthwhile career or a good job'* (DBIS 2011:38). Three middle-class (Anne, Julie and Leah) and five working-class (Teena, Chloe, Jo-Leona, Dyshe and Grace) respondents felt that a university degree could increase their chances of getting higher-paid jobs, being promoted and/or that the social and material benefits would improve their family's standard of living (Bourdieu 1985a). Anne (white English, middle-class) stated that

'I want a university degree because [...] having a good job and the benefits that an income brings will benefit me and the girls'. In contrast, Teena (black Caribbean, working-class) gave multiple reasons for attending university, including gaining subject specific knowledge, such as: *'the desire to understand about the human body'*, but she also recognised that her wages could no longer support a *'growing family'* and wanted a higher income and financial contentment:

> *My reason for coming to university is because I trained as a dressmaker, pattern cutter and designer [...] for 20 years. I realised that I wasn't really able to make a living and not enough for a growing family. Trainers [...] to buy, school uniform every three months it was all too expensive. I need a degree so that I can earn more money.*

Although Jo-Leona (black British, working-class) also offered several reasons for attending university, primarily she was prepared to '*suffer* [...] *if you want to go up and [...] work your way towards financial independence'*. In her opinion, a university degree was worth the 'suffering' because 'once *I pass this, once I am educated, stay on my path and I get past this bit then the world is my oyster and that's why I am going through it'*. Jo-Leona's account appears to concur with public perceptions of the benefits of HE (Ipsos MORI 2010) and of *'reaching a higher income bracket'* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010; DBIS 2011:54).

Following her divorce, Dyshe (white Albanian, working-class) wanted a higher income because relying on her husband for financial support was not a viable option:

> [The] *reason* [for studying] *is qualification of course. I don't want to follow something traditional, I want to follow something that make me progress. I came here* [to university] *for my knowledge for my career* [because] *I never wanted to work in a job* [that] *I am not getting paid for what I am doing.*

From Dyshe's perspective, the UK jobs market values qualified individuals over less qualified or unqualified ones as Bourdieu (2010) also noted. Moreover, Dyshe's perception, like those expressed by other respondents, such as Chloe (black

British/Caribbean, working-class) was that living on state benefits was unsustainable. Dyshe and Chloe saw university degrees in similar ways to Milburn's (2012:1) government report for the Cabinet Office, which suggests that a degree is *'a surer guarantor of economic security and social progress'*. Yet, Milburn's (2012) report also found the extent to which symbolic capital plays a key role in the recruitment and selection of employees (QAA 2008), commenting that, the school or university at which potential candidates gain their qualifications is often key for an employer (seeLeathwood and Read 2009). Milburn's statement echoes the previous statement of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) (2011:54) that HE is *'a powerful engine of social mobility'* through which individuals from low-socioeconomic groups could expect to attain a higher salary than their parents. From this assertion by the DBIS it seems that while inter-generational social mobility is possible, intra-generational social mobility movement between social classes is more problematic (for further disussion see Wainwright and Marandet 2010).

There were also reflections of government discourse in Chloe's narrative, such as when she stated that a university degree could potentially help her to acquire the *'nice things'* in life:

> *I came to Uni* [because] *they said having a degree, you would earn more money and obviously, I want to support my child. I want [...] a nice house so being on benefits is not going to benefit me and it's definitely not gonna benefit my child either.*

Like Chloe, Julie, (white English, middle-class) also talked about the advantage of a university degree and the limitations of living on a combination of a low wage and state benefits. Julie explained that, although work was her preferred option, some jobs had to be supplemented by state benefits with the only way of *'totally getting off benefits'* being to study for a degree:

> *I left my daughter's dad [...] and I was already working so I carried on with my job. I thought this is pointless cause I never gonna make enough money without a degree and whatever you earn extra just gets taken away from benefits. I thought the only way [...] is [...] go to university.*

Julie's 'can-do' approach mirrors official government's discourse on the 'ideal' citizen, who is expected to combine motherhood with education and/or work in order to achieve economic independence rather than be dependent on the state (Harris 2004). The decision to study means that lone parents must, like other students, apply for a student loan and/or grants, before eligibility for other state benefits can be calculated (Gingerbread 2014). Unsurprisingly, the respondents' accounts of their decision to study in HE replicate the language of government, with for example, Anne and Jo-Leona describing themselves as having done so on the promise of getting higher-paid jobs to support themselves and their families. It is also likely that the prospects of working in low paid jobs had prompted Teena and Dyshe into becoming university students, whereas Chloe and Julie no longer wanted to rely on state benefits.

Two respondents who demonstrated shared similarities but also differences are Grace (black British/African-Caribbean, working-class) and Leah (white British, middle-class). Despite their differences in class origin, both Grace and Leah were at university to increase their chances of promotion: however, they differed in the support that they received from their employer.

Despite working hard and being committed to the job, Grace felt unsupported in her job, describing how a colleague was favoured within the organisation over her:

> *In my office, […] a graduate had the academic backing [but] had no 'common-sense'. I guide them and they ended up being promoted. […] He was young white, middle-class [and] both his parents were professionals. I felt that they […] were push*[ed] *into* [a] *role that was better paid and progression in the organisation. A role that I would have been able to do, hands tied behind my back. He fitted in with management […] socially.*

Although Grace felt that, her experience or *'common-sense'* ability to make intuitive and pragmatic everyday decisions were valid skills and forms of knowledge they did not comprise an authorised form of knowing or give an indications of her graduate potential to

her employer (Hall and O'Shea 2014). As a result, Grace's 'common-sense' dispositions struggled against employer expectations. It was only after Grace had returned to work from maternity leave that she felt that a university degree was crucial for future job progression: '*I didn't want to have to take a junior position. I thought the degree you know people won't respect you […] if you haven't got this bit of paper. I have seen it before; people do have a lot of respect for it'*. Arguably, the habitus formed through gendered practices, such as in the balancing of both spheres of home and work, could deter some employers from promoting lone parents, which may have applied to the experiences Grace described (Armstrong 2006). With *'respect'* signifying *'status', 'recognition', 'honour' and 'dignity'* (Sennett 2004:49) (which is also discussed in Chapter 6), as a lone parent without a degree, Grace felt promotion was unlikely. Her experience is not uncommon and is supported by other studies which have found that higher educated mothers returning to work were more likely to achieve higher pay compared to less-qualified women (Crompton 2006).

In contrast, Leah's manager not only supported her ascent into a better paid higher-level position but also encouraged her to become better qualified: '*the children's centre manager was saying why aren't you moving up, why aren't you looking at your development [...], what more do you want to do, why don't you […] do a degree'*. Leah took the opportunity to pursue HE while maintaining a full-time position within the organisation. Echoing Grace, she felt that '*everything […] now* [is] *managers must have a degree'*.

From their extracts, it is apparent that, as employees, Leah and Grace wanted to gain *'recognition'* (Sennett 2004) from their respective organisations.   Mirroring government discourse, Leah said she was at university to '*upwardly*' progress within her organisation, while Grace talked about obtaining a university degree to earn '*respect*' (Skeggs 2002). The ways in which Grace, Leah and other respondents talked about the financial and promotional benefits of a university degree signalled that they, like Dyshe,

were not relying on ex-partners for financial support and were seeking economic certainties (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010) for themselves and for their children.

In sum, the majority of respondents gave complex and multifaceted reasons for becoming university students, but they mostly highlighted the high economic and cultural value they felt a degree could potentially bring them. As such, their rationale for entering into HE was that a university degree could be used as a bargaining tool for higher wages, as discussed by Bourdieu (2012). What was clear was that being primarily responsible for both children and domestic life, meant that the majority of respondents perceived that a degree would improve their job opportunities and earning potential and make them less dependent on state benefits and/or ex-partners. Dyshe also hoped to provide for the children. For some respondents, such as Grace and Leah, a degree meant furthering their prospects of promotion and gaining respect within the labour market. However, the data indicates that support varied and that, for some respondents, their family was the main driver for them attending university. This issue is discussed in the next section.

4.2b   Influence of family members

Family members, particularly mothers were consistently the most influential in the decision taken by some respondents to attend university, and the data showed that there was little difference between the respondents' familial attitude toward HE.

More than half the respondents were encouraged or expected to further their education. For example, Chloe (black British/Caribbean, working-class) was one of the respondents whose mothers had *'pushed'* her to study for a degree: *'one of the reasons for coming here* [to university] *was definitely because of my mother. […] The support of my*

family pushed me to want to better myself'. Kerry's (black British, lower working-class) mother was also her source of encouragement: *'my mum she always says just go straight to university'*. For Jo-Leona (black British, working-class), it was a *'community'* decision (see Sennett 2013): *'I had discussed it with my family [...] because I need a new support system, so although it was my own decision, it was a community decision at the same time'*. While not all three of the black working-class respondents' families had ever attended higher education, the support and attitude from their families had made a difference to their decision to attend university.

In contrast, Leah (white British, middle-class) described how, despite achieving good grades at grammar school, her working-class parents were less concerned about her grades and/or her receiving a university education:

> *I was a bright kid that wasn't pushed really and I had parents that didn't really go to school. I got top grades and I just said to me mum* [that] *I want to go where my friends are going to the comprehensive. She just said oh all right then.*

Leah's depiction is illustrative of cultural and social differences, where some working-class parents were less 'choosy' or 'pushy' and were more likely to leave educational decisions to their children (Hutchings 2003). Moreover, not only did it not matter whether Leah succeeded at school, her mother always put Leah's happiness over her educational achievements: *'she just thinks that I stress myself out [...] because [...] it wasn't just Uni, it was the new job. She* [said] *why are you doing that anyway (laugh)'*. Here, Leah's familial habitus appears to be attuned to those of *'manual workers'* (see Bourdieu 2010:389), meaning that her mother did not see the need to disrupt *'the division of labour (between the classes, the age groups and the sexes)'*, to which the family had become accustomed to (Ibid: 468). However, for Leah's class *'Taste is a practical mastery of distributions which makes it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall — and therefore to befit — an individual occupying a given position in social space'* (Ibid:

468). As it can, thus be (re)shaped through practice, her self-defined middle-classness points to a political era, where social inequalities between groups were less to do with 'class-capital' and more about meritocratic aspirations and social mobility (Lawler 2005).

Likewise, Sue (black African/Caribbean, working-class) received no encouragement from her mother to continue her education: 'a*t 16 I left school, I wanted to go college and my mum said you had better get a job. So I worked until I had my first daughter that was four weeks before my 18th birthday'.*

It appears that both Leah and Sue's parents took a passive approach to furthering their daughters' education, with Sue having taken her mother's advice about finding work rather than continuing her education. Mirza (1992) also reported some working-class students describing similar experiences, in which they were being encouraged to find work rather than stay in education. Interestingly, although some reports cite a lack of parental education and/or a familial background in HE as likely reasons for why many young people do not attend university, this was not the same for Chloe and Kerry (Chowdry et al. 2010; Ipsos MORI 2012).

The only male respondent, Greg (black British/African, middle-class), said '*I didn't have the choice'* whether or not to attend university, because: '*In my family* [habitus]*… it's a norm, there is no question about it. They believe highly in education, [....] you go to primary, secondary, [...] college and go to university, […] whether I need it or don't need it, it has to be done.* Mirza (1992) noted, that despite some exceptions, black families generally valued their children's education. With the exception of Sue, Mirza's findings were evident in the comments made by Greg, Chloe, Kerry and Jo-Leona, which illustrate that, despite only a few of the parents of the black and minority ethnic (BME) respondents

having a history in higher education, the majority believed in education and had high educational aspirations for their children.

There was little doubt that, with highly successful grandparents, parents, sister and brother-in-law who had all attended university, Julie (white English, middle-class), like Greg, would also espouse the familial habitus and finally study for a degree. Julie explained her parents' dismay when she delayed going to university:

> *My dad couldn't comprehend it, he just couldn't understand why you wouldn't go to university. My mum is a little more open and she thought [...] it's better for me to do it when I wanted. It was expected. My sister did her Master's [...] and her husband just finished his PhD at Cambridge. My mum's a qualified teacher [...] and my dad he went to Oxford University.*

Thus far, it appears that familial habitus, support, social capital and/or cultural expectations were factors in determining whether or not some respondents attended university (Bourdieu 1985).

Sharing commonalities with Julie and Greg, Anne (white English, middle-class) stated that 'm*y dad [...] and my brother have degrees. [...] My brother's degree* [is] *in Art and Design [*and] *both my dad and my brother have five bedroom houses. They have worked hard'*. The perception of what it means to be university educated is firmly located within Anne's familial disposition, in that she attributes her father and brother's material success to having a degree (Bourdieu 2010).

Nellie's (white French, working-class) socially mixed parents, who are divorced and never attended university, felt it unnecessary for Nellie to attend. This left Nellie feeling *'angry'* at her father, describing him as, *'macho* [and] *pathetic'* because, unlike her mother, he had the opportunity, like his father before him, to attend university. She states that, although he chose not to go, he understood the importance of HE:

> *I just feel like so angry with my parents you know [...] not really my mum she's working-class, she's not somebody that would have had that in her head to push, but my father I felt like [...] you know better. My grandfather was an Architect but*

my dad opted [out of] *university but ended up being* [an] *executive in the bank. It's his lack of care, lack of interest or even further thinking; women what you want to do that for; so to speak.*

Nellie's father's occupation is salient here, as he never attended university. Bourdieu (1985a:51) states that, for the middle-classes, education is about identity in terms of ways of thinking, lifestyle, membership and *'provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit [...]'*. Yet, it appears that Nellie's father was unconcerned about Nellie's university education, possibly because, like him, with the right 'connection', she could have a successful career (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010) without having to attend HE.

Although family encouragement and changing expectations of who can attend university were evident in some respondents' extracts, their familial habitus meant that some of the working-class respondents were in a disadvantaged position. Sue and Leah's account of their mothers' views was that HE is '[…] *not for the likes of us'* (Bourdieu 2010:381).

In sum, findings from this study show that both class and ethnicity played a role in some respondents' decision to attend university. While not all parents were supportive, parental encouragement and support emerged as positively influential in some of the working-class respondents' decision to attend HE. However, for the middle-class respondents, there were no doubts, because, to them, it was unthinkable that they would not attend university. However, it remains unclear whether parental influence and/or the need to improve their financial and social capitals were the determining factors in the respondents' decision to attend university. In this respect, a third theme to emerge was that some respondents were 'doing it for their children'.

The next section explores what respondents meant or understood by wanting to be role models.

4.2c   Doing it for the children

The findings show the struggle and sacrifice of the respondents in pursuing a career in HE, with six of the respondents indicating that their underpinning motive for attending university was that they were 'doing it for the children'. Furthermore, it seems that being a lone parent did not prevent them from wanting 'better' for themselves (Archer and Hutchings 2000) and their children. Mostly, children featured in the findings as one of the motivators for entering into HE, with Dyshe (white Albanian, working-class) saying she was at university *'to give my children a better future'* and for her future development: *'I came here for my knowledge* [and] *my career.* Expressing similar sentiments, Nellie (white French, working-class) spoke about her future hopes for herself and her son: *'I would be on the social […]* [but] *I thought I am gonna use that time to re-educate myself and get the level I need to be doing something for my son's future'*.

The data showed that some respondents, like Nellie, were prepared to give up material comforts to *'struggle'* to make a difference for their children*.* Jo-Leona (black British, working-class) also declared that, as she had *'no money...nothing material other people my age may have'*, it was important for her daughter's future that she was educated. She also stated that *'If I want a better life for myself and for my daughter and for the family you need to be educated, especially as I am a woman I am black and a single parent. That was a motivating factor'.* Jo-Leona's pursuit of an HE career was a strategy for achieving *'financial independence',* and to avoid being a *'statistic'* or associated with groups demonised for poor parenting, as described by Tyler (2008). Instead, she sought to pass on good social values that fit with the demands of good parenting.

Notably, the struggle for a better future arose as a theme mostly in the interviews conducted with respondents with no family background in HE and lower levels of economic

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and cultural capital, as discussed by Leathwood and O'Connell (2003), and which suggests a desire for greater social mobility. In echoing dominant government discourse on responsible parenting (Ben-Galim 2011), it appears that, while these respondents accepted their mothering role, as lone-parents, they also felt greater pressure to do more.

Shona (black Caribbean, working-class) explained that before her father's retirement, her Jamaican and African parents had both worked in a variety of manual jobs. Her father owned a shop that sold artefacts and worked both as a Security Guard and with the Royal Mail, while her mother obtained an Honours hairdressing qualification and also worked *'any kind of little jobs just to get us through'*. Realising that she needed job security and, like Dyshe, wanted *'a better future'* for her children, Shona was prepared to *'struggle'* and be an inspirational figure for her daughter. She explained:

> *I need to show my daughter that she's capable of more and not stop because […] we are capable of more. The first thing was for my daughter, why I am struggling so she can [...] say you know what, my mum went through this and my life is easier. So I must get through all this you know to inspire her.*

It appears that Shona's experience of work was not only a reminder of her parents' struggle, but also an inspiration to not repeat her familial work history and, instead, to (re)construct the familial habitus. As with Shona, a major theme emerging for other black respondents was to secure a structured career to *'better'* their standard of living. In short, a university degree not only offered economic stability for the future, but was also an embodiment of good parenting that might inspire their children.

Kerry (black British, lower working-class) talked of the way her mother inspired her and how she wanted to set a good example for her daughter:

> *My mum especially has been a role model to me. She's really got on with it and really done well in her life and so I wanted the same for my daughter to have that to look up to so she can feel that she would want to better herself as well. So I think [...] be at university […] for my daughter so she can feel that she would want to better herself.*

This mirrored other studies, that have suggested that it was common for black girls to model themselves positively on their mothers and previous female generations (Mirza 1992). Moreover, parents who placed a high value on education contributed more to their children's educational participation (Gorard et al. 2001). Framed within her motivation to achieve a university degree was Kerry's need to both further her credentials, in order *'to move on and move up and build my career'*, and support her child's educational advancement. Jo-Leona expressed a similar sentiment when she talked about doing it for herself and her daughter and not wanting to be a statistic. Clearly, Kerry also wanted to escape the prevailing constructed identities of lone-parents: '*I want* […] *to make sure that I am a role model […] for my daughter to look up to. I wanna prove all of them [...] people wrong and the whole statistics what they think about single parents'.* Jo-Leona and Kerry's accounts were similar to Louise's (mixed-race-Portuguese, working-class), in which she expressed a desire for her children to adopt her 'can do' attitude to life: *'Mummy is here on her own […] taking care of the house, taking care of us. She's […] at university, so yeah if mum can do it […] then we should be able to do it'.*

Some respondents commonly saw it as their responsibility to ensure that their children achieve educationally (Gray 2006), while being an inspirational role model for their children appears to be of central importance for some black respondents, such as Louise who stated that '*I wanted my children to see me as an inspiration'*.

From a post-structuralist perspective and in the context of this study, respondents being an inspiration for their children transcends *'self-regulatory practices'* (Reay 2003:310), where developing specific dispositions for their children to inherit might translate into *'the reproduction of social capital'* (Bourdieu 1985a:52). In many ways, standards of how 'good' parenting should be and/or is transmitted through essentialist assumptions of mothering and fathering practices (Miller 2012). After their breakdown of

the relationships with the children's fathers, the lone mothers in this study were constructing an identity that encompasses parenting as a positive social good. Chloe (black British/Caribbean, working-class) was concerned that, if she *'wasn't working'* or studying, she might fail to set a good example: 'm*y daughter was the main push into like doing a degree so that's* [the] *reason why I am at university'.* Arguably, the respondents illustrate how discursive messages highlighting 'good' parenting skills also meant the *'recognition of the judgements of others and awareness of social norms'* (Skeggs 2002:123). For Chloe, lone parenting, without working or studying might be seen as a practice outside of the perceived norms, and may often be regarded as shameful (Skeggs 2002).

For Greg (black British/African, middle-class) the only lone father featured in this research, university was not about the social good, but more about being able to provide for himself and his child: *'all that I want is to secure a home and regular income for my child'.* Unlike Chloe, Greg appeared less concerned about how others might perceive his unemployed lone-parent status. Thus although gendered variances existed, Greg also conforms to regulatory practices of 'good' parenting, because like the mothers he too was 'doing it for the children'.

In sum, although the respondents' primary reasons for attending university were about studying for a degree to enhance their career and improve their standard of living, one of the themes that ran through the data was the aim of setting a 'good' example for their children. Some respondents, such as Shona, Jo-Leona, Kerry and Louise, talked about being prepared to struggle for a 'better' life and be an inspiration showing their children that they too are capable of more. Despite the lack of economic, cultural and/or social capital, such individualised discourses often meant that, rather than being perceived as anything other than a 'good' parent, attending university for some respondents was their way of confirming that they met social standards and were responsible parents (Beck and

Beck-Gernsheim 2010:87). However, in their responses, there was also a desire for wanting and/or needing to use untapped potentials and to develop knowledge for their family, not only for monetary gain but also in societal terms.

The final theme discussed in this section examines the discourse of 'bettering' oneself and develop oneself personally through a university education.

4.2d   'Bettering' oneself and uncovering untapped potentials

So far the findings suggest that, for some working-class respondents, studying for a higher education degree was their way of taking control and escaping from what they might perceive to be a deficit position (Cutajar 2006). Their responses consistently indicated that they were attending university to 'better' themselves, because lacking the 'right' credentials in a meritocratic society would mean that they had somehow failed (see Reay 2001; Reay and Wiliam 1999). This also resonates with policy discourses that endorse higher education as the key to improving individual life chances (DfES 2003a). For respondents such as Sue (black African/Caribbean, working-class), university *'brings social benefits'* (DfES 2003(a):59), which might help them to move on from the previous educational underachievement that had impinged on their opportunities and choices: '*I thought [it] would be a good idea [...] to get into studying because I did badly at school and I thought it's better for me.*

Similarly, Grace (black British/African-Caribbean, working-class) wanted to *'make a change'* and to discover something new:

> *I wanted to be a dancer, I fulfilled that, then I wanted to be a mum and I did that. I was just going through a divorce and separation [and] [...] I wanted to be something but I didn't know what I wanted to be. I decided that I wanted to [...] do something new, so I just thought I'd go and study.*

Reay (2001:341) asserts that academic success for some working-class learners *'is not about finding yourself but rather losing yourself in order to find a new, shiny, acceptable, middle-class persona'*.

Despite seeing her mother run her own business, Kerry felt that because of her life experiences and situation as a lone parent, she was not even working-class:

> *My mum isn't in the struggling category whatsoever. She earns a really comfortable wage and so does my brother, but for myself I wouldn't even say I was in the working-class category at all. The lower class is how I would* [describe myself]. *I am a single parent […] and probably because of my race that just a signal that's what you're gonna be, that I am lower-class. […] that's why I want to have career and better myself.*

The uncertainty surrounding Sue, Grace and Kerry's future prospects influenced their decision to attend university as they felt that this was their way of escaping from previous life events and an opportunity to *'better'* themselves and/or to uncover untapped potential.

Losing her unskilled job had triggered Shona (black Caribbean, working-class) into realising that she had untapped potential: *'I know that I have a brain so it's important to use it'*. Shona also felt that she had more to offer than being a single parent and, in order *'to get somewhere in life'*, she had to struggle through university: *'I am here […] not be stuck working in retail when I know that isn't my potential. There is more out there for me and just because I am a single parent that doesn't mean that it stops there'*. Jo-Leona (black British, working-class) also wanted to do more to reshape her own life: *'If I want a better life for myself and for my daughter, if […] I applied myself to something and actually worked at something, then I could have anything I wanted'*. Unlike Sue, who felt university would: *'boost my confidence'*, Jo-Leona articulated confidence in her agency to become what she believed she was good at: *'I realised that […] I am not stupid and I am really smart'*.

From the respondents' perspective, as they were making decisions to realise and accomplish a cultural pattern in the future, they used meritocratic language, in the sense that, regardless of social position, anyone with a 'can do' approach can overcome previous false starts and rise to the top (Littler 2013).

Sharing these meritocratic principles, Sue stated that *'I join*[ed] *the Civil Service* [as an] *Income Support Officer and thought that's brilliant, that's a good way to get into a government job [...]'*. She invested time in her Civil Service work, which had also given her the confidence to move on: '*I wanted to better my education. I wanted to go to university because I [...] thought well I've worked all this time in the Civil Service I can cope with university'.* Echoing Archer and Hutchings (2000), Sue's comment also provides a glimpse into the ways in which Grace, Jo-Leona and Shona acted as agents of their own destinies, viewing higher education as a worthwhile struggle in order to progress and/or 'better' themselves and, in the process, differentiate themselves from other lone parents.

In sum, for the working-class respondents in this study, education meant prosperity, self-improvement, respect, acceptance and an opportunity to rethink their life course. For some, it was also an opportunity to realise untapped potential after experiencing poor job satisfaction. Underpinning their narratives was the notion of wanting to 'better' themselves and their families in relation to cultural and societal values and norms. Unlike the middle-classes, who are like *'fish in water'* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:127) in HE, for the working-class respondents such as Shona, Jo-Leona and Sue, HE was a challenge and, by adopting a meritocratic attitude, they felt that they would succeed through talent and hard work (Littler 2013). However, the process of change may be challenging, as the habitus engaged in a new field (game) with new rules (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007).

The next section explores some of the key factors that could be seen to have helped or hindered the respondents' routes into and choice of university. It also discusses how they dealt with the specific structural barriers with which they were confronted.

4.3. Entry Routes and University Choices

This section unpacks some of the factors that influenced the respondents' choice of university. Their educational routes were varied and complex, with all but two respondents having attended Further Education (FE) colleges before applying for a university place. As previously discussed, some of the respondents had underachieved academically at school and, therefore, used alternative routes to overcome academic restrictions. Specifically, five respondents studied on Access courses for the specific purpose of preparing and building academic skills and confidence. Two followed the Foundation Degree route, while the other 10 had chosen to study for qualifications at various levels or, having gained work experience, applied as mature students.

Chloe (black British/Caribbean, working-class) took advantage of an Access to University course: *'I wasn't really academic and I obviously had no qualifications. I done Access to media studies for a whole year and then from there I was able to apply for a degree'*. Similarly, Louise (mixed-race African/Portuguese, working-class) explained that her adult education teachers had encouraged her to: *'go into further education, so I did an Access course in Art [...]. I was advised that [...] the next stage would have to be university'*. Although Louise had offers at two post-1992 universities, the other university *'[...] lacked tact with mature students, whereas this one seems [...] more integrated [...] more appropriate [...] more open compared to other universities to mature students'*. Access

courses and Foundation Degree programmes are often run in collaboration with an FE and/or local HE institution and, although choice is often limited with little room for negotiation (Furlong and Cartmel 2009), personal and social identities tend to be less challenging for non-traditional students (Lister 2003).

Shona (black Caribbean, working-class) participated in various part-time courses, completed an Access course and applied to two universities:

> *I went to college and did an Access course. I applied through UCAS because at the time I wanted to do teaching. My friend was doing her PGCE and she was giving me all the horror stories so when it was time for me to pick I chose* [this university] *as my first choice* [because they] *replied to me quicker.*

Although some respondents took higher risks when choosing a university, for example, by applying directly to individual universities, others like Anne (white English, middle-class) thought that WP courses worked well in combination with her caring responsibilities: *'just along the road, there was the BEd Access course. It was just one year and you pay* [a small fee] *to do the course, they had good connections with the university'.* Anne highlights how affordability is a constant concern regardless of social capital and might determine both choice of and access to HE institutions (Callender and Jackson 2005). Moreover, it seems likely that concerns about affordability will continue as the government has increased tuition fees.

As discussed earlier, three respondents arrived in the UK already qualified. Gillian (black Caribbean, working-class) explained that although '*I did primary education and I taught at a secondary school for three years before coming here'*, and was told to complete an Access course, '*after coming here I did Access to Teacher Training but* [had] *immigration problems and I wasn't able to start the degree'.* In the meantime, she took on *'some mentoring. It was like voluntary work'.* While Gillian was one of the few respondents that had received offers from pre-1992 universities, her final choice of university was made based on feeling *'a sense of one's place'* (Bourdieu 2010:473) :

I [was] *running late and I called the university. The lady said, you'll be late but still come. I went for the interview […] and two days later […] I got through and I said you know what, I am not going to bother about […] the others. […] I just thought let me settle with this one.*

With some groups tending to actively choose post-1992 universities (Furlong and Cartmel 2009), Gillian made her university choice based on locality, or, as Reay (2005b) suggests, because it 'fitted' with her classed and/or racialised identities. This gives an insight into why post-1992 HEIs also offer vocationally orientated and sub-degree level Foundation Degrees for professions, such as health worker, nursery professional, classroom assistant or police officer, which are predominantly drawn from working-class groups (Leathwood and Read 2009). Commenting on who goes where, Watson (2006:8) claims that *'separating sheep from goats'* does not achieve equity even if *'the pens are labelled 'academic' and 'vocational' or 'public' and 'private''*, while Bourdieu (2001:164) argues that *'downclassing'* some diplomas helps to regulate structural hierarchies by differentiating between social groups and spaces.

Nellie (white French, working-class) and Greg (black British/African, middle-class) had all taken the Foundation Degree route; however, despite their shared lone parent status, gender, class and 'race' still separated them. Given his family history, it was customary that Greg would follow an academic route, while, in contrast, Nellie was expected to make a vocational transition. However, with the support of her college tutor, Nellie found the confidence to apply to university:

I applied for […] level three in Early Years. My tutor was brilliant and inspiring. She said why don't you do the foundation degree. I thought once you are on the foundation degree, […] you have to continue with it 'cos' […] you can't just do foundation and that's it. […] so she said, you might as well do the degree and then after that you have options.

Historically, mothers have not only been responsible for their children's education up to the point of work (Vincent and Warren 1998), but have also been encouraged to combine childcare with study or work (Compton 1997). This is often cited as an attempt to

regulate and control women parenting role, or what Skeggs (1997:52) refers to as the *'soft policing'* of mothers, particularly working-class mothers who should also participate in caring courses (Ibid.).

It appears that Nellie valued the Foundation Degree, whereas Greg, unlike Gillian, had no *'sense of one's place'* and blamed his *'bad luck'* on his lack of educational credentials:

> *I started university in Nigeria and I came back to England and […] because I didn't have college certificates over here, I needed to have some way of going into university. It was a bit of bad luck why I started with a Foundation course for a year.*

Greg found that different forms of capital are relational and that his could not be easily transferred to HE intuitions in the UK. Like Greg, some of the other respondents attended Foundation Degree and/or Access to HE courses, which acted as enablers to their entry into HE, which would not have otherwise been possible. With less capital, several of the working-class respondents attended FE colleges to explore different educational opportunities before HE became a possibility. However, some of these entry courses may also have limited the type of university the respondents could choose. Ball et al. (2002b) stated that *'there is an implicit recognition of differences between universities and between university intakes'* and that some social groups tend to choose which university to attend based on such differences.

These differences have been described as being manifested into two types, the *'contingent choosers'* and *'embedded choosers'* (Reay et al. 2005b:112). Contingent choosers rely on *''cold' knowledge'* (ibid.:114), which refers to encouragement from others, word-of-mouth and/or a limited amount of information about HE. They may be poor *'pedagogic communicat(ors)'*, not only because language is a process through which to communicate but also because it requires communicators to have the ability to decode complex meanings from messages, a skill which develops from early learning and is an

important factor in educational success (Bourdieu and Passeron 2011:101).   The diversity of the lone parent students in this study means that, as some respondents were not accustomed to the nuances and phrases used in HEIs, they were unlikely to feel at ease or able to express themselves in ways expected of them at university. For example, Dyshe (white Albanian, working-class), who is a second language speaker, explains her progression and her choice of university:

> *I didn't know any word of English, then I decided I would do a makeup course. […] I [also] stud[ied] bookkeeping AAT NVQ level two. My friend use to be here and she said why don't you do it. I said that's a good idea and […] apply for university.*

Dyshe's lack of English meant she had been unable to decode the 'right' information and, instead, had relied on a friend's encouragement to develop her interest in pursuing a degree in business studies, an action which potentially *'produces a lasting habitus'* to pass onto her children (Bourdieu and Passeron 2011:31).

Sharleene (mixed-race British/Caribbean, working-class), however, had no specific plan:

> *I didn't know what to do. I looked at A Level maths but didn't think that I could do it. I chose English Language and Literature but I didn't get on with my teacher so I switched to law and found it very interesting* [but] *I didn't want a career and for some strange reason I chose accounting.*

Sharleene also appeared to feel distant from the *'scholarly language'* and dispositions that those with a family history in HE are able to utilise to find the right course (Bourdieu and Passeron 2011:73). Likewise, after travelling widely and working in various countries, Marianna (white Spanish, working-class) needed some stability for her son, but with little information, she acted on word-of-mouth: '*I had a friend studying at this university and she brought me a prospectus. I had a look and I joined the university'.* With no other links to HE, Marianna applied directly to the university based on her friend's advice and without comparing universities *'I was very happy with the university'*.

Repeatedly, many of the working-class respondents accepted their first offers without enquiring about other universities. Jo-Leona (black British, working-class) chose the university because she: *'knew this Uni. I lived locally so I called, but the application was online, everything was very easy to apply'*. Equally, for Kerry (black British, lower working-class), the locality and entry process was easy: *'I only kept with the close ones that were nearby me'*.

Interestingly, as *'embedded choosers'*, there were noticeable differences in the educational practices of the middle-class respondents, where *''hot knowledge'* (Reay et al. 2005b:119) and *'pedagogic communication'* (Bourdieu and Passeron 2011:101) enabled them to decipher complex language to find the comparable educational value of a course (Reay et al. 2005). For example, Leah (white British, middle-class) had chosen the university because she '*couldn't see the course anywhere else* [to fit with] […] *a day release. [This university] had the course that I liked the sound of'*. Julie's (white English, middle-class) family intentionally chose the university for her: '[my family] *helped me filter through all of them and this is the only place I liked the sound of and the courses in music management. So that's why I picked this one'*. As *'embedded choosers'*, Julie and Leah were both concerned about which university best suited their interests, although, with a familial history of university attendance, Julie had a wider knowledge of HE league tables and the types of available options from which to choose. However, Julie's decision to study at a low status university was primarily based on not being able to find the course on which she wanted to study elsewhere: '*I couldn't find… [music management] anywhere else'. So that's why I picked this one*'. Whereas the working-class respondents placed less importance on interest and had prioritised their choice of university according to word-of-mouth, unplanned opportunity, locality, ease of access and/or perceived friendliness (Brooks 2003).

In sum, despite class differences, there were similarities among the respondents. For a variety of different reasons, the majority of respondents had left school and studied at an FE college before entering HE. A number of the respondents (specifically those from overseas) had to undergo formal tests or study on specific programmes such as Access and Foundation degree courses, while others, such as Marianna, Jo-Leona, Kerry and Leah, applied directly to their chosen HEI. Bourdieu's (2012:72) concept of habitus begins to explain not only the *'structured structures'* of the respondents' educational experiences, but also how their locations functioned as *'structuring structures'* helping and helped to shape their educational choice of pursuing HE. For example, the educational decisions of the *'contingent choosers'* were made via word-of-mouth and not based on any familial history of HE. In contrast, the middle-class respondents had insight into their choice of university and the educational pathways available to them. Thus, according to the social and cultural capital within the family and the location of the field and spaces that the dominant culture inhabits, its habitus has the ability to both adapt and structure future choices and lifestyles, while also reproducing past conditions that determine present practices.

As this chapter has demonstrated, cultural capital acts as a mechanism to reproduce particular social conditions acquired at an early age. The next chapter takes the journey with the respondents to the next stage, as they discuss attending university, and their experiences of being lone parent students.

Chapter 5

Being a Lone Parent Student

This chapter reports on the respondents' experiences as university students. Bourdieu (1990:56) states that, although habitus has the ability to adapt and change in different surroundings, *'at the same time'*, it also excludes itself from places that are *'not for the likes of us'*. This chapter focuses on how the respondents adapt and cope with the unforeseen and ever-shifting exigencies of two competing institutions – HE and family life. Three themes emerged during analysis. The first discusses the respondents' assimilation into and connection with university life, and the second investigates academic relationships. The third explores how respondents combine studying with caring responsibilities, such as, how they manage the public and private spheres, which relates to research question two.

5.1. Assimilation and Connection

This section is organised around two themes, 'fitting-in' to new spaces and connecting with technology.

5.1a   Fitting-in to new spaces

Some respondents reported that, as a condition of being allowed entry into HE, they felt they had to assimilate and 'fit in' spaces without disturbing the hegemonic structures of the university. Some were explicit about feeling out of place (Bourdieu 2010) or occupying spaces that were, primarily, not *''reserved' for them'* (Puwar 2004:1).

Three respondents, Grace (black British/African-Caribbean, working-class), Dyshe (white Albanian, working-class) and Gillian (black Caribbean, working-class) spoke about the difficulties of 'fitting-in'. Grace stated that: *'I feel that other people know things that I don't know and I'm like, I don't fit in, where did they find that out? It's really difficult, a lot of the stuff I haven't even done before'*. Findings from earlier studies on students' preparation for university show that middle-class students adjust *'to the interest of those who dominate it* [an institutional space]*'* (Bourdieu 2010:473) because they have a better understanding of what is expected of them (Crozier et al. 2008).

Despite the diversity of the university, some respondents felt ethnically challenged, made possible by the old and new forms of ethnic diversity coexisting through cultural *'difference/Otherness'*, such as language (Archer and Francis 2007:148). Dyshe said that *'the first time here I found it stressful* [because] *I didn't know how things worked'* and, describing feeling unrehearsed, stated that *'it's not been very good for me.* She explained why:

> *For me it's hard to like say exactly what I mean. When I speak English I always refer back to my own language, and if I say something to* [an] *English speaker they think, oh she's so dumb she can't even speak English.*

While initially optimistic: *'everybody I met says oh I went to* [that university]*'*, Gillian soon felt out of place because '*people didn't expect that* [I] *would understand English and no one spoke to* [me] *in the beginning. But as time* [went] *by they realise that, oh she's from Jamaica* [she] *knows* [the language]*'*. The problem confronting both Dyshe and Gillian was that *'in the higher echelons of social life* [...] *it is not only the imperial language that is a requirement but rather a specifically classed form of speaking'* (Puwar 2004:109).

A key element of the habitus is its ability to adapt to different situations, but the speed in which adaptation occurs largely depends on the amount of capital already invested in the field (Bourdieu 1990). This explains why, as first time entrants, Grace and

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Dyshe initially felt that university might not be for people like them, whereas Gillian's previous investment in previous learning and teaching meant that she was able to acquire a certain position for herself among her peers (Fanon 1986).

The data also shows the dualism between the habitus and field when Grace comment that *'I may lack knowledge about the subject',* but also recognises that to survive in university *'I need to fit into what's going on here and fit into whatever I can do'.* Grace having encountered a new field devoid of established social networks or connections with people *'conditioned'* in that same field, in accordance with Bourdieu, Grace's habitus had no *'feel for the game'* (Bourdieu 2007:128)*.* It is also likely that some respondents may have been missing key information from previous institutions about the structures and conditions of HE.

Chloe (black British/Caribbean, working-class) felt FE was different to being a university student:

> *It just felt like it was a bit too much because it's different to what I expected, in the sense that you should just get on with it kinda thing. That is how it comes across. Whereas, the access course ...the tutors they were really pushing us to do well because of our backgrounds.*

Chloe's educational experience, similar to Grace, Dyshe and Gillian's, illustrates how unprepared their working-class backgrounds made them for the kind of students they were expected to be. Grace stated that even with *'numeracy experience and knowledge […] I thought that maybe I should have done a foundation or an entrance to university to prepare me'.* Chloe and the others' comments show how habitus sometimes struggles to connect with a new educational field. Although the respondents saw the benefits of HE, to become an independent learner, they had to adapt to its existing cultures (Bourdieu 1993a:88) even if they were different to what they knew. In contrast, those respondents with a familial background in HE, *'ha*[d] *no need to ask'* because they were able to adapt to the (un)expected (Bourdieu 1990:82).

This process fits with the assumption that it is a natural part of life's that individuals move fluidly from one learning stage to another (Quinn 2010). The view also persists that, following an unencumbered learning transition, there is a period of stability, and that failure to manage or overcome barriers during transfer indicates an individual's lack of readiness for higher-level education (ibid.). Such views and the ideologies behind them assume a streamlined transition where students arrive with accumulated capitals that are 'fit' for purpose. As some respondents reflected on earlier educational experiences, it became clear that such assumptions were unhelpful for the 'non-traditional' respondents. Even after completing Access courses, some still felt unprepared, insecure and marginalised in the university environment.

Like Chloe, Shona (black Caribbean, working-class) described feeling that:

> To *be honest, I don't think any course be it A-level, Access or whatever can truly prepare you for university life because it is completely different. Because, as much as they* [FE] *try to prepare you, there is only so much they are able to do*.

Chloe's extract suggests that the institutional habitus of FE and HE operate differently and that her inability to manage any differences may limit her life chances. Nellie (white French, working-class) also found that, unlike her experiences of FE, where learning was more directed and familiar, university was alien and about being independent and 'getting on with it'. She explains the differences:

> *Uni is different because at the college you have a closer relationship with your lecturers. It's different because it's closer, a smaller classroom with the same people but Uni is more distant and there are more people in the class. It's not what I expected. I found the lecturers interesting, they know their thing, you are inspired by their knowledge and you feel that you are not cheated. But it forces you to be independent in your learning*.

Present in the respondents' comments was also the sense of a loss of the intimacy that they had previously enjoyed in FE, where their teacher was also a friend or someone with whom they could discuss personal issues (Scanlon et al. 2007). Nellie felt that familiarity was lost in the extra-large lecture rooms: *'I thought all that is very exciting but*

the problem is that I feel so small'. Although committed to the pursuit of academic excellence, she described feeling overwhelmed: '*I look at them like this wall of knowledge and you feel like a duck'.*

Grace, Dyshe, Chloe, Shona and Nellie's extracts are examples of the displacement that persists as they try 'fitting into' a university system modelled on historic pedagogic traditions that have excluded both women and working-class students (Moss 2004). Moreover, the harder they tried to connect with the university culture, the more they felt the *'weight of the water'* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:127) and had to find new ways of adjusting. As Jo-Leona (black British, working-class) said: *'I feel like I have been dropped in the middle of a desert and told to find my way home.'* Not having a *'feel for the game'* left Jo-Leona feeling displaced (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:128) and Nellie feeling as though she had been thrown in at the deep end and had to learn to swim to survive.

The data continually showed that familial habitus and institutional habitus strongly influence the disparities between respondents' expectations and their education. For example, Julie (white English, middle-class) found the academic year *'really tough'* because of structural issues rather than 'fitting in':

> *I am getting there because when I came to university I spoke to someone and they said that they would be really adaptable to me being a single parent* [and] *I have a close group of friends at university, which is really weird because they don't have kids. So yeah, the only real hang-up I have with the university is the timetabling.*

Notable is the way that institutional habitus, like familial habitus, reproduces wider social discourses, where merely by entering, for example, an educational field, agents agree to its rules, which *'goes without saying…*[when] *entering into the game'* (Bourdieu 1993b:74). Thus, inequality is constructed in classed terms. Julie, for example, was bought up in a family of experienced HE players, whereas working-class respondents, such as Jo-Leona, were the first in their family to learn how the game is played. Similar to some

working-class respondents, Anne (white English, middle-class) had also completed an Access course. However, her familial habitus worked to reproduce advantageous life chances. Like Julie, Anne organised prearranged meetings with relevant professionals to communicate her needs. Such practices point to the key differences between how 'non-traditional' respondents and respondents steeped in a family history of university attendance prepared for HE. Anne stated that:

> *You just have to be prepared and know what is coming next. Before I started university, I speak with my father and brother […] to make a head start and then I speak with the lecturer about the work. Now I'm able to work towards that finish piece thinking I have done this the best that I can.*

Social positioning appears to dominate how some respondents communicated competing priorities to academic and/or support staff. For instance, following pre-university open day events, in contrast to the middle-class respondents, some working-class respondents either had limited access to academic staff or were unfamiliar with the institutional habitus and/or how to *'take up* [their] *social space'* (Lawler 1999:14). The fear of being exposed had left some working-class respondents such as Nellie dreading that *'when you write your essays you think oh God, he's gonna read that, I hope he does not recognise my name'*. Anne was less concerned about 'fitting-in' or receiving critical comments on assignments, but did hope that her work was valued: *'I am happy with it and I hope the person marking will be'*. Other concerns expressed by the respondents relate to becoming *'self-reliant'* independent learners (Leathwood and Read 2009:97), with Jo-Leona stating *'I had essays due and I work hard like everyone else in my class but I don't know […] it is us relying on ourselves'*. Congruent with other respondents' comments, Sue stated that *'the lecturers are really informative they do try and help you in the classes but […] they're only interested in what they've got to teach you and that's it'*. Sue's comment clearly shows how focussing predominantly on teaching content could work to exclude individuals with limited social capital (Bourdieu 1990). Repeatedly, some working-class

respondents found a mismatch between their early educational histories and their experiences of university, and felt discouraged when lecturing staff showed little interest in them, or even their work.

In sum, this section revealed that the challenges were more pronounced for some working-class respondents than for the middle-class respondents as they assimilated into the university culture. The findings showed that respondents with a university-educated family were able to transfer more smoothly from one educational field to another. Conversely, some respondents with no family history of higher education had found the move to university more problematic due to the habitus becoming fragmented as it moves between its 'structured' dispositions to a 'structuring' disposition. For example, working-class respondents found the transition a challenge as they moved from the familiarity of FE to interacting with the unfamiliar university culture and its large group learning format (see also Read et al. 2003). As the data from Grace, Shona, Leah and others demonstrates, respondents had constructed their expectations of a university education through their previous educational habitus.

5.1b   Connecting with technology

Although respondents interpreted their experiences differently, many had encountered mismatches between an earlier educational habitus and their new learning environment. Even when 'non-traditional' respondents had made sense of the educational world, there was a mismatch between the old and new habitus. For example, Leah (white British, middle-class) expressed concerns about the technological culture at the university:

> *It is a culture where you need to be ready for the lectures and of you being responsible for your own learning etc. Everything goes on Weblearn. But* [with] *all that technology I have only just learnt how to go onto a discussion group and I don't*

feel connected with the university at all. I just haven't got the time to find things out for myself.

As a second language speaker, Dyshe also spoke about the challenges involved in using technology: *'because of my language I couldn't connect, I didn't know how to use the Weblearn for learning materials'*.

Leah and Dyshe's extracts indicate a certain type of institutional habitus which, instead, of its diversity bringing together uneven histories and different cultures, had positioned them as lacking certain capitals, thus reinforcing the class inequalities identified by Sennett and Cobb (1993) as *'hidden injuries of class'*. With virtual learning environments (VLEs) now standard throughout the education system, and all of the respondents equipped with home technology, it is possible to assume that students can access information remotely via their laptops, IPod's and smart-phones etcetera.   While educational research has highlighted the multi-layered inequality of working-class students' access and experiences in HE (Reay 2003), less is known about the challenges that VLEs pose to marginal groups such as lone parents.   Unsurprisingly, in becoming independent learners, through the use of a VLE, without having a teacher (Canaan and Shumar 2008) had resulted in Leah, Dyshe and Nellie feeling less connected. This is because habitus not only acknowledges its current position, but also draws on multiple historical and social factors, such as class and age, that bring further anxieties for some respondents about their ability to finance or cope with new technology.

Individual supervision and guidance do, however, have its benefits, as Greg (black British/African, middle-class) found when a lack of finance prevented him from attending university on a regular basis:

> *My PAT* [Personal Academic Tutor] *is trying to guide me via long-distance* [but] *encourages me to attend classes. I made use of Weblearn and the Internet. I download the lecture notes and research using the Internet but I am worried that I don't know my tutors.*

Typically, habitus feels more at home when deployed in a field that it recognises. Although Greg was familiar with the physical space of the university, he realised that, with childcare responsibilities, it was difficult to separate the two spheres (home and university). While the use of technology, facilitated his study from home, his affiliation with the university enabled him to rely on agents within the institution for support in order to aid his sense of belonging (Bourdieu and Passeron 1992), thus meaning that he was not concerned about independent learning, he did express concern at never meeting his lecturers.

In sum, the findings suggest that there was a tendency for respondents whose family members had not attended university to feel less connected with the institution, as their experiences did not matched by their expectations. Many felt overwhelmed by the notion of being 'self-reliant' independent VLE learners with little ability to access support from lecturers. Although the academic progression of the respondents is not the primary focus of this study, the concerns outlined above might put non-traditional students at risk of failing to complete university, with lone parent students being one such group (Hinton-Smith 2008b).

Therefore, the next section discusses the learning support structures that the respondents had utilised to help them complete their studies, including the learning or support groups they rely on and/or the academic services they use.

5.2. Developing Academic Relationships

The data presented in this section shows distinct differences in the way that some respondents negotiated the type of support they required or expected from academic and/or support staff at the university. Generally, although it was difficult to separate the

respondents' differing academic experiences, they discussed three broad types of support: lecturer support and service location; 'Personal Academic Tutor' (PAT) support; and, the support services provided by the university.

5.2a   Lecturer and support service location

'Non-traditional' students are often described as 'needy' (Leathwood and Read 2009), and out of place, or, as already been mentioned, that university 'is not for the likes of them', unlike the more 'traditional' university students for whom tertiary education was originally intended (Ogren 2003). Therefore, given the imbalance and/or lack of support from family and/or friends, some respondents were hoping that lecturers would help reduce the shortfall. Instead, they found discrepancies in the level of support and encouragement they received from their lecturers, which left them feeling disillusioned about university and doubting that the support was even available. For example, things were not as Teena (black Caribbean, working-class) had expected: '*coming to Uni I was hoping I'd get tutor support, well at least face-to-face tutor support'.* It appears that as a *'contingent chooser'*, Teena had a sense of hopefulness rather than concrete knowledge about the type of institution she chose (Reay et al. 2005a:119). Despite attending inductions and other orientation events before the academic year began, Teena was left confused about the type of tutorial support on offer.

Despite the fact that respondents had attended various inductions, some still felt disorientated and unfamiliar with aspects of the university environment. Leah (white British, middle-class) was critical of the university culture and the lack of support provided:

> *It's* [almost] *three years and I still don't know my way around properly or who to see for certain things. I think the induction and everything was very poor and we need as much support from support service as maybe the 18 year olds because it all new to us as well.*

Leah describes experiencing the unfamiliar, in contrast with her daily life, where the habitus would orient her actions without her having first to consciously determine *'the psycho-social strains and academic costs of juggling work, family and university'* (Reay et al. 2010:118). As mature students with caring responsibilities, some respondents required specific information to help them manage their competing priorities when studying for their degree (McGivney 2004).

After attending university for three years, Teena stated that:

> *I came to some sort of open day event* [where] *I spoke to someone who encouraged me that there are older learners here and that some of them haven't got science background. But I am feeling really out of my depth even after the induction because I still don't know who to ask for help*.

The respondents' comments demonstrate that, even after a series of introductions both to members of the lecturing staff and the study programmes themselves, they were still unsure about the different support services available on campus and how or where to seek help. Lacking in capitals and an HE habitus, some mature students felt inadequately prepared for university and needed additional support to help them build confidence post-induction.

As well as the lack of support, a recurring theme is that, although some respondents had been attending university for a number of years, they still found that lecturers were uninterested in them, and unwelcoming and unhelpful. Sue (black African/Caribbean, working-class) explained why she attended inductions: *'I went to the information sessions because [I] have been out of studying for a long time and I learnt how to do coursework and preparing to study'*. However, she also described feeling disillusioned: *'they say that these things are in place but [...] they don't want to know. When it comes down to it, you don't really get the support'*. University was also not as Teena envisaged: *'the human side of university I found really hard to deal with because, humanity I think lecturers leave it*

outside, I find that they are clinical'. Teena's comment reflects the experiences of other respondents, who had also hoped that their lecturers would be more responsive and sensitive to lone parent students' needs. Moreover, some felt that their lone-parent status was neither valued nor recognised as different from that of other students. Dyshe (white Albanian, working-class) said: '*What can I say? Sometimes they* [tutors] *are not supportive and for me it's hard. I don't like that scenario because at my age I'm a parent and I started learning and progressing at a fast period'.*

The study revealed that respondents without familial HE capital were less likely to separate study from family life and may indeed require the understanding and support of lecturing staff. In spite of her struggles with the demands of studying and raising a family, Dyshe had made progress without the support of lecturers. Similarly, Sue felt that, although knowledgeable, lecturers were unapproachable: '*you can't wrong their lectures but I just thought that maybe they should just at least have a little empathy'.* Chloe (black British/Caribbean, working-class) was surprised to find that her lecturer knew little about her circumstances:

> *They have treated me as myself; they haven't treated me as person with a child. I am in my third year and one of my tutors that […] I could go and talk to her about my work and everything, the other day, I told her that my little girl wasn't well, she didn't even know that I had a child.*

Chloe's experience is an example of the lack of knowledge about and interest in the respondents and their lives, which they felt that lecturers had shown. Jo-Leona (black British, working-class) was concerned that '*I don't know as a single parent the lecturers could support us like they do the younger students'.*

In general, related studies on parent students also raise concerns about both how to (Green 2003), and the continuing need to, better support parent-carers in higher

education (Marandet and Wainwright 2010). In this study, there were instances in which some respondents felt that they had to negotiate for space that was different from that required by younger students without family responsibilities. Sue summed this up: *'I've got kids and I'm on my own and a couple of the lecturers said to me 'well you're not the only one with children'. Why don't lecturers look at you as individuals? Why do they look at you like just students*?' These findings reflect tensions between the respondents' external lives and the hegemonic continuance of the university habitus, where *'diversity is valued'* providing it does not reshape the existing university culture (see Cotterill and Waterhouse 1998:9). As Edwards (1993) also asserted, the majority of respondents in this study had no desire to separate the university from their family lives. They were trying to embody both past and present dispositions. Chloe felt that *'they just treat me as Chloe and not Chloe with a daughter'*. In contrast, Anne (white English, middle-class) felt it was not necessary to disclose her lone parent status:

> *I was quite happy from my purposes* [that] *it didn't come through that I was a single parent. There were fathers that saw their children on the weekends but I was probably the only single parent on the course.*

Anne's extract corroborates the findings of other studies, where parent students – usually mothers – do not necessarily disclose their caring responsibilities and may downplay being a parent with a young family (Alsop et al. 2008; Brooks 2012b). Whilst Anne was not the only respondent to keep the two spheres of her life separate, some, such as Grace, hid their lone-parent status by maintaining the appearance of being married (discussed in Chapter 6). Here Anne was concerned about being put under surveillance by others based on their own maternal expectations of motherly duties: *'you know I don't want to be someone to watch out for because I might be taking time* off'. Such fears stem from wanting to be judged as competent rather than as someone at risk of failing in order to maintain the boundaries between university and family (Lynch 2008).

In the absence of tutorial support, some respondents discovered for themselves who to see and where to go for themselves, or relied on information from their peers, who were often better informed than the lecturers were. Gillian (black Caribbean, working-class) utilised her connections with her peers: *'when my bursary wasn't forthcoming, the lecturers didn't know where to send me but other older students that had gone through the process before knew'*. Connecting with students similar to themselves often helped to reduce uneasiness and provide a *'sense of one's place'* (Bourdieu 2010:470). Making connections, as Wenger (1998) noted, helps to create a sense of belonging and form 'communities of practice', in which learners develop practice that is meaningful and relevant for them.

Jo-Leona (black British, working-class) found not only that the university was unsupportive but also that it encouraged a particular type of student:

> *I find myself very reliant on my peers as opposed to the university to find out what's going on and what I need to do. My gripe is to do with the fact that older students aren't accommodated. Younger students seem to have their own thing going on.*

From Gillian and Jo-Leona's perspective, although they found the university culture inimical, through group recognition they were able to contextualise their mature student experiences by pooling information and turning it into reliable capital. For example, to mitigate the risk, habitus tends to exclude itself from certain situations; however, these respondents illustrated the permeability and responsiveness of the habitus in its interaction with those who had a shared sense of 'people like us'. In contrast, other respondents unintentionally reinforced previous socialised learning or expectations, what Bourdieu (1967:344) termed *'cultured* habitus', which further generated feelings of apprehension, tension or ambivalence. Such tensions were apparent in the respondents' interactions with personal academic support. Despite Bourdieu's lack of explanation about why some individuals within the same *'class or family* [do not] *adopt the same practices'*

(Nash 1999:177), as discussed above, habitus not only acts in relation to what it already knows, but also aspires to things it does not know.

5.2b   Personal academic tutor (PAT) support and university support services

Although some respondents had received varying levels of support from their lecturer and/or their 'Personal Academic Tutor' (PAT), judging from the very limited responses about the support scheme, it is likely that some respondents had little understanding of how the PAT support system worked. For example, the university's pastoral and academic support system allocates a PAT to each student with whom they are able to discuss academic or personal issues. While Nellie (white French, working-class) described needing academic support but, when probed as to why and subsequently about her relationship with her PAT, Nellie replied: '*what's that?*' After some explaining, Nellie explained further, saying *'I don't know who that is. I am really bad I am really lost. These are the things I am not really good at. She or he didn't email me. I didn't get any news'*. Nellie admitted to not knowing her PAT and felt responsible for not knowing. Interestingly, unlike Gillian, Nellie did not talk about receiving *'grapevine'* information from peers (Ball and Vincent 1998:380), with her comment instead revealing the ambiguities among the students' relationships with their PATs. Such inconsistencies could prevent mature students from developing deeper relationships with academic staff. However, if the PAT is less experienced than the student who is receiving the support, their role might be as challenging for them as is the student's role being experienced (Wilson 1997:362), as Sue (black African/Caribbean, working-class) illustrates:

> *I fell behind* [and] *my PAT said: 'well you're behind, you haven't done this and you're gonna have to do this' and I said I am having problems I am not coping any more. He was like 'why' and I said it's personal and he went 'that's not good enough'. I found it very hard to tell my PAT* [because] *there was a big age gap between him*

and me or [for me to] *reach out to lecturers and say I am falling behind, I can't do this and I can't do that.*

Despite Sue's tension between herself and her PAT, but not all of the respondents spoke about conflicts with academic staff and/or the supportive service. Kerry (black British, lower working-class) acknowledged that she could *'email them with drafts'* if she needed help and/or arrange to *'have tutorials'*, stating that:

They are quite good, you get to talk to them about where you are at and if you've done any work you bring it in for them to have a look at. I did last time and bought in my plans for them to see and for them to tell me what else I need and that helped.

Others also found that they could connect with lecturers and their PAT outside of the university structured support system. Louise (mixed-race African/Portuguese, working-class) said:

With the course, I have the module leader and my PAT and I feel they are both very approachable. If I have any problems at home with my sons or if I feel ill, they understand [and] *will email me whatever was done in class and even my colleagues will do the same thing.*

There were distinct differences among the support Louise received from her module leader, her PAT and from 'the university' itself:

The university is not as supportive. There is so much misinformation [and] *not everyone is aware. Many people are not clear about what they can get to help them integrate socially or psychologically into the university life.*

Sharleene (mixed-race British/Caribbean, working-class) was more assertive in seeking help: *'I don't have anyone outside of Uni [so] I just go to lecturers. When I was doing my first essay, he* [the tutor] *[…] talked with me […] separately from the class and […] answered emails'.* As already discussed, not all lecturers were accessible with Sharleene stating *'but* [with some] *studies you can't get in touch with anybody. You don't know who you are supposed to speak to'.* Sharleene's comment illustrates not only the 'hit or miss' relationships most lone parent students experience when they are in need of support, but

also the challenges they face and the negotiation in which they must engage before being able to access support.

In sum, the respondents' accounts indicate that support was inconsistent, while other respondents reported that there was a lack of empathy for their particular situation as lone parents, although conversely, some lecturers, module leaders and PATs were reported to be more sympathetic towards respondents' caring responsibilities. The issues experienced by some respondents who were the first in their families to attend university was that they did not know what support was available and they lacked the confidence and knowledge as to whom to approach for support. It was also clear that some respondents had no desire to separate their domestic situations from the hegemonic structures of the university, although Anne (white English, middle-class) felt it was better not to disclose her lone parent status.

With little understanding of what HE has to offer in relation to studying, some respondents sought information from other students and began to build their own social or cultural capital. Not all of the respondents had received this type of support and some spoke about different ways of 'struggling' and 'juggling' in order to keep up with their studies whilst taking care of their children. The next section explores how respondents combine university study with their family life.

5.3.   'Fitting' Study around Caring Responsibilities

As in Chapter 4, the data in this section highlights that, regardless of the difficulties they could have experienced when juggling caring and studying, all of the respondents were determined to pursue a university degree. Similar to the findings of studies that

problematised the notion of choice-making (Archer 2007; Reay et al. 2005b), the data obtained in this study indicates that the competing demands of study and childcare had left some respondents with little choice but to combine their HE with their caring responsibilities. Overall, a lack of support networks and structural changes meant that some respondents used various approaches to managing studying alongside childcare. These included building a community of formal and informal childcare support networks, such as child-minders, nursery, family and friends or after school clubs. However, even with a well-organised plan, some respondents recognised that HE was more demanding than they had anticipated and, in order to 'fit' with childcare, some respondents changed either their courses or mode of study.

5.3a   A community of formal and informal childcare support networks

Anne (white English, middle-class) spoke about having to be organised: *'I have to be working at least two days ahead by balancing things, organising and having a Plan A, Plan B and Plan C and using any opportunity to study'*. Leah (white British, middle-class) talked about having to *'zoom'* from a full time job to studying around childcare:

> *I drop him about 8.30 […] and I zoom off and get here* [work] *for 9 am. I also manage eight staff and five of them are in the community. When* [I] *get there my mind is still full of […] I've to go and sort that out, I must make a note of that etc., etc. […] which isn't good really.*

Julie (white English, middle-class) found that despite getting a very early start to take her 3 year-old daughter to the child-minder, she still faced unforeseen challenges: *'I get up at 5am and I take my daughter to the child-minder at 6am in her pyjamas […]. If I can I'll use the laptop* [to do] *some coursework on the train* [and/or] *I […] get her to bed, sort stuff out and then fit in […] Uni work'*.

While the unpredictability of caring for children and studying is itself challenging in itself, Julie also found that, on top of studying, she also had to deal with the emotional demands of her child. This had left Julie 'yo-yoing' as she prioritised childcare work over her studies then had to reprioritise her education over childcare.

> *The first year was a bit of a nightmare. I did full-time* [study] *[…] but I dropped to part-time for the second semester because* [my daughter] *was a bit of a nightmare* [with] *me going* [and not] *being there but then part-time just wasn't enough. I was only in one day a week and so I've come back full-time.*

Time constraints left many respondents constantly juggling their studies and maintaining stability for their children, but the findings of this study also revealed that there was little difference between social classes, gender or race in terms of how the respondents managed their studies alongside their caring responsibilities. Up until recently, before his parents began to provide financial support towards nursery fees, the only male respondent, Greg (black British/African, middle-class) also found it difficult *'juggling'* studying and caring for his nearly 3 year-old daughter difficult: '*I don't know how I have survived or managed juggling day-to-day but I did. In the end I decided to study from home so that I can look after my daughter*'.

The above comments illustrate how, in order to incorporate academia into their lives, some respondents had to adapt their daily childcare arrangements by changing their course of study and/or timetables. Moreover, the impact of assessment procedures meant that, when necessary, Dyshe (white Albanian, working-class) had to negotiate additional childcare for her two daughters, ages 8 and 14:

> *I was paying childcare especially* [at a] *busy time when it was exam* [or] *coursework deadlines to look after especially my daughter because she was five when I start university. I was studying mostly at night but they are very hard to put them to sleep.*

Both Marianna (white Spanish, working-class) and Kerry (black British, lower working-class) was dependant on the nursery places for their 2 year-old and 4 year-old children respectively:

> [I] *take my daughter to the nursery* [but] *if we get there after 10 o'clock, they don't allow us in or they tell us off. Sometimes I call them before ten to tell them she's coming at eleven because I think that studying and having my daughter that it's important* [I] *spend some quality time with her (Marianna).*
>
> *My daughter is at nursery Monday to Friday. The nursery is open from 7am […] but I don't like to take her too early and I pick-up* [daughter] *from nursery from 4pm. She is the type of child that has to have your attention all the time (Kerry).*

Moss (2004) uses the concept of space and time to discuss the unequal value and priority given to the education system and/or the unpaid work of the home. This study highlights the constructed discourses of nurturing and the unequal situatedness that some respondents, such as Julie, Marianna and Kerry, found as they struggled with the challenge of making time to study without leaving their children with others for long hours. Moreover, although respondents struggled to find the time and space in which to study, they were also attuned to societal ideals about 'good' and 'bad' ways of caring for children (Miller 2012). For some, it was difficult choosing whether to spend more time with their children and/or to 'fit' nursery hours around university timetables.

In order to manage studying, Nellie either waited until her 7 year-old son was asleep or studied in the early mornings: '*I need silence to study I can't have noise and people you know moving about and shouting mummy, mummy come here. Mornings* [are] *peaceful'.* Kerry also waited until her daughter was asleep before studying: '*once she is in bed that's when I study and I will be studying until three, four in the morning'.* Marianna felt like she needed to be a magician in order to study: '*it's a bit tricky, you have to be a bit of magician to study. I study* […] *while she's at nursery'.*

Ben-Galim's (2011) report suggests that nurseries are not only places of educational development for young children but also enact a social contact with other parents, and enable study. However, for some mothers with school-aged children, nursery was not an option. Gillian (black Caribbean, working-class) stated that at age 10 her daughter was confident:

> *Because of my situation,* my *child started going to school on her own since she* [was] *seven. Taking two buses, changing and going to school and coming back and […] the teachers make sure that she leaves exactly 3.15pm to catch the 3.17pm bus.* [They] *say, 'oh she's so confident'.*

Gillian recognised that, in order to survive economically, she must *'socially negotiate particular gendered moral rationalities'* (Edwards and Duncan 1997:37) against the emotional demands of childcare and find other ways of juggling and managing time.

Some respondents relied on family, friends or neighbours for support. Leah (white British, middle-class) relied on her mother to help with childcare:

> *I finish at 5pm because I get charged at the after school club after 5.45pm. […] He was getting knackered doing that, so my mum […] picks him up for two days [...] she's not far from his school. So I try to juggle the breakfast and after school club so he goes in early on days that she's picking him up.*

To give herself time to study, Shona (black Caribbean, working-class) elicited support from both her mother and estranged father to collect her daughter age six from school: *'she [mother] would have my daughter on Tuesday. I start at nine and I finish at four so recently over the past two weeks, my dad even though we are estranged would pick up my daughter'.*

To avoid having to arrange a mishmash of different people, be it family, friends or paid child-minders, to collect and care for their school-age children, some respondents often used after school club. Although Stewart (2009) reports that the number of out-of-

school clubs was insufficient to meet demand, Anne (white English, middle-class) was able to make use of such school club for her two 10 and 12 year-old daughters. However, she also found that her neighbour was a source of support, *'a real God send'.* Anne stated that *'my daughters stay on at after school clubs […]. I organise with our neighbour* [and] *can rely on* [them] *to pick them up'.* Unlike Leah's 10 year-old son, Anne's daughters enjoyed the after school club's activities*: 'my older daughter likes after school club because […] her close friends from school goes there as well. She takes part in […] gymnastics, trampoline and the choir […] they walk home but* [there is] *someone waiting from them.* Grace (black British/African-Caribbean, working-class) also relied on the combined help of an after school club and a relative: *'I have a cousin that lives close to the school and they go* [the children ages 12 and 7] *to an after school club that shuts at 6pm. I finish at 6 o'clock and I pick them up at 7pm and wake up at 4am when it is quiet […]* [to] *get my studying done'.* Sharleene (mixed-race British/Caribbean, working-class) had no such support for her son, aged 7: *'on Thursday, I will come to Uni for 10am and then I spend the hour break studying. I have a class from 2pm to 5pm and then I pick my son up from after school club.*

While Hinton-Smith's (2008) study reported that lone parent students relied on friends and family members for childcare, an arrangement that also worked for some respondents in this study, such support was not always available in some respondents' particular location, especially when elderly relatives were themselves in need of care. Teena (black Caribbean, working-class) also helped with caring for her father*: 'I make sure I do a meal for daddy at least once a week, he is […] in a residential home* [and] *has dementia'.* Anne also had an ageing father: *'my stepmother passed away* [and] *my dad […] turned 76 this year. I could call on him, but I think it wouldn't be safe for the children because he is not capable of taking care of himself'*, while Kerry's mother had moved away: *'my mum moved to Wales. She moved so far away from me'.*

The findings obtained in this study show that the struggles that studying while caring for children entailed were not gender specific and, importantly, that these challenges were no less severe for the lone father.

Locality was also an important issue for some respondents, as Sue (black African/Caribbean, working-class) with two dependents aged 6 and 9 highlighted: *'I wanted somewhere* [university] *where it was close because I would drop the girls to school and pick them up from after school club'*. Geographical constraints were also an issue for Greg (black British/African, middle-class) as the only affordable accommodation he could find was outside London. Moving away had left Greg feeling increasingly isolated and, unlike Anne or Grace, he could not call on friends, neighbours or relatives for support: 'm*y parents only found out about my daughter after she turned 1-year old. I have had no (*emphasised*) support but I would stay up late to read on the Internet*.

5.3b Changing course to 'fit' with childcare

In order to show her commitment to both institutions (home and university) and that she could manage the demands of being a parent student caring for two children, aged 6 and 13, Louise (mixed-race African/Portuguese, working-class) ended up choosing a different course that connected her dual roles as student-parent:

> *I started Architecture but Architecture requires [...] time dedicated to doing hand drawings and space. Having to work at home was extremely difficult with children, although there were parents [...] and they managed but they had their partners, whereas [...] as much as I tried, I couldn't negotiate the time to spend with them* [the children] *and university. In the first year, I was giving [...] time to my education and to the university and not much time to the children. I didn't have that support at home and my behaviour with the children was getting quite irritated. I was feeling guilty and just had to change, so I found this course and had a meeting with the Coordinator and I got into Tourism Environment.*

Louise's experience is a reminder of the disparity between care giving and studying, which could produce feelings of guilt when parent students spend time away from their children in order to study (Lynch 2008). As a result, Louise chose a less demanding course.

Fortunately, within the first year at university, students have some flexibility to work through different options before settling on a course of study, particularly where incongruence exists among n the institution, the student's habitus and/or their external lives (Reay et al. 2010). This provides opportunities for some respondents to reorganise their course of study without being penalised or having to renegotiate childcare arrangements. For example, further to what could be seen as gendered choices, there are likely to be other reasons for the majority of the women respondents choosing lower status degree subjects in biological science, teaching or the humanities subjects (Leathwood and Read 2009).

Similar to Julie and Louise, Jo-Leona (black British, working-class) and Marianna (white Spanish, working-class) had initially chosen their modes of study to fit with childcare arrangements. However, they found that some subject areas were mostly suitable for students unencumbered with family responsibilities and had to change courses or move from full-time to part-time study.

A lack of available childcare support for her 10 year-old daughter led Jo-Leona to choosing another course:

> *I applied to do Events Management. Where I struggle is with thing like childcare support because unless I take complete control [...] things can slip by me. In the second semester I realised that* [the course] *wasn't really working for me because I struggled, I really did, cause I am a parent, I am daughter, I am a sister, I am a hundred and one other things than just a student. I would need a new childcare system so I changed course to Psychology.*

Jo-Leona's above extracts pointed to shifting and multiple identities, which are discussed in Chapter 6, as McRae (2003) reported, mothers tend to make choices based on practicalities rather than preferences. Green (2003) noted that the (re)structuring of timetabling (also experienced by Julie) was often designed to meet institutional needs, with less consideration given to parent students. In contrast to Jo-Leona, who had changed courses rather than alter her childcare arrangements, Marianna explained that:

> *Because I did French beginners last semester, I went to French intermediate but when I checked my timetable, I discovered that French was […] on a Thursday from 6 o'clock to 9 o'clock in the evening. I was almost crying, so I had to negotiate. I think […] when they are giving you your timetable to see your personal circumstances* [being a] *single mother. For me to apply for my PGCE I need to have not only Spanish I need to have French, it's vital for what I want to do in the future.*

If, therefore, time and space are important for all mature students, this is only likely to intensify for lone parents with young children, such as the respondents in this study, who were juggling multiple roles with studying.

Overall, the data illustrates the ways in which dominant structures operate to influence students' experience of HE (Bourdieu 2007). For example, institutional structures, such as course timetabling, not only helped to shape the respondents' occupational choices but also determined how they organised their time and space for learning. The availability of childcare was also an important factor in shaping the respondents' experience of HE as they tried to reconcile parenting with studying. Many were constantly balancing and juggling childcare and studying with other multiple other domestic responsibilities, which meant that, in order to resolve the conflict and 'fit' with the structures of the university, some respondents had to change from their initial degree subject to a different course of study. Notably, how the respondents experienced these challenges did not differ by gender, class or 'race'. Although some respondents with school-aged children took advantage of breakfast and/or after school clubs, they also relied

on the support of family, relatives or neighbours to help with childcare. However, not all respondents had access to such support networks. Moreover, regardless of the type of childcare support that some respondents received, the majority found little time and space in which to study. Some respondents reported having to study whenever the opportunity arose, such as when they were 'on-the-go' or late at night or early morning when their children were asleep.

In the final chapter discussing the findings of the study, I explore the extent to which respondents viewed HE as a (re)constructive site.

Chapter 6

The (Re)Construction of Lone Parent Students' Identities through Higher Education

This chapter explores the respondents' (re)construction of their identities as they studied in HE. Jenkins (2010:17) stated that identity is about the *'process of being'* or *'becoming'*. In Chapter Four, I explored two of the research questions, which relate to the respondents' reasons for *becoming* university students while, Chapter Five reported on their experiences of *being* a university student. The focus of this chapter is to search for a deeper understanding of the reasons that led the lone parents in this study to want to (re)construct their identities. For example, most of the respondents repeatedly resisted the denigrating identities imposed on them both through the policies of successive UK governments (Gregg et al. 2009) and media reporting such as: *'The idea that a woman could be mother and father to her children […] led directly to the hopeless plight of often inadequate women struggling to raise children'* (Phillips 2013)*.*

Two main themes emerged from the analysis of the data and are outlined in two sections. The first section reports on why respondents felt it necessary to (re)negotiate their lone parent identities through higher education, while the second section explores the respondents' attempts to (re)construct their future ambitions.

6.1. (Re)Negotiating Lone Parents' Identities through Higher Education

The majority of respondents were aware of the negative discourse that helped to socially construct their lone parent identities but felt that the representational discourse

did not match who they were. Therefore, this section examines what the respondents understood their social positions to be and whether they felt HEIs were places that could potentially modify their lone parent identity as more positive and, thus, militate against negative public opinion. Lawler (2010) states that people are the inventors of their own identities and that identities are difficult to define, for they are never final or fixed. Unsurprisingly, there were some strong responses from the respondents about the media depicting them as *'a threat to social order'* (see Skeggs 2002:3) and/or a drain on the welfare state. Comments of denigrating depiction include: *'why should people in work […] be forced to subsidise those for whom claiming benefits is a 'lifestyle' choice'* (Littlejohn 2013), and Iain Duncan Smith the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions asserted that: *'[…] too many lone parents were parked on out of work benefits, leaving too many children facing a life in poverty. The Conservatives believe in work'* (Hawkes 2014). In one example, Sharleene stated that *'I don't like the media [and] […] the government […] assuming that single parents on benefits for a while don't have any form of education. I don't know why the government have that view'*.

As a result, the respondents felt compelled to defend themselves against negative identities and resisted the homogenised social positioning in which they appeared to be placed by public opinion (Hands et al. 2007). Thus, two themes emerged from the data – stigmatised identities and resisting stigmatisation through marital status.

6.1a   Stigmatised identities

Implicit in the majority of the respondents' narratives was the high visibility, social categorisation and negative representations of lone parents in the public domain. Most apparent was their dismay at the public opinion reported by the media: *'all you ever hear*

about [in] *the media* [is] *that people are on benefit, in the pub and had bab*[ies] *or children'* (Chloe black British/Caribbean, working-class). Chloe's comment reveals how public discourses selectively identify and label some individuals or groups with distinctive social markers. More precisely, popularised through various media channels, public discourses construct working-class lone parents as *'deviant and problematic'* (Walkerdine et al. 2001:189). However, with increased social mobility and diversity, class, gender and 'race' boundaries are more difficult to define (Lawler 2005; Savage et al. 2013).

The majority of respondents spoke about the disingenuous portrayal of them not only by the media, but also by public sector workers who often pathologised and 'Othered' them. Based on an encounter with a social housing officer, the perception presented by Nellie (white French, working-class) of public officials in positions of power is that they lacked empathy and had become *'oppressors'*. Nellie felt that public officials had positioned lone parents like her in a dependency discourse of 'need':

> *It's about [...] division. You know I am pretty sure that this guy [...] becomes the oppressor because he's got that impression that he's got that power over you or he's better than you because he is not in need.* [It is] *the way people look down on you*.

Nellie refers to issues of inequality, power and/or the social order between different groups (Bourdieu 2010). However, like Chloe and Nellie, even as an HE students, Kerry (black British, lower working class) found that, public sector workers perceived as undeserving those lone women parents asking for support:

> *I just don't think that the benefits people support*[ed] *me. Even when I'm going to university they didn't believe that I was going to university. They were like, are you going or it is what you want to do. They just think that I can't really do it and that's just such a low view of single mums [...] they just don't really think that you can achieve much and it's terrible that they think that way.*

All three quotes above reinforce the ways in which some individuals working in

public services and the media perceive unmarried mothers as being irresponsible (Skeggs 2002) and thus less deserving, a sentiment which was also highlighted by Savage (2003). Inequality is often a marker of social distinctions used to distinguish between those perceived as *'hard working'* (Cameron 2011) and the *'shameful'* 'Other' of the *'welfare population'* (Coleman and Riley 2012:31; Sennett 2004:101). Although the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Iain Duncan Smith's proposed cuts would affect most socio-economic groups, he stated that while *'those in lone-parent families in poverty […] and a lone mother with low educational attainment is at most risk, […] 54 per cent exit income poverty following re-partnering'* (DWP 2014:63). Such pronouncements differentiate between groups and imply that lone mothers need to be married to a man and reflect intersectionalities of gender, 'race' and class, as Teena (black Caribbean, working-class) remarks: *'as a woman, a black woman, a single parent, I felt stigmatised because I had to claim benefits'*. This stigma fuels public disapproval.

While aware of their social position in relation to the 'shame' of lone-parenting, the majority of respondents were struggling to normalise their situation within their socially constructed communities. Shona (black Caribbean, working-class) talked of such disapproval within the black community:

> *I was with my cousin who was also pregnant* [when] *two elderly black women made a comment that showed how they perceived me as a black woman bring*[ing] *a child into this world. Their comment was why aren't they in school, what's wrong with them why can't they keep their legs closed? I said to them, I am not a child* [and] *I am not a teenager. Because I don't have a ring on my hand and I am pushing a buggy, there is a certain amount of animosity. I have heard other people say why isn't she at school they keep having kids, living off of benefits.*

Shona's account illustrates a cultural habitus of behaviour towards unmarried women, which dictates that their upbringing causes them to be sexually promiscuous and dependent on public resources. The respondents' remarks also highlight how different agencies tend to compare social groups and act to remind them of their *'sense of […] place'* (Bourdieu 2010:473). Moreover, categorising individuals not only influences public

attitudes but could unintentionally reinforce disparaging messages, which might lead to individuals excluding themselves from certain places, thinking, for example, that university is *'not for the likes of us'* (Bourdieu 2010:473). However, the respondents in this study resisted such messages and did attend university.

The female respondents felt that they were under a constant gaze and that the parameters under which such surveillance occurred were age related. Appearing youthful meant that the public often perceived them as young unmarried mothers who had dishonoured and shamed their community (Sennett 2004) and, thus, threatened society. Louise (mixed-race African/Portuguese, working-class) who was 32 and divorced with two children was often wrongly perceived as young: *'I look much younger than I am and if people don't know me, I get the looks sometimes, especially if I am with my children'*. This reveals that the tendency is to homogenise lone parents under an overarching identity rather than distinguish young from young looking, and divorced or widowed from never married. Louise stated that *'they assume with that preconceived idea of a teenage pregnant girl who may be promiscuous with her sex life. It's like […] making a judgement and* [they] *don't even know me'.* Louise's comment was true for many of the respondents, who repeatedly spoke about feeling demonised and devalued, and being judged as too young to be lone parents. The findings showed that most respondents were constructed as having similar dispositions, which are not only racially and culturally interrelated (Sennett 2004), but also gendered and classed.

Images and messages of heterosexual marriage as the preferred normative practice also act to socially control families (see Mirza 2009; Skeggs 2002:3) while pathologising and demonising the 'Other', such as young unmarried mothers, as a threat to the *'social order'* (ibid.). Many of the respondents were attending university in order to be valued by society and to show that they were not a threat. For example, having separated from her boyfriend

because of his heavy drinking and bouts of depression, Julie (white English, middle-class) explained that *'I am the first single mother in my entire family (laugh),* [but] *my mum is very supportive'*; however, acquaintances would make subtle remarks about her ambitions and enrolment at university:

> *They think single mothers stay at home and don't do anything because [...] people who I haven't seen for a while or people I meet act surprised, oh you're doing Uni, oh that's brilliant* [and] *that I have got a child. I think well why shouldn't more single mothers do university or work?*

Despite Julie's middle-class background, familial support and the fact that she was taking responsibility for her child whilst studying (Archer 2003a), her comment illustrates how society continues to judge women through idealised notions of motherhood (Armstrong 2006). Irrespective of Julie's strong family tradition of studying in HE, her resistance to social norms and choice of independence had led to questions about her ability to be both a mother and a student without a supportive husband.

Edwards and Duncan (1997) reported that, although lone black mothers were more likely to be in paid work and/or education than not, they were increasingly under scrutiny from society. Despite pressure in the workplace to conform to social norms, not all of the black respondents felt constrained by wider social attitudes about heterosexuality, marriage and parenthood. For Sharleene (mixed-race British/Caribbean, working-class), public perceptions of the nuclear family went beyond the influence of the media and permeated many social spaces, especially the workplace. Her comments reveal that her place of work was a constant reminder of heterosexual norms:

> *I meet middle-class people who all got married before they have children. So, when I hear people are engaged in our office or about to get married and [...] have children. I'm thinking* [as] *a mixed race girl* [that] *rarely went to school and had a baby at seventeen [...] people are gonna assume.*

Skeggs (2002:90) interpreted the discourse of respectability as imposed class identities where *'the working class are never free from judgements of imaginary and real others that position them, not just as different, but as inferior, as inadequate'*. A key concern for Sharleene was how her work colleagues might perceive her, because she did not ascribe to the identities in which society had positioned women like her. Many of the respondents' accounts showed similar concerns about conforming to *'compulsory heterosexuality'* (Rich 2003:11) meaning that, as mothers, they gave up their rights to a career to be carers of children and that behaving differently was disrespectful and/or a threat to the institution of the family (Wilson and Huntington 2006). Gillian (black Caribbean, working-class) stated that:

> *It's all around everywhere you hear people talking about if you are a single parent… I am not bothered because I know it was by choice. I think the quality of life for me and my child is better than living in a relationship where my child is exposed to you know'.*

Gillian's remark contrasts with the fact that, for most women assigned to caring and unpaid domestic roles within marriage, dependency and respectability are synonymously linked.

In contrast, the only male respondent, Greg (black British/African, middle-class), did not express concerns about the social stigma of being a lone parent in the way that the female respondents did. This is not surprising, because, within public discourse, the moral and gendered rules of care do not apply in the same way for men caring for children as for women. Rather, the attitude of society is to applaud fathers (Miller 2012) while pathologising lone mothers (Lawler 2002; Tyler 2008). As Bourdieu (2007:60) observed, *'certain tasks […] are socially defined as inferior[…] but the same tasks may be noble and difficult, when performed by men'*.

Interestingly, before his transition into lone fatherhood, when Greg and his girlfriend were both studying at university, she worked while Greg lived a carefree peripatetic lifestyle. Untroubled by her pregnancy, Greg felt it was unnecessary to provide any support because *'she was a very independent person* [with] *a good job* [and] *capable of looking after herself ... I didn't do anything for her'.* His attitude is an example of how social norms and assumptions override any notion of interchanging such gendered roles, given that this 'superwoman' can be both employed and care for the family (Armstrong 2006).

Greg became a lone parent carer after *'I visited the mother of my daughter in prison after eight-months and felt* [that] *I had to take my child away from that place'.* Reflecting on the shifts in societal expectations and practices, Greg stated that *'society had morally changed'* because the previous habitus of African and Caribbean families towards their children's education had shifted to worries about early pregnancy: *'the third generation has come about* [and] *the strictness has diluted. No one really cares anymore what their children does'.* Signalling how attitudes had changed, Greg stated that *'respectability within the mother countries had changed* [because] *it was stereotypical that white girls had kids early'* [not black girls]. Greg not only contradicts his paternalistic authority but also lacks awareness of it (Bourdieu 2007), in which he reflects on the racial discourse regarding young unmarried mothers while tending to disregard the gendered regulatory practices aimed at women. Greg failed to recognise his own role when he described his girlfriend as independent and capable, while reproducing the constructed discourse of the *'strong black mother'* (Mirza 2009:20). In problematising the construction of the strong black mother, Mirza (2009) suggests that black African Caribbean women (married or unmarried, with a child or childless) were indeed autonomous in their capacity to be both mothers and workers. She argued that this egalitarian approach is a consequence of slavery, where the

division of labour was essentially genderless. This does not contradict Shona or other black respondents' negative experiences within their communities, because it is generally perceived that black women are of two types – a good time *'fly-girl'* 'baby-mother', or a *'fly-past'* obsessive careerist (Song and Edwards 1997:236). However, Greg saw his girlfriend as not only a careerist, but also a capable 'baby-mother'. He did not question the gendered practice of her taking responsibility for childcare while he did nothing, which, perhaps, explains why he initially avoided his responsibilities as a father.

Findings from this study show that, aside from the varying levels of public hostility and scrutiny, the lone mothers in this study mostly wanted to move away from problematic relationships and make a success of their lives. The majority of the respondents saw university as a place where they could (re)construct 'normal' identities. Sue (black African/Caribbean, working-class) felt *'a bit paranoid'* in relation to the public gaze: '*I think when you are lone parent you are looked at in a certain way*, *some think ah single parent, benefits* […] *and you do notice it'.* Making a success of her life meant attending university and '*studying to get a degree so people will look at me different'.* Sue's statement resonates with prior government policy discourse, such as that of the previous New Labour Government, namely that *'HE ...brings social benefits' (DfES 2003(a)).* Moreover, for some respondents, social benefits also meant resisting stigma while constructing heterosexual identities.

6.1b   Resisting stigmatisation through marital status

Emerging from the findings was a strong sense of resistance to the social structures that had stigmatised and positioned lone parents as deviant members of society, and a

desire to show that they were unjust. Some respondents felt they were not necessarily the originators of their social positions and, rather than exclude themselves (Bourdieu 2010), they saw university as an opportunity to (re)construct their identities through education. This meant that forming long-lasting partnerships was not essential, as Julie (white English, middle-class) stated: *'it's not [...] a serious relationship. I am doing Uni and that's all I have got time to focus on, I just want my independence and to do my degree'.* Here Julie reiterates the seriousness of the respondents' agency to move their lives forward. As such, some respondents believed that, by studying hard, there was a realistic chance of *'moving on and moving up' (Cameron 2013:2).* Jo-Leona (black British, working-class) stated that *'by working with my natural ability* [if] *I applied myself [...] put the effort in [...] then, I could have anything I wanted'.* Jo-Leona's comment resonates with the structural demands of neoliberalism that endorse individualism, competition and occupational aspirations (Hall and O'Shea 2014). In support of this ideal, former Prime Minister David Cameron wrote in the New Statesman (Cameron 2011) that *'we're building a system that matches effort with reward'*, continuing this theme in The Sun newspaper, stating that 'a*bove all, it's about aspiration'* (Cameron 2013:2)*.* Similarly, Iain Duncan Smith stated in the Guardian newspaper (2010) that '*aspiration, it seems, is […] becoming the preserve of the wealthy'.*

When individuals lack aspiration, they supposedly lack hope and/or ambition (Archer et al. 2010), which helps to reassign social boundaries in an already hierarchically ordered group (Bourdieu 2010; Hall and du Gay 2010). For example, while there are differences between the respondents' social backgrounds, such as economic, social and cultural capital, some working-class respondents might have felt that their only option was to adopt meritocratic principles (Young 2007). While such meritocratic discourse assumes that, with the right aspirations and effort, anyone can rise up the *'ladder of opportunity'*, this also means that some will not rise. For example, young middle-class women are

encouraged to be educated independent *'top girls'* or *'can do girls'* and to take control of their fertility (Allen and Osgood 2009:1-2). In contrast, lone parents are perceived – as alluded to by Iain Duncan Smith (2010) – as lacking aspiration and, inevitably, are seen as occupying the bottom of the ladder.

Chloe (black British/Caribbean, working-class) illustrates how meritocratic principles helped to inspire people like her:

> *They need to highlight more stories [...] where thousands of people have been on benefits at some time in their life but have succeeded and are top person in the company. There is a majority of us that are in university trying to actually do something to change* [yet] *they don't reflect that.*

Like Jo-Leona, Chloe felt that because the media continued to portray distorted images and misconceived tales about lone parents, she was adamant that she would not be one of those at the bottom of the ladder. Both believed that meritocracy offers the best possible opportunity for overcoming social stratification and for becoming a professional in ways that other *'top person*[s]*'* had.

Unsurprisingly, there was discord about being categorised with those 'Other' lone parents who were doing little to help their situation. Chloe revealed strong feelings about such labelling: *'the label welfare scrounger, I try to avoid the whole stigma of you having a baby you get a flat, you go on benefits'.* So strong was Chloe's dislike of such representations that she resisted being categorised on application forms: *'I'd rather tick student than tick unemployed cause that's when people* [know] *that you are on benefits... I don't like those kind of people, but I am one of them'.* Not only is Chloe's perception of others in similar situations contradictory to her perception of herself, but it also reflects the opinions of both Duncan Smith (2010) and the other respondents. Consequently, in order to resist the stigma and realign themselves with successful people, Bourdieu (2010:478) suggests that they *'retaliate'* and turn negative characterisations to their own

advantage. As such, some respondents strove to ensure that their qualifications would be to their advantage (ibid.). Teena (black Caribbean, working-class) was resolute in showing that, although she was on benefits, she was different: *'I'd rather […] have two qualifications* [so] *I will not have to be in a position where I have to be begging'*. Teena's comment reveals how society values and embodies the meritocratic system of reward, where the acquisition of a degree-level qualification is evidence of an individual's capacity to transcend barriers of inequality. However, possessing university qualifications is not the only key factor in the process of obtaining high-level employment, as the respondents will be also judged according to their accumulation of and level of access to cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 2011).

In the absence of such capital and/or the support of a 'knowledgeable insider' (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Puwar 2004), Jo-Leona, Chloe and Teena must first learn the rules of the game in order to 'play'. Here again, the intersectionality of gender, 'race' and social class intervenes in this study. Before presenting herself as an exemplary lone parent, Jo-Leona felt that she must first separate what she represents as a black woman and a working-class lone parent student from how others might perceive her and/or attribute certain negative stereotypical images to her. One strategy was to disassociate from *'those kind of people'* and, thus, be positioned as educated:

> *I believe ...that working-class people need to get educated especially like, I am a woman, I am black, and [a] single parent. There is always gonna be stigma attached to been a single parent and I have got all these stats against me. So if I don't sort my life out then I am destined to be a statistic and ...I don't want to be a statistic.*

Other respondents were also concerned about being a statistic and counteracting public disapproval, assumptions, stigmatisation and/or feelings of (dis)respectfulness, with a few respondents continuing to identify themselves as married even after divorce or separation. Both Grace (black British/Caribbean working-class, divorced) and Dyshe (white

Albanian, working-class) continued to wear their wedding rings and use the title of 'Mrs'. Even though Grace had married and divorced her long-term partner within the space of six months, she felt that, without a partner, *'people looked down their nose at you'*. She explained that: *'the stigma for me* [was] *that I was now one of these single mothers' statistics'*. For Grace, marriage was the principal means of gaining both social respectability and an identity: *'I don't know who I am sometimes but I think people give me more respect if I'm married especially as a woman with two children'*. Although Dyshe felt that she *'don't want to follow something traditional, I want to follow something that makes me progress'*, she continued to play the role of a married woman: *'I don't really show* [I'm single] *much. Because if you say I am single, they think, I am different. I say I am married and I got two children then people stay away from me'*. Dyshe constructed dual identities because she wanted to avoid being judged by society. What becomes clear from Grace and Dyshe's comments is their desire to position themselves as married, but also the ways in which some respondents avoided the constructed pathologies associated with lone parents.

The working-class respondents were not the only ones resisting social stigma and striving to prove that they were different to 'Other[s]'. Anne (white English, middle-class) did not want to be seen differently, stating that *'through the course, […] I was able to develop my own identity. […] I wasn't associated with being a single parent'*.

Research illustrates that it is not only class and 'race' but also gender inequalities that permeate the public sphere, where heterosexual women must continuously embody multiple identities of motherhood (Edwards and Caballero 2011). Yet, even when middle-class respondents shared similar (gendered) lone parent identities to working-class respondents, they emerged as being culturally different (Lawler 2002; Skeggs 2002). For example, even taking into account her negative experiences with acquaintances, Julie was not depicted in the same way that working-class mothers are demonised, *'ethnicised'* and

classed by the public or work colleagues (Lawler 2002; Mirza 2009:78; Walkerdine et al. 2001). Julie said that her colleagues *were brilliant* [when] *I left my daughter's dad [...]. They knew why I had left him and everything and they were very supportive in me leaving and going to Uni'.* However, when Grace and Dyshe felt vulnerable, they used defensive strategies, such as maintaining the appearance of being married and, thus, complying with societal heterosexual identities, but perhaps no longer desired.

The narratives and issues presented here are difficult and complex. As such, even when feminist theories are influential in diminishing patriarchal identity and credibility, normalised heterosexual practices persist and appear virtually invisible. This is because the category *'women ...*[resides in the] *structure of domination, held to produce women's common subjugated experience'* (Butler 2006:5). However, to help conceal their subjugated and/or stigmatised status, an alternative to marriage for most of the respondents was to attend university.

Anne was hesitant to discuss the subjugated position of lone parents, stating that '*I really wouldn't like to say, so I don't know'.* However, her account below shows that Anne ascribes, mostly, to middle-classness:

> *From my personal perception, single parents don't have rightly or wrongly that level of social standing as other people. Although my family are middle-class, as a single mother, I have got to prove myself a bit more unfortunately* [because] *if I looked at the working class, it's the working class that are on benefits and maybe not working.*

Anne's description of '*single parents*' demonstrates the complexities and hidden formations in class and gender identities (Skeggs 2002). For example, by directing disparaging remarks towards the working-class, Anne had hoped to make invisible her material position, such as living in social housing and receiving welfare benefits, which she shares with 'Other' lone parents. Another explanation might be the *'taken-for-granted*

practice' ascribed to the middle-class (Bathmaker et al. 2013:726), where it assumes a right to knowledge and cultural competence (Bourdieu 2010). Despite being rueful, '*I know this is very* spiteful' such distinctions permit Anne to *'pathologise and trivialise'* (Archer and Leathwood 2003:188) working-class practices as examples of *'vulgarity'* (Bourdieu 2003:9). Similar to the pathologised working-class, Anne had to work hard to escape the shadow of 'Other' lone parents, stating that *'unfortunately, the way it is seen or I have always felt* [is] *that maybe I have got to prove myself a bit more if I am going for a job'*. Because social identifiers conflate with personal and family identities (Lawler 2010), Anne, as a lone parent, had to demonstrate that she was normal to those administrators or professionals charged with making decisions and judgements on her, so that they would not pathologise her.

Although there was no hint from Jo-Leona, Chloe, Teena and others to suggest that they had a desire to leave their working-class identities, their responses signify their objectification and sense of contentiousness toward other lone parents. Thus, a desire to change and resist socially imposed markers, which are often 'raced', classed and gendered, featured heavily in the respondents' discourses.

The discursive practice of homogenising lone parents explains why some respondents resist being categorised along with 'Other' lone parents. This constructed distinction also resonates for respondents that were either attempting to or had escaped their working-classness. Since she started out as working-class, Leah (white British, middle-class) felt that, as society was more accepting of lone parents than before, it did not help when '*people used and abused the status of being a single parent. I think we live in a culture with a benefit system, which encourages people to lie'*. Similarly, Marianna (white Spanish, working-class) was as disparaging as Anne and Leah towards other lone parents when she stated: *'things go wrong in life and you have one child but I think it's terribly wrong for a*

woman to have another child …and get benefits. [For] *it is true that some of us are taking the* piss'. While Marianna's perspective appears representative of lone parents who had experienced misfortunes, she was also aware of some taking advantage (Bourdieu 1990).

Like Chloe, Marianna also noted that the structural constraints that some lone parents experienced were only temporary: *'they see single parents as on benefits or cost money, but many of us [...] are going to become qualified, paying tax so that people can benefit'*. Marianna believes that, with the right education, they would become contributing members of society. Conversely, because of the labelling and imagery used to reinforce negative opinions of lone parents, Jo-Leona, Julie, Anne, Leah and Marianna did not explicitly challenge the normalising of heterosexual behaviour. Rather, their responses (as with other respondents) to the negative public perceptions of them were to show that, by attending university, they were, in many ways, different from other lone parents on benefits. Their inclusion at university also demonstrated that they were conforming to society's norms and that university would help to enhance their social mobility and independence.

In sum, the respondents' narratives highlighted the deficit discourse through which they experienced their social world. It showed two things: first, that the respondents were agents who were keen to free themselves from their perceived social position in society by adopting a neo-liberal meritocratic 'can do' approach; and, second, they were concerned about their value within the meritocracy. The respondents were concerned about the way government and the media had constructed negative discourses about them, which, in turn, resulted in society's low opinion of them as lone parents. Consequently, rather than a disincentive, such discourses acted as a motivation to prove that they were different from 'Other' lone parents. However, even though the female respondents were studying in HE

to 'shake-off' dispositions of what they were not, the social category of mother persisted and, depending on their financial situation and marital status, statistically defined them as welfare dependents. This study also found that the middle-class respondents did not experience the same levels of social stigma to the same extent as the working-class respondents, and that, for some middle-class respondents, the devaluing of lone parents meant that it was necessary to maintain a distance from those deemed to be less deserving. After all, the working-class know *'their place'* (Bourdieu 2010:473). The next section discusses the respondents' future ambitions and explores whether their chosen occupations were sufficient to (re)construct their future identities. For example, how did they choose an occupation and do they know how the game is played?

Future Ambitions

The data in this section shows how societal influence intersected and shaped the ways in which the respondents saw their futures evolving after leaving university. It examines whether university provided sufficient opportunities for the respondents to (re)construct their identities and prepared them to adapt to new social or professional environments. Bourdieu's critics argued that there were ambiguities in his analysis (Jenkins 2008) of how habitus changes or adapts to new surroundings, suggesting that he does not sufficiently explain the multiple identities that some individuals might experience throughout their educational journey or how social transformation might occur. Therefore, in relation to the respondents' future ambitions, the data was analysed to address Research Question 3, which sought to understand how the respondents might (re)construct their identities, and whether they had acquired the dispositions for *'play[ing] the game'* in their chosen field or even that they knew how to (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:128). As a

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result, the emerging two themes were: a) career choice and conflict in (re)constructing identities; and, b) constructing futures to fit with parenting responsibilities.

6.2a   Career choice and conflict in (re)constructing identities

All of the respondents in this study had experience in paid employment before studying in HE. The majority of respondents had chosen careers mostly in occupations that fell into professional or lower management categories. Although work featured as the main goal following university, only a few respondents had sufficient 'practice' or knew what to expect in their chosen occupations. Unsurprisingly, through social and cultural connections, all of the middle-class respondents (Anne, Julie, Leah and Greg) had acquired work experience linked to their desired occupations. For example, Julie's connections in the music industry and Leah's promotion to middle management allowed them to maintain academic and occupational interests in their respective fields. In contrast, only four of the thirteen working-class respondents (Dyshe, Gillian, Sharleene and Sue) had work experience in and/or had studies related to their desired post-university occupation. Dyshe (white Albanian, working-class) worked part-time in accountancy but hoped to start her own business when fully qualified: *'I am working in a very good place where I can get my experience, I have* [...] *future ambitions for my own company [in] chartered accountancy'*. Gillian (black Caribbean, working-class) explained that having arrived from Jamaica 13 years ago as a qualified and experienced teacher she was surprised when told that she had to retrain for three years before she could teach in the UK. She said: *'I went to college for three years and I taught at a secondary school before coming, so I didn't know when I came here that I would have to do three years again'*. Gillian was determined to fulfil what she believed was her destiny: *'I am from a family of teachers. My sister went to university* [and] *she teaches [...] my auntie was a teacher'*. Although Gillian's cultural background was not

very different from most middle-class professionals (Maylor and Williams 2011), coming into a different educational system showed her that her professional experience was not automatically recognised, and that she had to prove again that she could be trusted as a professional (Puwar 2004:123).

The remaining nine of the working-class respondents had no previous work experience in their chosen occupations and all but one was unemployed. They were at varying stages of their degree courses, with some close to taking up teaching positions. Like Anne, most were looking forward to their future work placements, while a few felt less confident about the prospect of teaching.

Interestingly, a combination of part-time and full-time work, life experiences and/or advice from professional people 'in the know' had led to five working-class and four middle-class respondents pursuing their chosen occupations. Marianna (white Spanish, working-class) had worked in Israel and Brazil before applying to university: *'I am planning to apply for PGCE on Modern Foreign Languages. Once I finish that I would like to become a secondary school French and Spanish teacher'*. Her choice of profession was similar to her brother, who teaches Modern Languages in Spain. Mirza (2009) noted that, often, ethnic minority women not only take a longer route into HE but also tend to choose careers with easier access. Particularly notable was the absence of various forms of capital in some respondents' work histories. For example, despite Sue's background (black African/Caribbean, working-class), she had gained experience in the music and entertainment industry through unpaid public relations work, giving her an understanding of the nature of the game and how it is played:

> *I have experience in PR music and entertainment,* [but] *to get into the media; I* [need] *a degree. Because it doesn't matter about your experience they are not gonna take you, I don't have the academic side. A person who is a graduate and have got a degree will always get a job over me.*

As discussed in the first section, some of the working-class respondents – with limited capital – were relying on their degree to help them to work their way up. Although some working-class respondents were unfamiliar with the culture of HE, Sue stated: *'I am not gonna give up, I was gonna give up but I am not gonna give up now. I will get my degree and be able to get into the field […] and work my way up* [to] *my dream job'*. Despite lacking academic confidence *'I don't know* [how to] *write as a PR person'*, Sue felt that she could elicit support from a 'knowledgeable other': *'I have experience* [and] I *know people in there […]'.*

In contrast, the four middle-class respondents (Julie, Anne, Leah and Greg) were more confident about their chosen careers because they could draw on the knowledge and support of people who were already working in their chosen field. Having studied classical music from an early age, Julie (white English, middle-class) was intent on building a career based on what she already knew:

> *Since I was four, I am a classical playing pianist and I did singing, flute and violin. I want to have my own management company and manage bands. I am […] involved with people I know in the industry at weekends, people from college or when I use to gig but if it all goes wrong, I have marketing.*

Julie's privileged background reflects the strong social and cultural networks that she developed through extra-curricular activities. Here we see what Bourdieu and Passeron (2011) referred to as the (re)production of capital at work, a process which does not come easily for working-class respondents such as Sue. However, although utilising capital is important for locating and entering specific fields, in order to succeed in certain occupations and professions, a *'class habitus'* is also required (Bourdieu and Passeron 2011:204). For example, as discussed above, some professions possess different dispositions and thus generate practices adapted to particular structures and functions (ibid.). With the 'right' type of habitus, Leah (white, British, middle-class), like Sue, had

learned how to *'play the game'* as she *'moved up'* through her profession (nursery education) from a working-class to a middle-class position:

> *One of the nurseries [...] was doing this pilot scheme and I [...] transfer*[red] *to that nursery. This pilot* [and] *the staff was being evaluated [on] how it would work across health, education and social services. [..] I ended up coordinating that project* [and] *I moved up from being just a family support worker to the coordinator of the team. I was there for about four-years.*

As established, identities are not fixed. Leah's experience is an example of the generative structure of the habitus that enables people to switch between groups, as Sue had been able to do. For example, as a condition of entry into the profession, Leah had taken on the values of the dominant culture by learning on the job: '[I] *did some training under* [a] *Professor from Guy's hospital. He was really nice and I learnt a lot from him on that project'*. However, unlike Gillian (black Caribbean, working-class), Leah had been able to pick up the formal and informal rules of 'the game' with the help of a 'knowledgeable other', thus proving to colleagues that she could be trusted to do the job (Puwar 2004).

Nevertheless, while the middle-class respondents had an understanding of HE, the nature of lone-parenting meant that accessing the occupation they desired was not easy for all of them. For example, if he had so chosen, Greg (black British/African, middle-class) could have worked in his father's business, but he had other ambitions: *'my father owns a security business* [but] *this is not something I am interested in except the criminology side of it'*. The difficulty for Greg, as with the mothers participating in this research, was that, struggling to find childcare, he was left little time to pursue his ambitions. Despite his difficulties, the social class differences in career strategizing were evident from Greg and the other middle-class respondents' comments, suggesting inculcated knowledge from early childhood, which is not memorised and thus cannot always be articulated (McNay 1999). However, without the 'right' type of capital, the working-class respondents must first learn how to 'play' before they can progress towards their career goals, which, for many, was a motivator rather than a deterrent.

The next section shows how social expectations of 'good' parenting meant that some respondents were apprehensive about combining work and parenthood, instead opting to continue with their studies before returning to employment. Additionally, some careers were chosen for pragmatic reasons, where, for some respondents it was a matter of 'weaving' together extended periods of study in order to care for their children.

6.2b Constructing futures to fit with parenting responsibilities

All of the respondents were particularly concerned about the demands that some future careers might generate. As might be expected, five working-class respondents (Kerry, Sharleene, Shona, Jo-Leona, Nellie and Louise) had chosen careers that 'fitted' better with their parenting roles. A continuing theme discussed in the previous chapter is that some working-class respondents had changed career direction because some occupations required more time and finance. Both Kerry (black British, lower working-class) and Sharleene (mixed-race British/Caribbean, working-class) had changed career direction before deciding on their current area of study. Kerry explained that it was her experiences following her daughter's birth that had led to her decision to study nursing: *'the way I was treated by staff that was supposed to be looking after you, I wanted to make sure that people are treated good when they are in hospital'.* However, Kerry recognised that the long hours and finances required by her studies were unsustainable: *'being a single parent, I couldn't cope. It was 10 in the evening until 10 in the morning and I never [...] see her* [my daughter] *you know'.* In contrast, Sharleene who *'had bad experience of social workers',* said that *'I don't want to be a social worker at all'.* While Sharleene felt that *'I rather be an accountant for life* [than] *working in that field',* accountancy was not practical,

because: '[to] *work in a practice […] the hours are demanding. I would like to do voluntary work with* [a] *charity in the protection of children, but not as career'*.

Bourdieu's (2010) concepts were valuable in identifying how structural constraints continued to influence and shape the respondents' life chances, of which they were often unaware. Kerry and Sharleene were not explicit about how social structures might have influenced their career choices, with their comments clearly showing that a range of factors, including the public discourse on lone parents, continued to shape their lives. For example, Kerry recognised that nursing '*isn't what I really want to do'* and, instead, chose primary teaching because it was congruent with her childcare responsibilities, while Sharleene was indecisive and studied a range of subjects (Psychology, Latin American Studies and Caribbean Studies) that fitted around childcare.

Like Kerry, Shona (black Caribbean, working-class) had thought that primary teaching would be more suited to the structural tensions in her life, but then ruled out teaching because '*I am not sure if I am ready to deal with all […] the extra paperwork that goes with being a teacher'*. She went to on to explain:

> *The actual practicality of being a teacher, I don't know if I can do that* [for] *as much as I want to be an instrument to helping children to learn, I don't know if I can do all the administration and you can't do this, can't do that, the stipulations seems a bit outside of teaching.*

Shona's comment shows the conflict between the demands of teaching and her parenting role, similar to Kerry's experiences of nursing. Shona realised that teaching was not a nine-to-five job, as it requires planning lessons and marking homework, an investment in time that she could not afford. Shona felt that one option was to work for a company working in education, but was uncertain about how to gain entry:

> *My main interest is literacy and I know that there is a scheme at my daughter's school the Ruth Miskin Literacy (RML) programme and that really, really works. I'm interested in that and I wouldn't mind working within her company but I don't know how to go about that.*

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Simply being aware of RML and understanding how to 'play the game' might make all the difference in gaining advantage. However, while competing priorities (childcare, studying, work placements, and/or paid work), as experienced by Kerry, Sharleene and Shona, might in itself, be no different from mature students, being a lone parent had implications for what they could do or when and where they could do it.

Divisions also existed between the respondents' approach to and preparedness for work. Although lone parenting for the middle-class respondents was also fraught with difficulties in terms of managing a family, study and work, they talked knowingly about constructing their futures. For example, finding it difficult as a lone parent, Greg (black British/African, middle-class) had put his ambitions on hold until his daughter was in nursery. However, over time and with help from his parents, Greg felt *'this is the type of company that I can work with towards my ambitions […]'*. Greg felt confident that he was in the right job to become a criminologist. Julie also knew what career she wanted: *'I wanted to go into performance so, after college I just* [started] *gigging and then in one of the places that I was gigging they offered me a full-time job'*.

Conversely, not all of the respondents had a desire to return to work whilst caring for young children. A solution for Jo-Leona (black British, working-class) and Nellie (white French, working-class) was to extend their university education so they no longer had to choose work over parenting. Previous dissatisfaction with employment meant that Jo-Leona had no immediate plan to return to work other than becoming a crystal therapist and healer: *'what I have gained by studying which I love and not working, slave[ing] to time and money* [is] w*hen I graduate, I want to be a Psychologist* [and] *work for the NHS'*. For her part, Jo-Leona had no clear strategy on how to actualise this:

I haven't thought that far ahead. My goal is to practice crystal therapy and healing [and] *incorporate psychology into what I do. I am thinking about doing the postgraduate and maybe the doctorate and see where it takes me. I am just taking it one-step at a time and I just want to complete my degree and get a first class degree, that's my main focus right now.*

It is evident that Jo-Leona did not fully investigate the types of employment opportunities or requirements for practicing alternative therapy in the public services. Instead, Jo-Leona's focus was on obtaining a university education to (re)construct her future identities. Even so, Jo-Leona had to balance university with her domestic life: '*I have to juggle everything*'.   These examples show and how lone parenthood can coexist simultaneously with future life plans and, how university provides new possibilities and identities.

As the tension for Nellie was also how to 'juggle' a career with being a hands-on parent, she chose primary teaching: '*the first 5 years I would struggle […] but as a mother I'd rather he has primary care with standards that I live by and feel comfortable with*'. Similarly, Sharleene was not prepared to work full-time because '*my son's* [not] *old enough, and I'm not sure if I would like […] somebody else taking him to school, somebody else picking him up, so I thought let me take a break from full-time* [work]'. Nellie and Sharleene realised that the incompatibility that arises between their relationship with their children and full-time work could develop into a conflict of interest between their requirements and those of their employer. Such conflicts stem from the structural barriers, which inevitably mean a compromise in time and financial capital. Sharleene explained that '*to work in a practice, the hours are demanding. So I thought [...] the role isn't suitable […] at all'.* Knowing that she had an alternative to fall back on, Sharleene seemed less concerned about her future.

Other respondents, such as Louise, had chosen not to delay their careers further. Having been supported by the Head of Department (HoD) for Tourism and Environment,

Louise (mixed-race, African/Portuguese, working-class) had clear ideas about how to find work and/or continue with her studies:

> *I began to consider my option. [The HoD] is fantastic. My dissertation is to do with ecology [on] a small island off the coast of Portugal, which is a national reserve but they have quite a lot of tourists, so hopefully* [I will] *find a job, if possible, within the environmental department* [and] *do a part-time Master's next year. Those are my plans […]* [and] *where I am heading.*

Louise had made her options known and had actively sought support from a 'knowledgeable other'. She saw university as a place where futures were made: '*I just wanted to do more, because my* [then] *husband had finished his* [degree] *and I just felt I wanted to be on that level as well'*. It is clear that, seeing her ex-husband's success, Louise wanted more than what her gendered position had allowed, yet she recognised the distinction between her parental role and the demands of the work with the caveat *'if possible'*. For the respondents, it is not only *'the quality of degree'* that is important (Bathmaker 2013:741), but the ability to 'juggle' both spheres.

Other respondents also recognised the unevenness between occupational and familial demands, and felt that they needed to determine their own lives. Teena (black Caribbean, working-class) explained that '*what prompted me to go to science and human biology* [was] *[...] the idea that afterwards I could get a job that could probably give me better stability'*. Teena and Louise's comments are reminders of the potential benefits of a university degree. However, even with a degree, women who want to work are likely to earn less than men and are also more likely to be taken less seriously in some occupations (Leathwood and Read 2009).

In sum, emerging from the findings was an underlying feeling of hopeful anticipation. Some respondents believed that realising their potential through HE would help them become respectable and acceptable citizens. The data also shows that

respondents who lacked the necessary capital and experience in their chosen occupation were less likely to interact with 'knowledgeable others' or know 'how to play the game' in order to secure future employment opportunities. Unlike the majority of middle-class respondents, with Greg an exception, many of the working-class respondents were unprepared for work and some had chosen to take time out from paid employment to study and provide a caring home for their children (Crompton 2006). The findings provided some understanding of how social transformation is not only gendered but also a middle-class privilege (Bourdieu 1985a), with some respondents illustrating that, seeing the benefits of a university education, they as mothers, were having to 'struggle' and 'juggle' their lives so they could remain in university for longer. It seems that while habitus must adapt to its new surroundings in order to survive in the short term, change is slow before the transition can be made.

The closing chapter, Chapter 7, provides a commentary on some of the key findings from chapters 4, 5 and 6 in answer to the research questions. I also discuss the limitations of the study, the contribution of the study and recommendations for policy and practice, as well as future research. Chapter 7 concludes with a final summary.

Chapter 7

Conclusion and Implications

7.1.   Commentary

In this final chapter, I summarise the findings from the data chapters to demonstrate how I have answered the research questions and the overall research aim addressed. The overall aim of the study was to explore the educational and social experiences of 17 diverse lone parent students studying in higher education (HE) to gain a better understanding of their everyday experiences. For this, I drew on a feminist lens together with Bourdieu's concepts of capitals and habitus to analyse and make sense of the lone parent students' interview data. In doing so I explored some of the ways in which educational policies, practices, familial backgrounds and wider social factors tend to influence the everyday lives of the lone parent respondents both in HE and outside the university. The findings were organised into three main themes: 'becoming a lone parent student'; 'being a lone parent student'; and, 'the (re)constructions of lone parent students' identities through higher education studies'. These themes resulted from the research questions outlined in Chapter 3. The three main questions were:

1. How do lone parent students manage their studies around caring commitments?

2. What are the educational experiences of lone parents undertaking an undergraduate degree course as full-time or part-time students?

3. In what ways does gender, social class and 'race'/ethnicity impact on lone parent students' learning experiences, peer-group relations and learning identities?

The following sections provide a summary of the research findings. It also considers the limitations of the study, the contribution of the study, including recommendations made by some respondents for policy and practice, the theoretical considerations before discussing the specific issues for lone parent students and future research in the areas of focus. Finally, I present my reflection on the research process.

7.1a   *Becoming a lone parent student (Research Question 2)*

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that there is no one 'truth' but multiple realities. Findings from the interview data showed that, for the majority of respondents, their reasons for becoming university students were not clearly defined, but multiple, complex and overlapping. Particularly salient were the ways in which some of the lone parent students had previously experienced disruption in their home life and to their schooling that resulted in them leaving school early or with low-level qualifications, as discussed in Chapter 4. In the telling of their educational experiences, it appears that WP policy initiatives enabled the majority of them to enter HE through Access or Foundation Degree courses. It was evident from the findings that, despite numerous educational barriers or personal challenges, the lone parent students had entered HE for the benefits that a university degree would bring (MORI 2010). The catalyst for entering HE stemmed from wanting to escape from state benefits and to become financially independent for themselves and for their children's sake, which supports research that suggests lone parents' financial situation would be strengthened if they had a degree (Gray 2001; Wilson and Huntington 2006). The majority of respondents were investing in an HE degree to improve their chances of finding more highly paid employment and/or job promotion, particularly for those who were in full-time employment. It was, however, not only their

families and/or a desire to 'do it for their children' that spurred many of the respondents on, but also because they felt they were capable of more and wanted to prove others were wrong about them. Yet, there were some notable discrepancies in what the majority of respondents had expected from a university education and their perceived experiences, which are discussed in the next section.

7.1b   Being a lone parent student (Research Question 1)

Despite the majority of the working-class respondents having no familial background in HE, the findings showed that there were some minor differences between the working-class and middle-class respondents' entry routes and university choices. For example, three of the middle-class respondents and most of the working-class respondents attended further education (FE) before entering HE. However, this study found class differences between *'embedded'* and *'contingent'* choosers (Reay et al. 2005b), where *'embedded'* middle-class respondents with a family history of HE, chose the university for a specific reason, such as academic subject, whereas, the *'contingent'* working-class respondents had chosen the university based upon word-of-mouth or because it mirrored 'people like themselves' (Reay et al. 2005b). Class seemed to separate an understanding of the institutional habitus such as the written and unwritten rules of the academe or having a *'feel for the game'* being played (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2007:128). The findings revealed how economic and cultural capital act as mechanisms for reproducing social situations acquired from an early age, as seen the black, ethnic minority and working-class respondents who were familiar with feelings of inclusion or exclusion in academic spaces (Puwar 2004:144).

It was likely that the majority of black and ethnic minority and working-class respondents may have *'internalize*[d] *the legitimacy of their own exclusion'* (Bourdieu and Passeron 2011:41) by complying (unconsciously or consciously) to the hierarchical academic capital within the education system (Bourdieu 1993b; Bourdieu 2001), such as having lowered expectations of themselves. Yet, in this study, most black, ethnic minority and working-class respondents had resisted the internalisation of their experiences and, instead, had adopted a meritocratic approach to studying.

However, black and ethnic minority and working-class respondents were not the only ones without the appropriate qualifications, and findings show that both black and white working-class and middle-class respondents attended FE colleges and studied on Access or Foundation Degree courses. As *'diverse student bodies'* (Archer 2007:639), many of the working-class respondents were challenged by the university's practices such as its 'freedom', autonomous learning styles, fewer interactions with lecturers and having to find the 'right' person for support, which was not the same for the middle-class respondents. In such situations, respondents tend to obtain information from what I have called their 'student dependency network', which is a bank of information gathered between those who have had similar experiences and now have the knowledge to support others. However, some of the respondents talked positively about the contact and support that they received from lecturing or support staff.

For some mature respondents, the process of engaging with and using technology to access information, along with many other domestic activities was time consuming, but for others, technology emancipated them because they could access information without travelling to the university campus. The lone father in this study was particularly grateful for technology, which meant could access coursework and lecture notes and communicate

with course tutors and peers while managing his daughter's needs. However, he did note that he missed the face-to-face interactions at university.

Those respondents who had chosen subjects to fit with childcare found that last minute changes to timetables left them struggling to rearrange childcare or having to negotiate with employers as course timetables were non-negotiable. As a result, they changed courses to 'fit' with the structures of the university and external commitments. The findings showed that some to arrange two or more alternatives for childcare on the same day, with respondents with school-aged children taking advantage of breakfast and after-school clubs and relying on relatives and/or neighbours to collect their children from school. In general, having to rearrange childcare was difficult and frustrating and not all of the respondents had access to such networks. Chapter 5 also highlighted the many ways in which all of the respondents were constantly reorganising their daily lives, particularly in advance of assignment deadlines. Some respondents studied on trains or buses, late at night and/or early in the morning when their children were asleep.

Interestingly, findings from this study revealed relatively few differences between the lone parent students' experiences as they studied alongside childcare responsibilities. All were negotiating and struggling with finance, domesticity, finding 'good' and reliable childcare, attending lectures, meeting assignment deadlines and state benefit obligations, and/or paid-work for those in employment.

The next section discusses in-depth the respondents' resistance to public denigration of them as lone parents.

7.1c   (Re)constructing identities through HE (Research Question 3)

Chapter 1 conceptualised some of the historicity that positioned and constructed women who had children out of 'wedlock' as 'insane', while in chapters 2 and 3, I outlined the theoretical approaches used to explore the lone parent students' educational and social experiences. In using a feminist lens together with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital, I was able to explore some of the ways in which the respondents' educational and familial backgrounds had contributed to their gendered, classed and 'raced' construction of lone parenthood.

The findings obtained by this research show that the perception of all of the respondents was that their main route out of state dependency and the continued social denigration of them as lone parents was through higher education, which the majority of the working-class respondents also perceived to be a future motivator for their children. Interestingly, although the middle-class respondents did, not experience the same degree of social stigma as the working-class respondents did, both working-class and middle-class respondents looked to distance themselves from 'Other' working-class lone parents. For many of the respondents in this research, class signifies all that is worthy or flawed and, in particular, some of the working-class respondents were counting on a HE having a transformative outcome, where, for example, they could cast off their imperfection and public condemnation of them and move toward a future of acceptance and worthiness. In the belief that a HE would help them to (re)construct their lives, most of the respondents were able to build up their resistance against the social categories that pathologised them. For example, some responded to government discourse by adopting a neo-liberal meritocratic 'can do' approach the difference between them and 'Other' lone parents on state benefits, whereby, they had taking up educational opportunities that would lead to employment and, thus, reducing the burden on the 'public purse'.

It was evident that, for the majority of the respondents, university was their attempt to engender 'self-respect' and 'self-value' distinct from that of other lone parents and, in particular, to (re)construct their own identities to that of their own choosing as opposed to the identities imposed on them by society. In this regard, habitus and types of inherited capital from the respondents' familial background influenced the extent to which they were able to (re)construct themselves. For example, in their effort to find a course that 'fitted' with their external commitments, many of the respondents had chosen subjects for pragmatic reasons, a practice which would extend into new employment and/or 'fit' with being a hands-on parent. As such, some chose teaching because it 'fitted' with school holidays. While unknowingly, some respondents were also (re)producing the sexual division of labour through the type of jobs they had chosen, which were likely to pay them less than men in similar professions, they also recognised that survival depends on balancing occupation with family demands. Not all of the respondents were convinced that they could balance both spheres and some intended to continue studying for longer (see 6.2b) before finding paid employment and/or until their children were less dependent.

7.2. Limitations of the Study

The qualitative methodology used in this study was appropriate for a small-scale research project seeking an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of lone parent students. I am a single researcher, which ruled out any possibilities of conducting and analysing large amounts of data on the lone parent student HE population within a specified timescale.

I limited the scope of the research by obtaining data from one source, for example, drawing samples from a single post-1992 university and omitting the institutional perspectives of other stakeholders such as mature students with no dependent children, lecturers, senior managers and members of the support services. However, the intention within the epistemological framing of this study was not to seek data that would generate generalizable findings. Rather, the use of semi-structured interviews brought in-depth understanding of the educational and social backgrounds of lone parent students within a specific location, thus, allowing the respondents to construct their own meanings related to their lone parent student identities.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the number of lone parent students studying in HE in the UK generally and, specifically at the university in which this study was conducted is unknown. This type of data would have provided some useful insight into the general characteristics of this group of students in the form of contextual information. In addition, such data would be useful for targeting those lone parent students who might perceive research as not relating to them, and who, thus, do not self-identify.

Arguably, another limitation of the study relates to the ratio of women to men lone parent respondents. To emphasise again, due to a lack of documented information on this group in HE, it was not possible to determine whether, in relation to the sample of 17 lone parent students, the initial four male respondents were indeed above or below the university or national average (as reported by the ONS) for lone fathers. For instance, the lone black father in this study was from a middle-class background and, although research studies have investigated the under-representation of white working-class men in HE (Quinn et al. 2006), with no official records, we cannot establish whether any particular group of lone fathers is under-represented in HE. Despite many attempts to recruit lone

fathers to participate in this study, only one participated, reifying the constructed gendered perspective that lone parenthood is indeed, predominantly, lone motherhood.

7.3.   Contribution of the Study and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

This study makes an important contribution to the body of knowledge about the educational and social experiences of lone parent students in HE. Framed within a feminist and Bourdieuian framework, the research contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of lone parent students' identities. In doing so, the findings presented in chapter 4 and 6 show that the majority of the respondents' had entered HE because they thought a degree would enhance the public's perceptions of them and improve their prospects of getting a better job. The study also demonstrates that these lone parent students had resisted social and structural barriers in order to study for a university degree.

An important aspect of this study was to influence policymakers in gathering more background information about mature student groups at university. This information is critical for bringing attention not only to the many ways that policy and practice contributes to lone parent students' learning experiences, as identified in Chapter 5, but also to how some academic subjects continue to serve the unencumbered 'traditional' students at the unintentional exclusion of other student groups. Lone parent students must feel that they are able to choose to study subjects of interest rather than simply because the subject 'fits' with childcare arrangements and/or employment.

For lone parent students to have experiences that are as close to the 'good' experiences of those perceived to be 'independent traditional' students (Leathwood and

O'Connell 2003), there were several ways in which the respondents felt the university needed to change. Some of their specific recommendations include:

1. For the university to reconsider its current 'Policy on the Admission of Children to University Premises', which prohibited children from entering the university campus other than in exceptional circumstances. This would provide greater flexibility and opportunities for lone parent students to participate in all aspects of university life.

2. For the Student Union to take into account these students' maturity, ensuring that activities are more inclusive of parent students and creating a support group for lone parent students on campus.

3. Collect local knowledge about the characteristics of parent students and lone parent students in order to target support most appropriate to their needs in the subject areas they are studying, an action which could, potentially, improve retention.

4. Prioritise student grants and/or student loans for lone parents and those experiencing financial hardship. For example, many of the lone parent students stated that the length of time that they had to wait before they received any financial assistance was unreasonable.

5. Have a designated financial advisor on campus to act as a liaison between the student body and government officials. This financial advisor would, similar to the university's Personal Academic Tutor (PAT), have a holistic view of students' situation.

6. For the university to ensure that timetables are more flexible, including alternative weekends and a staged approach to assignment deadlines.

7. Expand and improve the technology used to deliver course content, such as live streaming of lectures, and interact with students, including communication with lecturers.

Clearly, the recommendations above affirm that more should be done to accommodate the needs of lone parent students who have taken up the opportunity afforded to them to study for a university degree. Some of these recommendations relate to wide ranging educational and social factors, which the university, despite good intentions, might find difficult to implement without government backing. This would include some issues related to external structures such as timetables clashing with employment, state benefits obligations and funding entitlements. Such a dilemma is not easily resolved. With one of the university's specific institutional objective being to 'downsize' to one campus and although lone parent students have a right to HE, it might be impossible for the university to redesign its structures in order to completely reinstate previous childcare facilities, not only for lone parent students, but also for all students with dependent children. Other key recommendations include weekend openings to alleviate the pressure on weekday timetabling and/or family friendly events on weekends. Finally, not all of the recommendations require additional resources. For example, better uses of technology, such as the live streaming of lectures, should be considered.

7.4. Theoretical Considerations

In this study, it was necessary to consider the barriers to the lone parent students' pursuit of a higher education degree, as discussed in the data chapters, and their motives and resilience in overcoming them. Bourdieu's conceptual tools of capital (economic, cultural and social) and habitus were effective in identifying and analysing how the lone

parent students' educational practices were constructed, as well as gaining insight into their familial background (2007). For Bourdieu, the habitus is a structuring system in which our dispositions are formed through both the family and early schooling. The complexity of habitus is also found when, for example, gender, class and 'race' become culturally embedded and socially reproduced through tastes, preferences and actions (Bourdieu 2010) and, as such, some groups are viewed as more deserving of a higher education than others. Despite Bourdieu (2010) stating that some working-class people tend to exclude themselves from places where they feel they might be excluded, I found that the working-class respondents in this study were resilient and prepared to 'struggle' through the hegemonic structures of HE in order to succeed, something that Bourdieu did not expand upon.

With the use of Bourdieu's concepts, the findings drawn from this research identified, specifically (when viewed relationally to families parented by a man and a woman partnership) that the socially constructed identities, such as the historic stigmatised status of lone parents, were key in them becoming HE students. In particular, despite sharing many common experiences with other mature student groups (as discussed in Chapter 2), how they experienced HE was heavily influenced by them being lone parents with dependent children. For example, the combination of a lack of support at home and social barriers differentiated them from other childless or partnered students. Feminist theory was also significant in helping to understand how, consciously or unconsciously, the respondents understood their gender, social class and 'race' identities. As opposed to adopting a single theoretical perspective, a Bourdieuian and feminist framework therefore offered a rich combination for drawing out the intersectionalities and complexities of the lone parent students' lived situation in HE.

7.5.   Specific Issues for Lone Parent Students

The feminist lens was particularly helpful in illuminating the specific issues for lone parent students. A key and overarching theme in the lone parent respondents' extracts was the many ways in which they felt that the media, employers, some politicians and the public (including some lecturers, support staff and/or welfare officers) held them responsible for their own situation (see data chapters). However, feminist theory and current statistics tell us that women remain overwhelmingly responsible for childcare and that economic inequality for women (specifically lone mothers) has not diminished, with both factors appearing to be resistant to change (Hughes 2002). Although official figures show changes in family formation (ONS 2014), there remains a lack of genuinely child-friendly policy. For example, the absence of childcare facilities and the restrictions on the admission of children onto campus show that the lone parent respondents were still being judged against a one-dimensional understanding of parenting practices based solely on the two-parent family model. Moreover, despite its promotional material reflecting diversity and the fact that many more 'non-traditional' mature women are now entering university than mature men (Callender 2014), the university appears to foster an environment that is more conducive to the white independent able-bodied male student (Leathwood 2006).

In general, the findings of this study concur with other studies on the factors affecting 'non-traditional' lone parent and mature students in HE (Hinton-Smith 2012; Moss 2006), such as financial concerns and juggling competing demands on time and space to fit the university's timetable and/or employment around childcare and study. Despite many commonalities with other mature students, due to their lone parent status, many of the respondents' learner identities were compromised because they could not fully access all facilities or socialise with other students outside their scheduled timetable, even if they wanted to. As the sole source of income in the household, lone parent students were one

of the groups with the highest levels of student loan debt (Pollard et al. 2013) and, in general, are one of the poorest groups in Britain (Thane 2010). Furthermore, for lone parent respondents who receive state benefits (as well as some unemployed people), it is mandatory to attend the government's 'welfare-to-work' job interviews, an obligation which, on its own, does not necessarily lift themselves and their children out of poverty (Gingerbread 2012b) and, instead, potentially affects the lone parent students learning identities.

In sum, while they shared many issues with 'non-traditional' mature students, the continued denigration of lone parents in the media and the political objectification of them as 'welfare scroungers' mean that lone parents' 'sinner' status remains particularly heightened. As noted above, with lone parent students facing specific barriers when undertaking a degree programme, and this study contributes to deepening understanding about their specific needs and/or how to address these and other obstacles if they are to invest in HE in order to improve their job prospects. The next section discusses future research.

7.6.   Future Research

To strengthen the position of lone parent students' in HE, future research should explore their accounts of barriers, both in terms of entry into HE and within HE itself. Moreover, similar to other research studies on students parenting in a partnership (see Chapter 2) it should also seek to understand some of the key regulatory barriers for lone parent students from the perspective of lecturers and support staff. After all, the respondents' experienced of HE was linked to institutional rules and regulations, both inside and outside the university. Additionally, the under-representation of lone student

fathers in the sample means that the situation of this group was insufficiently explored. In order to recruit lone parent fathers, future research is likely to be required to first widen its sample to include other post-1992 universities and then to other kinds of universities, such as pre-1992 HEIs.

As this study found, the situation in which many lone parent students found themselves was not necessarily of their own makings, with some respondents reporting that some lecturers were more sympathetic than others. In this respect, it is crucial that future studies also seek the views and perceptions of lecturing staff regarding the different constraints and outcomes under which some lone parent students must live their lives, and that they specifically consider lone parent students with physical disabilities.

7.7. Final Summary

As I review the research process and the evidence involved in this study, it has become clear that the lone parent students who participated in this research study saw university as part of their journey to improve their lives, both for themselves and for the future of their children. For many of the respondents in this study, their lives were shaped by issues that related to structural barriers both inside and outside the university. In order to do justice to their accounts, rather than to rely solely on 'tick boxes' and make assumptions about their social backgrounds, I spoke with them directly. In particular, they spoke about how they conceptualised their undergraduate student identity in terms of being a parent and a wage earner whilst also managing everyday domesticity. I also wanted to understand more about them as individuals and the social consequences of being a lone parent, as well as their familial backgrounds, all of which information has been largely missing from previous studies (see Chapter 2).

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to present and further the interests of lone parent students, as well as to contribute to the 'knowledge community' of academia on this area, both of which were only made possible by the lone parent respondents' participation in the research. I have also learnt a tremendous amount about research processes, including the various methodological approaches and methods used to elicit information, to develop research questions, and to read and search for literature. However, above all, I have learnt valuable lessons about articulating research findings in the context of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capitals as viewed through the theoretical lens of feminism.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Research Discussion / Interview Topic Guide

Title: "But you've done well haven't you" An exploration of the educational and social experiences of single parents in higher education.

Objectives for investigating
- How do single parents negotiate their study around caring commitments?
- What are the experiences of single parents undertaking a degree course as full time or part time students?
- In what ways do gender, social class and 'race'/ethnicity impact on single parents' learning experiences, peer-group relations and learning identities? and
- What are the implications for Higher Education (HE) policy and practice?

Introduction
- introduce self
- study
- confidentiality and consent
- timing

Discussion topics for students

- To put participants at ease, ask the participant to say how they are finding it at university and what the reasons for attending.

  Purpose: to explore motivation, similarities and differences between genders
    - subject / area of study
    - destination post-university
    - reasons for choosing this university
    - other options available? (Universities or other)

- Support and Social Networks
    - Participant to say what is a typical week for them i.e. what help/support do they receive and when do they find time to study.

  External: childcare arrangements

  Purpose: to explore family, friends or community (mentors) support and identity
    - 1st, 2nd or 3rd generation to attend university (family, friends, community)
    - family origin (home / family background?)
    - coursework management (time management)
    - social life (if so how often)
    - mentor / significant other

- circumstances as a single parent

Internal: childcare, service provision

Purpose: to explore service users, peer and tutor relationships, learning/cultural identity
- which support services are accessible (library service)
- use of resources (computers etc)
- why those services
- have they made a difference?
- relationship with module tutors
- relationship with other single parents at uni
- relationship with peers

- Socio-economic status

External: finance, childcare and living costs

Purpose: to explore family, ex-partner, income support, work
- financial management
- work full or part time (if so what are the problems)
- living accommodation
- travel

Internal: grants / bursaries

Purpose: to explore knowledge of what is available
- support financially for studies (grants, books etc?)
- fees
- counsellors
- do they help - if so in what way

- Ending interview question

- what specifically would you like to see change
- what difference would it make?
- how would this help people in the same situation?
- anything else to add or you may add later
- can I ask for clarification post-interview?

HA's Literature review

- Higher Education Policy
- Gender – heterosexuality, identity
- Feminist theory
- Men's societies

Appendix 2

Pilot Study Coding Framework

		Analysing, Coding the Data, Reducing Text		
Code	**Themes**	**Interview summary transcript – Anne**	**New-headings**	**New codes**
SN T Cc	Social Network / Neighbours Time Childcare	A: I think from when the girls were young **unless they go for a sleepover I have not really gone out myself**. I have left them with a babysitter and gone out for a couple hours to meet with a few _friends_. I think I wouldn't really miss the social life aspect as I don't think it isn't actually there apart from the daytime when I might see neighbours or _friends_ or people coming over then or meeting up as parents going out with the children together at weekend, its things like that.	• Friends	Friends (Fr)
Sl	Socialising	A: But I think my social life I have come to accept is on a different level, but then again I think it's true in a way because then that kind of leave me hooked into the group in some way that _I am dependable_ and I am _playing my part_. I think if I really analyse myself, but yeah.	• Identity • Dependency	Learning Identity (LI)
HA: How old are your children?				
T F Cc	Cost of Childcare	A: They are 10 and 12. They have got for **my daughters** - one who is in year 5 at primary my youngest there is Harroway Park just around the corner they have a walking bus an **after school club that finish about 6.30** and that _just around the corner_ from the tube where I come out on my way home. So **that ideal** and it is reasonably – it is a reasonable amount. It is something like £17.00 it £15.00 a week which isn't bad when you think about it per day. And my older daughter she takes part in various sport club. She does _gymnastics and trampolining_ at her school and she is in the choir as well so she practises and there are only really two nights per week that F needs to um, be accompanied home, they _walk home_ but just have – go round to someone have someone there waiting from us. I didn't think it warranted the level of me going for the childcare grant in the studies. It actually paid off to go for another	• Location • After school club • Sports / leisure activities	Location (L) Child Age (CA) Activity (A)

T Cc T		one, which you couldn't apply, which is the opposite one – I can't remember the name of that, I need to look it up. **On a rotational basis ahead of time been organised**. Just checking, **I organise with our _neighbour_** that is at home quite often. They are a married couple and the make puppets for the little Angel theatre – marionettes I shouldn't call them puppets. But they are around quite a lot and J has recently this year she has given up her work as a nursey nurse. So she is around a lot more. She only goes in part time **they have been a real Godsend really and a real help**. _Someone I can rely on_ and having that there is brilliant but then **I can't just take all the time** they don't say anything. But then **I take their children out** to London zoo with my daughter or to **do something nice as a one off** every six week or when their half term holidays or thing like that come up. But I think, or there is other friends and neighbour along the road that we know. But having that and the childcare been relative just a few doors away or just a walk round from the tube station is um, but C likes that particular after school club because most of her some of her close friends from school goes there after school as well so she's in that company. Yes just **having things in place** and **preparing, preparing ahead** and making sure they are happy with the arrangements, I think is more important than just saying this is how it goes. _Making sure they are comfortable_ with where they are.	• Reliability	Trust (Tr)
HA: And what about your immediate family are they able to help?				
Cc		A: My dad, **my stepmother passed away**, on the day that I actually found out about my interview and um, my dad. (HA: Your interview for?) that I was accepted for the school that I wanted to go.		
HA: Oh I am sorry.				
A	Age	A: That OK. **My dad quite old now he 70ish he is turned 76 this year** and so its not as – I mean **I could call on him but I think it wouldn't be as safe for F and C now because he is not as capable of taking care of himself**.	• Family • Safety	(Fa) (Sf)
T	Time	A: I still allow half an hour just to be on the safe side. But I think study element for the PGCE course in particularly or for the degree course the degree course was easier because it was 8 hours full time and then I could just work around the reading and the note taking as and when.	• Full-time study • Organised • Plan time	Study (SFt or SPt)

And I think coming from there with, unless, I have to be organised. Like when I have to plan, we have to plan lesson, do lesson plans about four sheets of paper and as you know isn't it? And then there is the lesson script and the resources, print all of that just be ahead. **I have to be working at least two days ahead. And then just _using any opportunity I have got to study_.** That's why **I don't have a social life** because um, you know if the girls are at home and they need me if I can sense it not too urgent I can say just give me 5 mins. I will be there or come in or they are in there next to me anyway or telling me. I haven't got the chance to answer they are telling me which is nice or you know. Just knowing that I can't _I am not guarantee any time really to do anything_.

Key to Themes: Social Networks (SN), Time (T), Childcare (Cc), Social life (Sl), Finance (F), Age (A), Social-class (Sc)

Reducing Text

Anne – Transcript Summary – Childcare (Cc)	Reducing texts – Childcare (Cc)
"I have to be working at least two days ahead and use any opportunity I have got to stud. That's why I don't have a social life. My daughters are 10 and 12 and 'A' in year 5 at primary. They have an after school club that finishes about 6.30 just around the corner from the tube where I come out on my way home so that ideal and it is a reasonable amount. My older daughter she takes part in various sports. She does gymnastics, trampolining and she is in the choir at her school. When the girls were young, unless they go for a sleepover, I have not really gone out myself. I think my social life; I have to come to accept is on a different level. On a rotation basis and ahead of time, I organise with our neighbour (who is home quite often) to pick them up. They are a real Godsend, someone I can rely on. But I just can't take all the time – they don't say anything,	Anne _"I work at least two days ahead and use any opportunity to study. I don't have a social life. My daughters stay on at after school club that finishes about 6.30 [...] so that ideal. Unless the girls go for a sleepover, I have not gone out myself. On a rotational basis and ahead of time, I organise with our neighbour to pick them up. They are a real Godsend, someone I can rely on. But I just can't take all the time [...] I take their children out and do something nice as a one off"._ _"I work at least two days ahead and use any opportunity to study. My daughters stay on at after school clubs [...]. On a rotational basis and ahead of time, I organise with_

but I then take their children out to London zoo with my daughters or do something nice as a one off".	*our neighbour to pick them up. They are a real Godsend, someone I can rely on".*

Greg – Transcript Summary – Childcare (Cc)	**Reducing texts – Childcare (Cc)**
"I was sleeping / squatting for approximately 1-year with friends after giving up my room at another friend's house. I left there after I visited the mother of my daughter who was in prison after 8 months, so the baby spent the first 8 months with her mother before I felt (that) I had to take my child away from that place (the baby was born in prison). I had to find a permanent address before the prison authorities would allow me to take my daughter. The only accommodation I could afford was outside of London, away from friends. My parents only found out about my child after she was 1-year old". I had No-no (emphasised) support. I really don't know how I did it but I did it".	Greg *"I visited the mother of my daughter in prison after 8 months and I felt, I had to take my child away from that place. I left (where) I was sleeping / squatting […]. I had to find a permanent address before the prison authorities would allow me to take my daughter. My parents only found out about my daughter after she was 1-year old". I had No-no (emphasised) support. I really don't know how I did it but I did it".* *"I visited the mother of my daughter in prison after 8 months and felt (that) I had to take my child away from that place. I had to find a permanent address before the prison authorities would allow me to take my daughter. My parents only found out about my daughter after she was 1-year old. I had No-No (emphasised) support. I really don't know how I did it but I did it".*

Appendix 3

Recruitment to Participate in a Doctorate in Education Research Study

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March 2010

Dear Student

My name is Heather Allison and I am a research student studying on the Doctorate in Education (EdD) at […] University. I am conducting a research study on the 'educational and social experiences of single parent students in higher education'.
The aim of the study is to explore how 'single parent students' negotiate their academic study and caring responsibilities and to use this information to inform policy and practice.

Professor […] is supervising this study and if you have any concerns about the study, she can be contacted via email […].
For this, I am looking for full and part time single parents studying on undergraduate degree programmes to participate in no more than approx. 1-hour audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. For example, the purpose of the interviews will be to gain further understanding of your experiences as a distinct group i.e. to discuss:

- Your views on the ways in which gender, social class and 'race'/ethnicity may affect your experience at university, and

- How do you as a single parent manage your caring responsibilities and studies at university to achieve? and

If you would like to participate in the interview, then please contact me via email at h.allison@[…].ac.uk or telephone 020 […] or […] and I will contact you.
For your information, if you agree to participate I will ask you to sign a consent form agreeing your participation and I assure you that your anonymity and confidentiality will be preserved.

Kind regards

Heather Allison

SINGLE PARENT STUDENTS NEEDED
FOR RESEARCH

If you are a single parent studying for an undergraduate degree at [...] University and you would like to participate in research to discuss:

- Your experience at university and the ways in which it may be affected by factors such as gender, social class and 'race'/ethnicity and

- How you as a single parent manage your caring responsibilities and studies at university to achieve.

I would like to hear from you.
Please contact: Heather Allison h.allison@lf...].ac.uk or telephone 020 [...] for more information

The aim is to explore the social and educational experiences of single parent students at university and to use this information to inform policy and practice

Single parent research
Tel: 020 [...]

Single parent research
Tel: 020 [...]

Single parent research
Tel: 020 [...]

Single parent research
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Single parent research
Tel: 020 [...]

Appendix 4

Briefing Note to Staff for Students to Participate in a Doctorate in Education Research Study

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March 2010

Dear ……

My name is Heather Allison and I am a research student studying on the Doctorate in Education (EdD) at […] University. I am conducting a research study on the 'educational and social experiences of single parent students in higher education'.

The aim of the study is to explore how 'single parent students' negotiate their academic study and caring responsibilities and to use this information to inform policy and practice.

Professor […] is supervising this study and if you have any concerns about the study, she can be contacted via email […].

For this, I am looking for full and part time single parent students on undergraduate degree programmes to participate in no more than approx. 1-hour audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. For example, the purpose of the interviews will be to gain further understanding of

- how single parent students manage their study around caring commitments
- the experiences of single parents undertaking a degree course as full time or part time students
- how gender, social class and 'race'/ethnicity affect single parents learning experiences, peer-group relations and learning identities and
- what the implications are for Higher Education policy and practice?

I would be most grateful if you could please inform potential students about the research. I can be contacted via email at h.allison@[…].ac.uk or telephone 020 […] or […] and I will be happy to discuss this with you further.

For your information, all respondents will be asked to sign a consent form agreeing their participation and I can assure you and them that their anonymity and confidentiality will be preserved.

Kind regards
Heather Allison

Appendix 5

Participant's Demographic Research Questionnaire

A short questionnaire about you

1.   Name_____ what would you like to be called
_____

2.   How long have you been at | Years | | Months | | university?

3.   How many children do you [   ] have?

4.   What are their ages? [   ]

5.   Are you studying   full time   or   part time (please circle one)

6.   Are you   Female or   Male (please circle one)

7.   How old are you? [   ]

8.   What subject are you studying?
_____

9.   How would you best describe your ethnicity? _____ (please
write in)

Thank you
Heather

Appendix 6

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Dear

My name is Heather Allison and I am a research student studying on the Doctorate in Education (EdD) at […] University. I am conducting a research study on the 'educational and social experiences of single parent students in higher education'. The aim of this study is to explore how single parents on undergraduate degree programmes negotiate their academic study and caring responsibilities and to use this information to inform policy and practice.

For this, I am looking for single parent students willing to participate in a 1-hour audio-recorded semi-structured interview. The purpose of the interviews will be to gain further understanding of your university experiences.

If you would like to participate in the interview, **it is important that you read, complete and sign the consent form below agreeing to your participation**. By taking part, I assure you complete confidentiality and anonymity.

I can be contacted via email h.allison@[…].ac.uk or telephone […].
……..…………………

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this pilot study. Before we start, I would like to emphasise that:

- your participation will be entirely voluntary;
- that you are free to refuse to answer any questions;
- that you will be free to withdraw at any time;
- that the interview will be kept confidential and
- all data will be anonymous.

Furthermore, the data will be used to write the thesis and possibly publications that may arise from the study. However, I assure you that the results will form part of the thesis and your anonymity will be preserved by replacing your name with a pseudonym. Thus, readers of my report will not be able to identify which persons took part in my research.

Please sign this form to show that you have read and understood the contents and that you are willing to participate.

_____ (print name)

_____ (signature)

_____ (date)

Please send me a copy of the transcription   Yes   No   (circle one)

Address for those requesting a copy transcription

_____

Appendix 7

NVivo Tree Nodes

Academic Support, Learning and Learning Communities
- tutors
- peers
- family or friends

Childcare Support

Experience at University
- expectations

Family Background
- siblings education
- parents education

Finance

Identity
- Single parenthood and being a student
- gender, race or ethnicity and social class
- conflict

Managing day-to-day
- time to study
- materials
- child development
- accommodation

Previous Education Experience
- Transition
- other

Reasons for attending university
- Interest in subject
- future hopes and career (employment)
- family
- choice of university
- access

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Social Life

Work

Other

Appendix 8

Transcript of interviews with Julie

Transcript of interview with Julie: 10 March 2010

Thank you once again Julie, I have a few questions that I would like to explore with you. It's about your experience your achievements and really why you are attending university. So it's about why are you here and how are you finding university – so tell me what are the reasons for attending?

J: Well basically I left my daughter's dad when she was 11 months and I was already working so I carried on with my job so I thought this is pointless cause I never gonna make enough money. And whatever you earn extra you just get taken away from benefits so I just thought the only way I am gonna do it is by totally getting off benefits. I have always done music ever since I was very little so I thought I will go to university (laugh, laugh) and I found a music course here which is why I travel up and I thought if I want to do a degree I need to something that I am really, really interested in. So that's why I chose this university.

HA: So how are you finding it?

J: This year has been really tough just because my timetable is so bad. But I am getting there.

HA: What do you mean your timetable's really bad – give some idea?

J: Well I am over four days when I was only three last year and for me to be here for 10am I get up at 5am and I take my daughter to the child-minder at 6am in her pyjamas and get the 7 o'clock train.

HA: How long is the train journey?

J: I get into Paddington at about half-past eight and then obviously getting from Paddington to here.

HA: And what time is your first lesson?

J: 10.00 O'clock three days per week.

HA: What about the fourth day?

J: The fourth day I start later. I start at 3 o'clock so, that's a bit easier I can take (daughter) to the nursery first.

HA: Can we go back a little bit and talk about school.

J: Yep.

HA: How did you find school and your transition from school to work was it/ as you said?

J: Yeah.

HA: Well tell me a little bit about that.

J: Well I was in school...

Phone started ringing

HA: Sorry (phone stopped ringing)

J: That's ok and I then I did college...

Phone rang again

HA: Answered and took the phone off the hook.

J: A busy day.

HA: Yes, sorry about that.

J: It's not your fault. I went to college and then...

HA: Oh ok what a further education college?

J: Yep.

HA: Where? near to where you live or...

J: Well I did it in Basingstoke. So it wasn't that far away but it took me about an hour and half to get there so.

HA: Sorry, if you don't mind, let's go back to school, did you pass any...

J: Passed my GCSEs then went onto. I wanted to study music like the playing side but I didn't want to do classical so the only way to do that was by going to college.

HA: Did you do music at school?

J: Yeah, I've done since I was four I am a classical playing pianist.

HA: Oh wow.

J: And I did singing, flute and violin yeah. So I wanted to go into performance so I went to college and then after college I just gigging and then in one of the places that I was gigging they offered me a fulltime job and I wanted to move out. Cause I suffer with epilepsy and I only, I got it when I was sixteen and my parents live like in the middle of nowhere so I just wanted to work and move out. I started working in restaurants and then dropped the whole music thing and worked my way up to assistant manager and, then obviously, I got pregnant with my daughter and like left the restaurant cause you can't really do that for 16 hours a day with a child. I then just started working in a dead end office job after I had my daughter.

HA: Was it just a normal factory or a...

J: It was a warehouse for carpets that supplied to the carpet trade. So I wasn't really gonna get anywhere working there (laugh).

HA: Ok and then you went to further education?

J: Yeah and then I thought I'd look for universities.

HA: After further education.

J: Yeah this is cause I left. I went straight from school to college I was eighteen when I left college and then...

HA: Did you leave with some qualifications?

J: Yeah, BTEC National Diploma in Popular Music and then I started gigging and working and have my daughter as I just turned 22 yrs. So yeah (laugh).

HA: And so you decided to go to university.

J: Yep.

HA: Now tell me more about how you went about researching which university and why you chose this university etc.

J: Well me and my sister, because my sister did her Master's at Leeds University and her husband just finished at Cambridge he did his PhD there and so they just helped me filtered through all of them and this is the only place I liked the sound of and the courses.

HA: Really?

J: Yeah, music management I couldn't find one anywhere else. So that's why I picked this one.

HA: Ok and any problems getting in or...

J: Yeah, there's been a few fatalities on the train lines or if there is any problem with childcare and with it been snowed in I couldn't get in on Monday. I couldn't, Leah my daughter is out on Monday and obviously I couldn't drive so I missed my presentation on Monday but he's rescheduled for next Monday.

HA: Is the course as you expected?

J: Yeah I really enjoy it, I like it and I did marketing with it as well so.

HA: Tell me about your first year?

J: The first year was a bit of a nightmare. I don't think I'd quite know what I'd took on to start with so I did fulltime and I did really well in my grades, but I dropped to part-time for the second semester because Leah was a bit of a nightmare from me going to been there. I only worked five hours a day and then I was having long days obviously I had a child-minder. So I went to part-time but then part-time was, just wasn't enough I was only in one day a week and I was just bored so I've come back fulltime.

HA: So you are back here fulltime?

J: Yeah I am going fulltime now.

HA: What about your results so far?

J: I got one 'D' in quantitative analysis but I'm awful in that, I got 'As' and mostly 'Bs'.

HA: You are doing really well?

J: Yeah so far. My coursework hasn't been so good this year but I am hoping to make up in the exam.

HA: Ok, destination, where do you want to go, what do you want to do with it?

J: Well I want to manage Bands and I am getting involved with people in the industry at the weekend and people I know from college or when I use to gig. I want to basically have my own management company and manage Bands. But if it all goes wrong I have marketing in there (laugh).

HA: Have you researched into the management of Bands.

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J: I got involved with one person who's signed to Universal and is due to release schemes? And he's let me into a lot of his meetings and how the systems work and everything.

HA: You have connections; have you been networking?

J: Yeah and I've met someone else who's just recorded an album and he's letting me in on meetings as well so it's just a matter of speaking to everyone I can really to get in there.

HA: Tell me about some of your social network and how you are coping?

J: With?

HA: With your childcare arrangements as well as internally with your social network with other peers and stuff.

J: Well, back at home I have got a really brilliant child-minder which my daughter is really close to. She works at her nursery as well and she's got two children so they are like they get on like siblings which is really good. And she's really adaptable.

HA: Does she live near you?

J: Yes, about a ten, fifteen-minute drive. So, it's fine if it isn't snowing, then I can take her there and she's really supportive and my mum helps and she stays there, my daughter stays with my mum once a week so she doesn't have three girls that early. At university I don't know, I think I have met one or two other single mums. I haven't really met any which I find a bit strange but.

HA: Well lone parenting isn't something that we ask people about so people tend to just come in and get on with their stuff so you're never sure whether some people have children or not. That was one of the reasons why I wanted to research single parents because I wanted to find out who they were because it isn't something that is obvious or talked about and I knew they exist. It seems there are quite a few lone parents actually.

J: Yeah, ok I know. I listened out for like why you're here and everything like you do at the beginning of the semester, but apart from a couple, I haven't seen any. Maybe people are not that open about it I don't know.

HA: Yes, who are your friends in Uni do you have mates?

J: Yeah I have got a close group of friends but they are younger than me which is really weird for me and they don't have kids. (laugh).

HA: You are what 25yrs and they are how old?

J: Twenty, 21yrs so there's not much difference but I think the whole, like, they live in London on their own obviously and like I'm all the way in Thatcham with my daughter and I think it really weird how we get on cause we're so different.

HA: But do you find time to socialise with them?

J: After university I've stayed up a couple of times but it's harder in the evenings cause obviously I have go back but my daughter does go to see her father every other weekend. So a lot of times I have come up to London and stayed with them or they've come down to me so.

HA: You have friends here and you have friends outside of the Uni...

J: Yeah I have got a lot of friends at home.

HA: So you've got a good network and support of people?

J: Yeah.

HA: And with your coursework who helps you with that?

J: What do you mean?

HA: Sometimes, you know, if we've got coursework to do and we need to talk it over with somebody. I know you've said you have got your sister and her husband.

J: Yeah, I talk to them sometimes about the coursework. A lot of my friends do it a lot later than me for university work but obviously I have to get it done as soon as I can because I have got Leah so but...

HA: But do you meet deadlines?

J: Yeah, yeah, yeah I meet the deadlines I just do it before them that's all (laugh). I tend to get mine done a bit sooner just because I've got that extra. I just can't sit there and do it that morning or the night before.

HA: Julie can you tell me a typical day / week?

J: Yeah, every day is a bit different Mondays...

HA: You say that you get up extremely early.

J: 5 O'clock.

HA: Yeah, yeah and when do you study that sort of stuff. I want to hear what a typical day is like.

J: Ok, I get up at 5am then get my daughter up at 6am. Sometimes in a sleep suit and I drive her to her childminder and she gets her dress, washed and brush her teeth there with all those kids.

HA: Wow.

J: And I'll drive home, walk to the train station, and get on the train and if I can get a seat on the train I'll read a book or like go through some coursework. I have got a little laptop that I can bring.

HA: It's just over an hour you were saying?

J: Yeah, then obviously I get to Uni I do my lectures or seminars. Sometimes I do what I have got, I think it's on a, yeah on a Monday I have got a gap from 12 till 3 o'clock so I either do work then or if I have had a lot of group work then I do group meetings cause obviously I am already in the university. And then I either finish my class either 4 or 5pm depending on how long it goes on for. And then I get back to Paddington for the, it depends on what time I leave here if I leave here at 4pm I get to Paddington for the five past five. So I get home about half past six, then I drive to pick her up, bring her home sort her hair out get her to bed. Sort her stuff out for the next day and then if I haven't got washing to fit in or anything like that I do Uni work. Then obviously get an early night cause I am up on Tuesday.

HA: Oh wow

J: It's a bit busy (laugh)

HA: Ok so tell me, give me a bit more about your family background. Your mum, your dad do you have any brothers?

J: I've only got one sister yeah.

HA: One sister ok. Tell me did they go to university?

J: Yeah my mum's a qualified teacher but has only done little bits of teaching here and there and...

HA: What primary teaching or?

J: No secondary school. She's a trained RE teacher and my dad he went to Oxford University and he works in computers doing software – but I don't really understand it at all.

HA: What about their parents? Do you know much about their educational background?

J: Yeah, my dad's parents he did quite a few things I know he was a policeman for a while and he did, I think he did boxing or something. And my mum's side she grow up in Muswell Hill. And my granddad owned Hardware Stores which were Marlin Wilkinson and Sons' and he sold the company on but there are still some brands and stuff that are kept in with the same name. So that's pretty cool.

HA: Yes it is. Did any of them attend higher education or further education?

J: I think everyone has. I am not sure whether my grandma did and my granddad definitely would of but I am not sure.

HA: And you and your sister have but she's finished.

J: She's finished; she's become a Chartered...

HA: How old is she?

J: Thirty and she's a Chartered Water Engineer.

HA: Wow that's different (both laughed). Is it something that was expected do you think?

J: Yeah, it was definitely expected (laugh).

HA: So when you left school and didn't go to Uni, tell me what your parents thought about that? What were you doing (both laugh)?

J: My dad couldn't comprehend it all he just couldn't understand why you wouldn't go to university and my mum is a little more open and she thought if I was going to university it's better for me to do it when I wanted because I was a bit of a tearaway. She just thought I would be a nightmare.

HA: So why didn't you want to go?

J: I think cause it was expected I suppose. I always kinda done what I was told. I don't know I just...

HA: To that point.

J: Yeah, I think I just wanted to earn money and move out.

HA: Ok what age did you move out?

J: Eighteen (laugh)

HA: Ok and they were cool about it or not?

J: No, yeah they were, cause I live in a tiny village and I got epilepsy when I was sixteen and they said you can't drive anywhere. A year, you have to wait a year after everything before you can get a licence so they thought obviously that it's better for me to move out. So I went and rented my first flat off my mum's friend anyway.

HA: Ok and then you met your partner, sorry your daughter's dad? And what does he do?

J: He worked in computers but he now works in hardware.

HA: And has he been to university?

J: No he didn't. He did college, and then, I think he did it whilst he was working for them cause I know that he's got certificates and stuff for IT, so to get where he is he studied that way.

HA: I am trying to piece things together. It's interesting. And your family where are they from originally. Are they Irish or English...?

J: No, they are all English apart from...it goes back to my grandma's grandfather was either Lithuanian or Polish and he was a Jew and he came, luckily he had enough money and came over here, when obviously they wanted to kill the Jews and everything. Then married a Christian converted I don't understand that but that's how this side got here. But I am not sure I think the other side, already been here as far as I know.

HA: Do you want to discuss some of the circumstances in becoming a single mum? Were there any stigma or anything like that?

J: Well I think there is...

HA: And what did your family think?

J: I am like the first single mother in my entire family (laugh). But my mum is very supportive and basically her (daughter's) dad is really, really nice until he starts drinking basically and he does suffer with depression.

HA: That's your ex-partner?

J: Yeah, so he does get violent, he got violent with me and I thought no that's not how I have been bought up, this is wrong so we just left. And it was a bit of a palaver leaving and everything but they've been really supportive because of the reason I left him.

HA: Did you not want to get married?

J: Oh we were engaged and we were gonna get married yeah. But after, he's always been a bit violent when he's drunk but he's never done it to me before but I wasn't gonna stick around that.

HA: Has he sorted himself out?

J: Yes he has, he's done counselling and everything and he has Leah, he doesn't live with his parents but he goes to his parents every other weekend to have Leah.

HA: Ok so that's where your daughter goes to?

J: Yeah so I go there with her and he's not allowed to leave her in anyone else's care. We went through solicitors so that he can't physically go down the pub and come home as that's the only ever time that she would be in danger.

HA: Pretty well sorted so well done.

J: It is now yeah.

HA: Did that take a while for him to agree to all that?

J: Well it was all a bit of a. I think I shocked everyone by just leaving so quickly. And it was the weekend I don't know if you remember all the floods years ago, it was the weekend of the floods so the council didn't have anywhere to put me. I ended up luckily getting a...

HA: You just somewhat left?

J: Literally, literally, he went to his mum and the next day, I literally just packed all of our stuff and got some vans from my old work and they moved us out. And I managed to get a flat who my friend was, hum, who owned it but it was taken off the market to redo it cause it had forty-two metal spiral staircase on the outside and that was the only way in and out and he didn't want to rent it out until he sorted it but obviously I needed somewhere. But I tried to find other places...

HA: It must have been difficult for you with your daughter as well?

J: I use to take her up, put her somewhere, run down to get the buggy (laugh), take that up and then run down again to like get the shopping I am like (laugh).

HA: Anyway, at least she was safe.

J: No we had, then she got bronchitis because the windows were really old and they said I'd have to start putting tubes down her and I went in every estate agent and they wouldn't. As soon as I said I was working but partially on benefits they just said no. And I ended up, my parents ended up re-mortgage, getting a mortgage basically cause I think they paid it off, mortgaging their house to buy another house so I can rent from them.

HA: So that's what you do now?

J: Yeah, so I rent from them that obviously why I can't move to London so yeah I am lucky.

HA: Wow, yes, yes, very good parents they are supportive.

J: Yeah really. They didn't want me to move in with them so they thought the best way to do it was for them to buy somewhere and for me to rent off of them commercially so.

HA: So that helps to pay for it and it is something that they could sell later which is very good business sense as well (both laugh). What about the services at Uni do you access any of them? Or do you use any of them like the library, counselling I don't know have you ever...

J: I haven't used the library much just because it's so far away obviously from where I am. So I tend to file the course.

HA: When the lecture finishes do you want to go?

J: Yeah I kinda want to shoot off. I bind all my work in there and obviously, I do my...

HA: Where here?

J: Yes, and I do my group work like usually in the library.

HA: So that's about it. You literally come here attend your lectures and shoot off home unless you are spending some time with mates to socialise.

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J: Yeah, in my gaps, I have got gaps which obviously I can't go home and come back again so I do my socialising then or if I have work to do or do my group meetings. There is a lot of group work, which luckily I have got the gaps in my timetable.

HA: I just want to explore how much of the university that people like yourself actually use? Like some of the resources that is there.

J: I know a lot of my friends use the gym but obviously I don't really have time to use the gym while I am here.

HA: But you do know that they exist?

J: Yeah, yeah.

HA: Are you aware of all the different services?

J: Yeah, oh I used the benefit person once from the office by the cafe. And they went through, cause I am renting commercially off my parents I can claim towards my rent and my council is awful even when I was working and before I moved into my parents' house, they always worked the benefit claim out wrong. And it's really hard to work out. And when I was at Uni, when I started Uni it was even lower than when I was working and I thought that actually I haven't even got the income like when I was working. And they went through it and they got their legislation for me which was really helpful saying they don't take into account the grant which I took down to them and obviously they said they were wrong which came in handy cause I needed it again this year and they did it wrong so.

HA: Tell me more about your finances and how are you are being supported through that and how do you manage?

J: Well I have had...

HA: Do you have a loan.

J: I have a loan and a special support grant but there was all the problems with the loan coming through this year so I didn't see any money until November. So luckily I borrowed money off my parents which I paid straight back when I got the loan and I am still waiting for my childcare to come through. I still haven't had that which is ridiculous. So basically if it wasn't for my parents lending me money I wouldn't be here cause I pay nearly £600.00 per month on childcare. So obviously, it takes a lot of means to get that sort of money and I can't get an overdraft anyway so.

HA: How about your daughter's father, do you get maintenance?

J: Err no. Because I don't want anything from him like. He always said when he use to get drunk and stuff that which I knew he didn't mean but that I could never, I would never survive without him. So he would help out and he would buy her stuff when she needs stuff and he does treat her but I don't wanna, apart from him supporting her like more emotionally I don't want his money.

HA: Are you in debt?

J: Yes. I got credit cards out when I was eighteen that I am still paying off. Which is why I am 'black listed' and I can't get a student bank account.

HA: Oh, ok. Do you have a lot left to finish paying?

J: I have only got £2000.00 but obviously I don't pay much for months so...

HA: Well that's fine but when that finishes what happens? When you finish paying will they

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unblocked you?

J: I think so because I have only got one credit card that I owe money on and it's until I pay that off basically I think.

HA: But you don't know what happens after whether you would be trusted again?

J: I think I will be all right because I looked at if I went bankrupt on whether that would be easier and it worked out that that would like affect me for years.

HA: Years, I think for life isn't it?

J: Yeah, so I think this way is just paying it off and then you don't owe anyone any money. I think if that works out I'll be fine, hopefully.

HA: What about stuff at home do you have your own resources at home such as computer, printer that sort of stuff?

J: Yeah, luckily I already had a computer anyway and I bought a printer because obviously it is easier for me to print it off at home because I can't always be a Uni to work so.

HA: Sure. But what about other stuff for your coursework where do you get that from? Well you said you don't use the library here very much, do you use a library near to home or do you access information via the Internet?

J: Well I buy the course books. I do use a lot on...

HA: But they can be quite expensive can't they?

J: Yeah but I buy them on Amazon and they're cheaper. Rather than going to Blackwell's cause they are really expensive.

HA: They do second handbooks but it's a chance that you get the one you need. Check them out they do second handbooks.

J: Oh I didn't know that, oh ok. Yeah I get the books that way and then just by the internet.

HA: Do you access the library through the internet - this library?

J: Yeah I use the online library database loads at home and all the key notes and all of those, which is really handy. Yes, I can just do my coursework at home and access it through there.

HA: So tell me about the relationship that you have with your tutors and do they know that you are a single mum?

J: Some of them do and some of them don't. Some people are really sympathetic.

HA: Who are the tutors?

J: Yeah, I had a PAA last year she was brilliant and she got them to change my timetable cause I think they put me in for a 6 o'clock till 7 seminar and I said I can't really do it I can't leave my daughter till 10 o'clock at night and the undergraduate said just say no. And even I say like I leave at six in the morning to take Leah off they would never change it you always have to get some else to tell them to change it. And she was really good but then I had a PAA last semester who is now my lecturer but I never met him and he's never turned up for his PAA hours and I had to grab another lecturer to do book my new modules in. Cause obviously you have to see someone, he was a nightmare.

HA: Have you changed PAA or you cannot swap?

J: Well I don't know who I have this year cause I haven't checked but if it's him I don't want to obviously.

HA: I am not sure whether you can change who you see.

J: Who do you ask?

HA: I am not sure, the undergrad centre maybe or maybe another lecturer that you do get on with. And so the others that are supportive what do they...

J: They tend to be females that are more supportive. There was Sal I can't remember her second name and then Joy something she was brilliant the first year and I still see her about now. But it tends to be the men that aren't as, they don't really understand about looking after a child and obviously being a.

HA: It don't seem as though they are really interested?

J: No, I think they feel well, you really sort it out. But then when I came to university and said like, cause I came to one of the open days and I was talking to someone like and I said, that I am a single mother is there like provision. For obviously if my daughter is ill and she can't go to the childminder and she can't go to the nursery so obviously I have to stay at home and things were timetable and they said they would be really adaptable to being a single parent. They shouldn't say that if they're not gonna.

HA: I am still trying to explore more about the stigma. Do you feel that generally out there as well as in university that people have certain thoughts about, well stereotypical things about who they think you are?

J: I think stereotypically that they think single mothers stay at home and don't do anything because when I am at Uni people are surprise to find out that I have got a child and the people I know or who I haven't seen for a while or people I meet 'oh you're doing Uni. Oh that's brilliant' and they congratulate you and I think well why shouldn't more single mothers do university or work or...

HA: Like it's something special?

J: Yean (laugh) and it's like we don't all sitting around producing more you know like so many do.

HA: What about when you were working, did you find any stigma?

J: They were brilliant cause it was a really small office and I left my daughter's dad when I was still working there. So obviously, they knew why I had left him and everything and they were very supportive in me leaving and going to Uni as well which was really nice. They were brilliant.

HA: Would you hide the fact that you were a single parent?

J: No, not at all (laugh).

HA: You've told me a lot about your family does your sister have any children?

J: No, she wants to become a Chartered Engineer, do some work charity work abroad and then she will settle down and have kids.

HA: Well from what you have told me I would guess that you are from a middle-class background. Is that correct?

J: Yeah.

HA: Would you class yourself as middle-class?

J: I am not sure about me (laugh) but yeah, my family they have always had money and a big house and yeah.

HA: So why not you?

J: well I hum, I don't have a big house, I don't have any money (laughing), and I am a single mother so I am not quite there.

HA: So your family you believe are middle-class, but you have detached yourself from that because of your situation, is that what you think?

J: I don't know; I have never really thought about it. I hum...

HA: What about the majority of your friends, would you say they were middle-class or working-class or a mixture? And are they diverse. Do you have a mixture of black, Asian, mixed-race people as friends? I don't know...

J: In university I do and back...

HA: Because, it is quite a diverse university isn't it?

J: Yeah, which I think is really good.

HA: Do you enjoy that aspect of it?

J: Yeah, but in Thatcham everybody is white basically they, I think we have some Polish people at one point and they opened up a Polish supermarket but they didn't last very long. I suppose maybe it because it's a small town and hum.

HA: So your friends at Uni are quite diverse?

J: At university yeah.

HA: How about, are there any issues around gender. Do you think we are treated differently? You mentioned that there were issues with some male tutors, but what can you tell me about the other men in your class?

J: Towards me or?

HA: Well just towards women in general yeah.

J: I think women, it harder for women to get their points across that they are not like happy or whatever. But like in all the group work that I have worked in I have had like nearly all blokes in my group and I've been the one who say you do this you do that you need to sort this out. So it's a bit strange that it ends up like that if...

HA: So are you saying that they probably take the lead in class or try to the guys?

J: Yeah, sometimes.

HA: Are there more women than men in your class or is it equal?

J: I think it's equal if there're not more men. I am not sure. I think the way people perceive people is always very different to how they are.

HA: What do you mean I don't know – explain.

J: I don't know like people, well since I have been at Uni it's like, people find out that I am 25

and they are like really and then they find out...

HA: What do they think you are too old or something?

J: They think I am too old or my look or whatever, and then they are like 'you come from Thatcham'? Like one they've never heard of Thatcham or if I say I renting they can't believe that I don't live in London and then I have a kid and they're like 'what' and it's just like what they perceive is completely wrong. It's just like everybody I have met in Uni are like students.

HA: Or what a student should be?

J: Yeah (laugh).

HA: How interesting, what about outside of Uni? Are people reactionary when they see you pushing a buggy or?

J: Not really, not so much. Most people don't think, if I meet people they don't think I am a mother they think I am a trainer not maternal or something. Most people are just surprise if I am doing Uni as a single mum, which I find really weird.

HA: Do you think you will have any difficulties in your chosen career because of your gender?

J: Yeah, I think you have to prove yourself a lot more for being female but.

HA: It's a male environment is it, that you will be going in to?

J: Yeah, it is really male dominated. And also that I know there's is if I went for a job I know that when you hire someone if you are aware that they have children you have to like be prepared when you take them on to like let them off for certain things regarding children. So obviously a lot of employers they don't want a single mother because they don't want to have to let you off when you have to take a week off.

HA: So how do you think it would work with managing bands? Because that's what you said you wanted to do was to manage bands.

J: Well it's not like a...

HA: And what is the pay like for stuff like that?

J: You get a percentage of what they make. The more they're earning the more you earn. But if it worked I would want to set up my own company so it would be mine and I'd manage the artist. And it's surprising how many blokes like trust women from management. I don't know if it's that maternal thing about mothers whether they are better at managing than males are I am not sure.

HA: Ok, so you've met a new partner and how is that going and how long have you been together?

J: Yeah, about a year and a half but I have known him since I was 11 years old so I have known him for years. We went to school together (laugh).

HA: Wow, did he also live in Thatcham?

J: He used to live in a little village by me so he lives in London. But it's not like a massive serious relationship. Its hum, I am doing Uni and that's all I have got time to focus on really. And he's happy doing his thing working in London and, but he's met my daughter on a friend basis and they get on so that's good and he's met my little girl's dad but I am not about to move in with him or anything. I just want to do my degree that's all I want to focus

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on really.

HA: Yeah, you've got a place of your own, your own space which is kinda cool really.

J: Yeah.

HA: We've talked about travel, we've talked about living accommodation, work I think we've covered quite a lot of stuff actually (Pause). And are you on target with your coursework?

J: Yeah, yeah I haven't hand in anything though.

HA: And the feedback has been, well you've said that you have had some good feedback, grades anyway so.

J: Yeah, I did last year, but it's harder this year because of the timetable.

HA: Why tell me more about the timetable?

J: Well because I've got three 10 o'clock starts last year I didn't have gaps in the day so it was all more compacted together and it was over three days whereas this is four days and a lot harder to have time at home to do work but I was told that they can't change my timetable. So I don't think that they can on this one. I don't think my coursework will be as good that's all but at least I am prepared for it at least I know.

HA: What time do you go to bed?

J: Late.

HA: You have to get up, but I thought you said that you have to get up at 5am?

J: Yeah I do.

HA: So what's late?

J: Well if I am getting up at 5am I try to be in bed before 12am. But obviously that doesn't give enough time to do anything cause by the time I have got home and got the little one in bed it can be half past eight and obviously I have got other things to do as well as Uni work so it does get late. Like if on a Tuesday night or Wednesday, I stay up till 1am / 2am and then just get up at 7am for Leah. So (laugh) I am use to that.

HA: And at weekends?

J: Well it depends if I have got or not cause every other weekend she spends it at her dads.

HA: You can catch up then or not?

J: Well sometimes because ever since I have had her I can't seem to lie in like I use to. And it really fascinates me that people at university are in bed until 2pm and I am like how?

HA: Yeah, I know, but do you catch up on your coursework?

J: Yeah, it's really handy that he has her at the weekend. Every other weekend so I can spend the day doing my coursework.

HA: Ok I think we have covered, we have covered quite a lot of ground actually, well done. To end the interview, what would you specifically like to see change and what difference would it make?

J: In the university?

HA: Yep.

J: The undergraduate being a little bit more sympathetic with timetables.

HA: In what way because sometimes the timetables are fixed aren't they?

J: Yeah, but sometimes they aren't because they are. For instance, marketing on Tuesday we've got a lecture between 1 and 2 and my class was 9 to 11 and for me to get here for 9am is even earlier and I couldn't actually physically make it in and I tried for ages but undergrad kept saying no that they couldn't change it. Then I find out that there was another class that they did 9 to 11 and 11 to 1pm, so I had to get Emmanuel who is the Course Leader involved for the undergraduate to change me to the 11 o'clock slot. So that was a pain when they could have just changed it for me. And I think they should put timetables on Evision earlier cause obviously I have got to tell the child-minder and nursery what my daughter's hours are. And for next semester they're still not up so that's a bit of a pain.

HA: Yeah they do arrive quite late I would agree with you. Cause I am still waiting to hear what rooms we have but it is a huge place and a lot of people to organise.

J: That's why they should do it a lot earlier.

HA: Yes I am just saying and in their defence but that's something that they ought, well they know that so they ought to start earlier. Anything else, timetable, what else?

J: I am not sure, I don't think that I have that much problems with the university.

HA: Well the course is running all right so all those things are ok. So your situation as a single parent it's just that with the timetabling?

J: Yeah, that's my only real hang up with the university.

HA: What about the lecturers are they a little sympathetic that not all students are what they perceive or imagined them to be?

J: I think they should be a little bit more aware that you are not just living 10mins down the road but I suppose in some ways that's my choice. Sort of, but even if my parents...

HA: An agree choice though between them and you wasn't it?

J: Well yeah. The only other thing is like when they do, like when I said about the mix up with the PAA because he didn't bother attending the PAA hours and I sat outside for an hour and he's now my lecturer and he went on to say he's a busy person and doesn't attend his PAA hours, I was like come on a minute. We are all busy I am like paying for a class...

HA: Sorry, so he was now saying students don't attend my PAA?

J: Yeah he was saying don't attend my PAA just email me.

HA: Oh, don't attend.

J: Yeah, don't attend I haven't got time. And I was like it's only an hour a week he should really attend it and he's not that busy sorry and he doesn't have to pay childcare cause his kids are a lot older so I was like that cause I had already stood outside his room...

HA: But if that is a part of his role.

J: No, I know but he's I just don't really like him he is very arrogant. But I had to get one of the other lecturers to fill in my modules for the next year but because he wasn't dealing

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with our year he forgot to put my, he didn't know that he had to put both modules on. So when it came for grants to come through to start with the student finance said it's not coming through cause the university haven't said that you've enrolled. And I couldn't enrol online and I couldn't see the problem and they said oh you have to do your other four and I said can I do it over the phone and they said no. So I had to come all the way in to enrol on my other four modules, which it turns out, it was with the same lecturer.

HA: And couldn't you wait until your first lecture or something, you know wait until you're in to do the rest?

J: No they said I had to enrol so I had to come up before and obviously it does cost a few bob getting up here.

HA: But let's say you had lecture next week and your first session I would probably agree for you to come and do it then?

J: Yeah, do it together but they say no.

HA: It does seem a bit mean doesn't it?

J: Yeah. Well it didn't make any difference with my loans anyway because (laugh, laugh).

HA: That's not understanding that everybody has different needs and circumstances and that everyone is treated the...

J: It's like the undergraduate centre has this yes no thing either like this box or this box. Like this goes for everyone I think.

HA: Is there anything more you want to add?

J: I don't think so, I don't think so.

HA: No, that's fine. Well if you find that there are some things later on your journey, are you going to get your train now?

J: Yeah.

HA: Well you thought I could have said that to Heather do email me or contact me and let me know so I can include it.

J: Yeah, ok then.

HA: It's been really interesting talking to you and pleased to have met you. Oh, while I am transcribing is it ok for me to contact you just to clarify stuff that I didn't understood.

J: Yes of course it is. I have changed my mobile number should I give you my new number?

HA: Yeah, I have your home number please jot it down. Thank you again for coming.

J: No problem.

Appendix 9

Transcript of interviews with Shona

Transcript of interview with Shona: 18 December 2009

HA: Just to thank you again and, as I explained to you before in... class, the main objectives of this study is to explore how single parents studying in higher education negotiate or manage their time around study and childcare commitments. There are the three main reasons for this research and the reason for this is to help inform policy and practice such as when management are developing policy around certain key areas like diversity or inclusion that we have research information to support and improve your university experience here.

S: But it will be after I have gone.

HA: Well, yes, but your contribution will help others that are coming in. Similarly, my previous research, probably will have some benefits for those that participated, but the research helped to secure a part-time post to support those after. This was significant because some of the students that I taught were able to apply for that position and other positions were developed later. You know a little about me from the introduction in your class.

S: Yeah.

HA: So let's find out about you. Tell me Shona, how are you finding things at university and what are the reasons for attending?

S: Well firstly my reasons for coming to university were because, after, when I before I was expecting my daughter I was working in retail, it wasn't really going anywhere even though I was progressing in the job whatever, it wasn't going anywhere. Because I was very ill I was pregnant, they basically sent me my P45. At the time, I didn't know that it was illegal but yeah they basically sacked me while I was on maternity leave. And I thought I need to be in a job that has security not only for me but also for my child. I also needed to show my daughter that we, she's capable of more and not stop because of certain situations that we are capable of more. So the first thing was for my daughter why I am at university why I am struggling so she can look at it and say you know what my mum went through this and my life is easier so I must can get through all this you know to inspire her. And also for myself because I know that I have a brain so it's important for me to use it like. So that's why I am here just to get somewhere in life I guess and not be stuck working in retail when I know that isn't my potential and there is more out there for me and just because I am a single parent that doesn't mean that it stops there.

HA: Can I take you back a little the, prior to work, tell me a little bit about secondary school and what happened?

S: Secondary school, that was hard in the sense that I was going through a lot in my personal life. And that led to me being very disruptive from about 8 to year10. I was in a very bad place mentally, not to the point that I was cast as depressed or whatever, but I was definitely going down that route and that affected my schoolwork.

HA: From what age?

S: Gosh from about thirteen.

HA: Ok, so primary was?

S: Yeah, I got bullied a lot in school because I am black.

HA: In primary?

S: Yeah.

HA: Was this predominantly a white area?

S: Ilford. No, but I guess there were black children at the school, but I was I guess the only black female in my class. There was another black female…

HA: That was unusually high.

S: Pardon.

HA: A high rate of white to black girls?

S: Err, no but hum…

HA: To black or white female?

S: White or Asian. Quite a lot of Asian children at the school, so that was a bit of a pain so when I got to high school I decided that I wasn't gonna get picked on anymore so I became a type of bully. And so hum, high school, it wasn't because I wasn't smart enough to do the work it just a case of, because I had so much stuff going on I just couldn't find interest in school. There were certain lessons that I enjoyed big time and those were the lessons that I got my As and Bs in. I was quite good at maths so I was in the second set or whatever. But it wasn't until year ten that my teacher said to me if you don't fix up basically you are going to be expelled. They gave me a lot of chances they really did. So I fixed up and I got my GCSEs.

HA: What grades.

S: An A, 5 Cs a D, E and an F.

HA: And so?

S: I was working at the time and I never revised. If I had revised, I would have done better.

HA: Yes, but what did you do with those, you went into retail? You didn't think of going onto further education.

S: I did A-levels and I only did one year because I was failing. No, they said to me that I wouldn't pass my A levels so I would have to repeat it and that just put me off cause I thought all of my friends are gonna be gone blah, blah, blah. So I decided to go and cause I was probably working at the time cause I got my first job when I was 14yrs. My mum was a single parent, my dad, they got divorced when I was about ten or so. So yeah, I have been working from about 14. And earning money was very important to me for my independence so after I went and got my first full time job and I worked continuously up until I got pregnant. That's about it.

HA: So you got pregnant and then after having your child, are you still with the father?

S: No.

HA: And were you still with the father up to…

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S: No.

HA: Ok. So you then decided to come to university. Did you use an access route or did you apply through the usual channel UCAS?

S: No, I did some courses like it was some part time courses prior to that because it was like six years you know so I did a couple of courses.

HA: Where was that, in further education?

S: Well what it is, is I was living in a hostel a mother and baby unit and it was one of the workers there that said to me listen you have a brain you need to use it. And I went to do a Taster I think it was and that was an introduction into hospitality that kind of industry. And I found out, I did the course and I pass the course and whatever, found out that it wasn't for me. I did a mentoring course but never far with that, it kinda just disbanded and I did a few other courses and I organised some shows in that time as well. Black history shows and it was while I was doing that I thought you know my brain is working let me go to college. So, I went to college and did an access course into high education.

HA: Do you mind saying which college?

S: No I don't mind, […].

HA: Oh, ok.

S: Yeah, from there I passed that and I came here last year.

HA: Was this the first university you applied to or did you apply to any others and why did you choose [this university]?

S: I applied through UCAS and I applied to do Education because at the time I wanted to do teaching. Even though at that time I had my doubts about teaching because my friend was doing her PGCE at the time and she was giving me all the horror stories so when it was time for me to pick on my UCAS I chose [this university], Sheffield Hallam and...

HA: That's a long way away.

S: Yeah.

HA: Were you prepared to move out...

S: Yeah.

HA: Ok, and...

S: I can't remember the third one.

HA: A local one? Was it…?

S: No, definitely not…

HA: And there's hum another, sorry it's just gone from me, one over north.

S: It could have been Anglia Ruskin's or something like that.

HA: Ok so you were thinking of leaving London completely.

S: Yeah but what I wanted to do was, I found an interest in Caribbean studies and that's what done it for me. I got this as one of my first choice so I thought let me just go for this, [this

university] replied to me quicker than Sheffield Hallam, so I accept this and then afterwards I was accepted to Sheffield Hallam.

HA: So were applying for the teacher training at Sheffield...

S: No and similar education studies.

HA: So education studies were the main thing and this one had...

S: Caribbean studies and nowhere else in England has Caribbean studies. So I thought ok.

HA: Yeah, it's very unusual, it's one of the good things about this university. So tell me how it's going and what did you expect to do with education studies?

S: Well I have an interest in children and the way they learn and what I was expecting from them was, well err the course hasn't met my expectations but that doesn't mean I am not enjoying it, it is just different.

HA: Could you say a little bit more about that?

S: I wasn't sure if I was expecting more, a lot more of the way they do it in college. How they do education or child base learning in college. I wasn't sure if I was expecting more along those lines but the amount of theory that I guess that backs it.

HA: What here?

S: Yeah, I don't think I was expecting as much as that or different theorists you know like Paiget, and Vygotsky and people like that. I don't know if I was expecting that because it's more on the lines of psychology, but anyway. I found it ok but I struggled, I struggled because I found it very, very hard trying to balance like my home life and like Uni life. Basically, I just come to Uni, do what I have to do and then go home, I don't really interact with many people here. I have a couple of people that I speak to but that's about it. And I don't go out of my way to socialise in Uni because I just don't have time for it.

HA: So, when you leave Uni what do you go and do, tell me about a typical week?

S: A typical week or a typical day?

HA: Or typical day both.

S: Well a typical day is like getting up at ten to six, getting myself ready for Uni, getting my daughter ready for school, taking her school, her school is still in Stratford. So I leave from my house go to Stratford, drop her off and go back, cause her school is PrimaryLand, go back to the station take the train in, go to my lectures and then leave as soon as my lectures are finish, go home…

HA: Do you pick her up first, no...

S: No, I go home first cause I finish as 12 o'clock. So by the time I get home its one o'clock and from 1 to 2 I will have my lunch at home and then it's leaving my house to pick my daughter up from school and we get home probably about 4/5 o'clock typically and then is just getting her ready for bed. And giving her dinner (laugh) and then I try and get some reading done.

HA: You study then late when she's in bed?

S: Yes, that's if I get to study at all.

HA: Why, what would stop that?

S: Oh gosh. Like I have health problem, I was diagnosed with thyrotoxicosis which is a disease of the thyroid gland so I suffer from fatigue. And I get lethargic a lot especially if my thyroids are raging and I have thyroid storms and all the rest of it so depending on how my health is, if I am not feeling well in myself. . .

HA: How is it managed?

S: It's managed by medication I am carbimazole. But hum like between 2006 when I was diagnosed and 2008, I spent a lot of time in hospital, no sorry 2007 between 2006 and 7, that's when I spent a lot of time in hospital, so it was basically like try and keep out of hospital but there are times like when I am on borderline.

HA: How did you manage when you were in hospital with your daughter?

S: It was very hard. My mum had to have her but my daughter started playing up because she didn't wanna be away from me cause for one admission I was in for six and half weeks and then another one I was in for four weeks and then again sometimes I may go in for a week two weeks whatever. And yeah it's been a lot on her and she does act up sometimes and even now she'd be like mum are you going to leave me and I'm like no I'll come and get you later.

HA: Tell me more about external support outside of university, you said that your mother helps. Anybody else?

S: What like...

HA: Yeah, who supports you whilst you are studying, who are your networks, who else can you ask for support/help?

S: No one.

HA: No one, does mother help with babysitting?

S: She would have my daughter like, like on Tuesday I start at nine and I finish at four so recently over the past two three weeks my dad even though we are estranged my dad would pick up my daughter. He would meet me at Stratford station, pick her up and get her to school so that I can get to Uni for 9 o'clock. And then my mum will pick her up from school and drop her back to me (laugh) or I would go and pick her up whatever, but on those kind on a Tuesday we don't get home until about 8 o'clock. But hum, yeah.

HA: I don't suppose that helps your health either, arriving home that late.

S: Probably not. But like I said I am struggling through but I'm gonna get there.

HA: Of course you are going to get there that goes without...

S: Obviously, I don't have a choice you know but yeah.

HA: So when you achieve, the qualification will take you then to? What is the future?

S: I have no idea I just want to get that paper and then see where it can take me.

HA: What are the possibilities with that paper have you explored what that could be? Into primary education, what is it?

S: To be honest I was gearing towards teaching in a primary school but I am not sure if I am ready to deal with all the red tape and the extra paperwork that goes all with being a teacher.

HA: What's the red tape?

S: Oh like of gosh I can't remember the proper phrase. All the administration stuff and all the you can't do this, can't do that. The stipulations and stuff it seems a bit outside of teaching. The actual practicality of being a teacher and I don't know if I can do that as much as I want to be an instrument to helping children to learn and helping them to find their niche as much as I'd love to that I don't know if I can do it.

HA: So is it working with children that you would like to do. How about nursery?

S: Not challenging enough. (Laugh) not challenging enough. My main interest is literacy.

HA: Ok

S: And I know that there is a scheme at my daughter's school the Ruth Mishskin Literacy programme what they call the RML and that really, really works and I'm interested in that and I wouldn't mind working within her company as it were but I don't know how to go about that. That's what I'd like to do is just help children with reading that's the main thing.

HA: Perhaps just contact them in the first instance.

S: Maybe.

HA: Find out more about them and tell them that you are interested. Simple things like that you know may work. What types of jobs are there and what would you need what type of qualifications would you need? You need to ask those sorts of questions otherwise, you are just guessing, they can only say no.

S: It's true, it's true and also I write as well at times.

HA: Are there any other options other than working with young people?

S: I am interested in editing books or writing books myself cause I do some writing children's books. So yeah if it doesn't work out that way I know that education can take me into it.

HA: Into another way. That's excellent. With them you can still ask those questions. You have an interest in two different angles.

S: But as far as the Caribbean studies side, I have no idea what…

HA: Tell me about that, how is that going and what does that entail?

S: What Caribbean studies in itself?

HA: Yes.

S: Basically it's just the history of the Caribbean and last year I did African history as well and it's just gaining more insight into Caribbean history which interest me big time. And I guess it resonates with my own life as well being a second generation born here Jamaican. So, I, the Caribbean history is more fun for me. Well not the exam but the rest of it the learning side of it is much more fun for me and I can place myself and I can see parts of myself when...

HA: Connection.

S: Yes, I can connect with it and that makes it easier for me to digest the information than education I guess

HA: Well the two are a pretty good combination actually. Well Caribbean studies, I haven't done, but education has been a really good place to find out lots of things. This is because, as you have said, to engage with those philosophers or understanding the way people learn and the creation of knowledge, who knows what, the whole thing is so wide and varied that you can get so much from it. It's a great area and I wished I'd done it earlier myself. So are your parents from Jamaica, both of them?

S: No, my mother is from Jamaica and my father is from Nigeria.

HA: Do you have any other siblings and are you the first to university?

S: I am the middle child. I have an older brother and a younger sister. I am the first to university in my immediate family and my sister is going to university next year. But like my cousins they have all gone onto university, no four of them have and one of them is a single parent. So she's kind of like, gives me a kick up the backside when I need it.

HA: What did she do?

S: She did sports science and sports psychology maybe.

HA: Ok she's not on the other side like a bit like me (laugh).

S: Yeah, she got a 2:1.

HA: That's very good, what university was that?

S: Oh god.

HA: Don't worry.

S: No, it's kinda dissolved now because they moved it to another sight.

HA: What job does your mum do? And your father?

S: My dad is retired.

HA: What did he do?

S: Everything, he had his own shop and he sold artefacts and he also worked for Royal Mail and he was a security guard as well. That's what I know of in the last 10 years I guess.

HA: And your mum?

S: Mum she did hairdressing she had her honours in hairdressing. She's done any kind of little jobs just to get us through.

HA: Did she study at college, further education college?

S: Probably.

HA: Yeah, ok, have you been back to the Caribbean at all.

S: Yep.

HA: Laugh, and Africa?

S: No.

HA: You've not been to Africa only to the Caribbean, Jamaica. Where about is she from I'm Jamaican?

S: St. Katherine. Well my grandmother was born in St. Katherine and my grandfather Kingston. When we go there, we go to St. Thomas.

HA: Ok, I am going to take you back now to the university and the coursework. You said you are coping but you are finding it hard. But did the access course prepare you enough for life at university. It is I assume the academic side of it, the theory really. Although there are vocational programmes, you would still need to demonstrate the academic side, so do you think the access course prepared you enough for that.

S: To be honest I don't think that any course be it A-level, access or whatever can truly prepare you, for university life. Because it, it's completely different you know and as much as they try to prepare you there is only so much they are able to do. I don't think, unless you go into I don't know, some sort of top college or whatever which is probably outside of my range they can only do so much.

HA: Tell me what the main difficulty was?

S: I guess what we are allowed to do at college we aren't allowed to do here. Like I used any website, whether it was accredited or not where here you have to use academic based websites if you are allowed to use any websites at all. And I guess that, that aspect of it I am a bit blah and because I love reading. I read a lot not necessarily academic books so in that respect it's different but we had to do reading at college anyway you know, we had to do things like that so. I don't know, it's, they tried and it's definitely put my brain back into like, furthering my education that way and getting my brain into gear but as for preparing for here no, I don't think anywhere could have. Do you get what I mean?

HA: I do understand and I think, I suppose I am thinking here about social class. I think the middle classes are probably more prepared hence my question about whether you were the first generation. Because research shows that if you come from a background where the mother, father, and people before them have also been to university their children will be better prepared for the type of life/culture at university. In contrast, some people who are first generation do not have a background in HE or the types of capital at home to enable that. That's why I was asking those questions because I think it's significant especially for universities like this who are enrolling first generations that they need to have more understanding of where students are coming from and their backgrounds and experiences. That they may not have the support at home in the same way somebody else might...

S: But even knowing that it shouldn't really change anything.

HA: I am not suggesting it should but they should be better prepared I think. What I want you to say more about is whether you get help or support with say your coursework and whether you can access any resources. You told me you do your stuff and then you go home so I wonder how integrated you are in university life and whether you are fully utilising the resources and whether you are in contact with any other people in university outside of your immediate group?

S: No I don't communicate with anyone outside of my immediate group. Simply because I just don't have time and I have friends outside of university that I have gathered along the way in life you know. And I don't access the resources here probably to the fullest potential because I don't have time. I don't really have time to go and meet people. I know there are different places here, I don't know what they are called but they help you read over your essay's and stuff.

HA: The Learning and Development Unit, they are excellent.

S: I know they are here but I never seem to have time to have my essay done in advance for me to come in and show them.

HA: Have you ever made an appointment with them?

S: No.

HA: So, just test it out.

S: But I've never had my work done in time to bring it in do you know what I mean. More times than not my essays are getting done the night before or on the day that I have got to submit it which isn't fantastic.

HA: So what are your marks like, are you just…

S: Last year I got an A, I think 2 or 3 Bs and the rest was Cs. I think I got one D but they were just on like coursework. This year I have no idea because we haven't got our paper back yet. In fact, I was supposed to go on Wednesday but I wasn't well on Wednesday to collect my paper from Clive but, I am, so I am ok. A 'C' isn't fantastic and a D is ur but I am ok.

HA: You're managing.

S: Yeah. I don't have a choice but to, it would probably be better for me, if I try to sort myself out whereby I can get my work in there a bit earlier or even to show a draft to my lecturers, but sometimes it's just not possible.

HA: Who do you talk your ideas over with? (Shona shook her head and I then said) Oh, don't tell me you just go away and not ask. Do you have access to the library?

S: Yes, where I am registered with the disability and dyslexia services there is like a book collecting, book fetching part of my account but I don't use that I just go and get whatever books I need. I take them out or whatever. So, yes I access the library and I try to access the online journals as well.

HA: What about the module tutors do you have any opportunities to speak with them about your work?

S: Probably but I just don't take it up. Maybe that is short sighted on my part but when I am here I am here but as soon as I left it's all gone. So whatever happens at Uni I leave it at Uni kinda thing and as soon as I leave the rotating doors it all kind of falls to the back of my mind. So even if I thought I need help with this and this if I don't deal with it then and there I tend to forget and yeah it just gets left.

HA: What I am driving at it maybe just having somebody to just talk through your work sort of thing, which may give you more motivation. If you think you have it right, somebody may just help you with that little bit extra. I suppose the module tutors are pretty handy, but you said you leave at 12pm and you are home at 1pm, there seems to be an opportunity between those hours after your class to arrange to see them for some support. For instance, what we talked about for your future, there might just be somebody in the know about those sorts of things.

S: I guarantee that as soon as I walk out of here I forget though.

HA: Then write.

S: My brain is a sieve.

HA: Do you write things down.

S: Yes.

HA: Do you make little notes.

S: (Coughs) excuse me; I have a little black book.

HA: Then write it down.

S: Sorry I forgot it.

HA: Then purchase one of those recorders you can speak into it. You can record some of your thought as they occur otherwise you forget as you've said. Tell me about your financial situation. Have you got loans, grants, child benefit?

S: I survive on grants and loans.

HA: Loans. Do you get child benefit? What do you do, how are you managing?

S: Where I was living before the rent was a little bit higher, Stratford.

HA: Was that council or private hire?

S: No, it's, I was in temporary accommodation from when I was living in a hostel so they moved me into temporary accommodation. And even in a situation with temporary housing its very hum, it puts you off of doing a lot and even for me to come to university I had my doubts because of the rent. My rent, the rent there was £300 and seventy odd pounds a week. So I was worried that I had to pay it all blah, blah, blah.

HA: Did it include housing benefit?

S: No that's just the rent how much it was a week. I was getting housing benefit, full housing benefit while I was on income support so it was a worry how I would survive financially if I was looking to pay like twelve hundred pounds a month in rent. But anyway, it got resolved and I found out that I pay a lesser amount and that I am not required to contribute to council tax and now I have moved the rent is even lower because I am in permanent housing and stuff. Financially we are ok sometimes it hard because sometimes I buy, I have decided not to buy as many books as I bought last year because I found I was spending a lot of money on books and all that I am been required to read from it would be one chapter.

HA: Very expensive.

S: Laughed, like I got that one, that's the book, yes. It was and most of our class was taken from that. And most of reading was taken from that but then I had another book where we had only to read one chapter.

HA: The library is good for things like that.

S: Well that's what I am doing this year, that's what I am doing this year. I haven't bought any books so far because there are only weekly readings one chapter. So I am learning what is a necessity and what's not. Yeah financially, we are ok.

HA: Good. Good that's good to hear actually and travelling is ok?

S: Travel is a pain in the bum because I don't live near to my daughter's school but I don't want to send her to breakfast club in order for me to get here on time. I can get here on time so long as I start at 10 o'clock. Tuesday's I start at 9am like I said and that stresses me out because what am I gonna do with my child or I am gonna miss an hour of my lecture every week but since resolved that as well but.

HA: Have you spoken to the tutors about that?

S: What about my time?

HA: Yeah, cause I remember Clive. At the time people was arriving, because if he's aware of it then he's aware. Not just Clive but I am using him as an example.

S: Clive, well I am not late. So it's not necessarily a problem because where she starts at 9 o'clock I can get the 9:19 train from Stratford so I tend to get here on time.

HA: Oh ok.

S: There was, it was stressing me out before I found a way around it. Before that, I was staying at my friend's house in Stratford, getting to her and leaving my daughter with her to take her to school. She was working nights because she is a nurse so it was very tight cause I would look after her daughter the night before and then leave with my daughter so I can go Uni so you know.

HA: You've got a good network then outside of Uni? Friends that you can...

S: I got friends don't get me wrong but I mean I am one of these people where it's my problem. I don't tend to hum, I try my best not to ask unless I really need it and even then sometimes I'd rather not ask.

HA: Is her father involved?

S: No.

HA: Not at all?

S: No.

HA: No maintenance nothing?

S: No.

HA: Do you see him?

S: No (laugh). She has never met him.

HA: Never, ok. Ok, you touch on this briefly before, but that was about school, so how you finding it here in relation to gender and ethnicity?

S: I don't find it an issue I find it very comfortable here but then times have changes not to say that really affect people don't have problems with other people's ethnicity but it doesn't affect me. I come here I do what I have to do you know. I try to keep out of, there's certain little clicks even in university when you'd think people would be old enough to know better. There are certain things that you hear and whatever, but I tend to keep away from it all. Being a female, it doesn't, it doesn't I don't find it's a hindrance or anything like that.

HA: Is the group predominantly female?

S: What do you mean?

HA: It is an all-women's group or are there some males. What is the ratio of men / women in the class?

S: Oh, well for education there is, well for both of them there are more females in the classes. Education has mixed ethnicity. But Caribbean study is more, is more hum Black ethnicity but there are few exchange students from America or there is one English girl I think she's

from up north from Liverpool or something like that. Yeah she there as well but mainly its black female students in Caribbean studies.

HA: Ok it's kinda interesting. It's interesting on who's there and who's not and who's taking that kind of course. The other thing that you mentioned was Black and Asian and I was kinda intrigued that you don't consider Asians Black.

S: Ah, see I err investigated this a couple years ago, well I came across it a couple years ago cause before then I never realised that some Asian people classed themselves black.

HA: But some did.

S: When we, when I hum…

HA: It's the opposite for me you see I use to think they were black, then I realised that they classed themselves as Asians.

S: Well when I was doing the black history show there was one person on the ward who was like why can't Asian, Asian culture be included blah, blah, blah we are black too. And I was like they ain't (laugh) you know what I mean. No you are not. I think being classed as black is more than just skin tone and more than just hum it's not necessarily yeah I don't view people of Asian descents as black. I don't know why because there are some Asian people who do class themselves as black but for me it's, I don't know, I don't know why.

HA: So it's not just about skin colour?

S: No, no it like there is so many different gradients of blackness but I also think to an extent blackness is a mentality as well. You know you can class yourself as whatever you please.

HA: Why not say we are Africans or West Indians or why do we need to say black. I am just teasing this out because it's like…

S: I don't go for it.

HA: There are white people and there are white people. Then why do we have Chinese people, or Asian people, Chinese are Asians as far as I am concerned because that part of the world is Asia. I get a little confused about the thinking process…

S: I guess it's what been put, what has been put in mind from a very young age is how people tend to be perceived in the world. For me myself I was bought up to refer to Asian people by a completely different name, which is neither polite nor politically correct and it was rude you know, but that is how I was bought up. And I decided that no it's not nice so I refer to people of Asian descent as Asian. But it was never seen as an offensive thing when I was younger – do you get what I mean. But, after I guess that's what was set in my mind now that they Asian, that they are of Asian descent and I teach my daughter that they are Asian. But I guess if I was bought up with the mentality that they were black, then I would probably think to myself, oh they are black you know, they are just a different type of black do you get what I mean. But I found too late in life the difference.

HA: Yeah, but that's not the issue that I was questioning. What I have in my mind is why they are Asian and why we do not say, we are African or African Caribbean or African American.

S: Oh ok then.

HA: Do you see what I mean because of the different places that we are from rather than say Asians and we are black, you are white. It becomes fuzzy, because we are referring to one group of people to where they came from and to another by…

S: And not…

HA: Yeah and not by their skin.

S: I guess because we are displaced as black people we are displaced and there are some who deny their full heritage. Like for many years, I never saw myself as an African person or of African descent even though my father is Nigerian so as a race we are displaced. We don't have I guess, we don't have a homeland and there is still a stigma attached to calling yourself African unless you embrace the whole black history do you get what I mean. So I guess that is why you can't really say that or I don't even say it even though I began to embrace it there are still issues and it runs deeper than you know. Even though I am relatively young, it's still quite deep you know and even in my own self the denial is still quite deep and I guess that is why some of us refer to ourselves as being black. Does that make sense?

HA: Yes of course that has cleared that, thank you very much. I just have one final question and that's about the stigma of being a single parent.

S: What stigma?

HA: Being a black single parent. Tell me about that is that an issue, or just tell me about the issue of being a single parent.

S: Well the first time that I realised that I have some kind of resistance was from, when I was pregnant and walking down the road with my cousin who was also pregnant. And we walked pass two elderly black women (laugh) and they made a comment and it really ticked me off but that also showed me their mentality and how they perceived me as a black woman who was expecting to bring a child into this world. And their comment was why aren't they in school what's wrong with them why can't they keep their legs closed. All this while me and my cousin was walking pass and I had to turn around and say to them listen I am not a child. I am not a teenager expecting to have a child you know. I went through the education system I was working blah, blah, blah and I felt like I had to validate myself. In when I have been on buses after I had my daughter I have heard people say stuff because there are times when I look younger than my age. I am 26 going on 27. I have heard people say stuff, err why isn't she at school they keep having kids, living off of benefits and all the rest of it. Like that's anything that someone would go out and purposefully go out of their way if they had another option or if they wanted to take up another option so yeah. But I mean, in regards to, I don't know it's hard to try to explain it. It's more impressions you know, impressions of dislike. Because you are a single parent you know and even though I could have a partner and just because I don't have a ring on my hand, but because I don't have a ring on my hand and I am pushing a buggy there is, there is a certain amount of animosity, especially when I was living in Barking.

HA: I think some of this could be media driven, what do you think?

S: It's only recently that I have noticed stories on the television, like documentaries on the TV about single parents or young parents and the increase in teenage pregnancy and things like that. It is only recently. At the time that I was going through it I never really saw it as anything to do with me because I wasn't a teenager, I was young I was twenty going on twenty-one but I was no longer a teenager so hum…

HA: The demonisation of single parents is ironic really because people become single parents for all sorts of reasons. They could be separated through divorce, death. There is a lot of fighting going on where lots of our men are at war and anything could happen.

S: The same stigma that is attached to someone in my situation isn't necessarily attached to a widower or somebody who's divorced or do you know what I mean?

HA: Most people don't know that they just see the word single parent and I think, and quite rightly it may depend on how old you are they assume by your age that it is your own fault.

S: Definitely, definitely but they forget the story that's behind it.

HA: Sure.

S: We have all got our stories and in the mother and baby unit we have all had our stories but they don't see past, I guess the book cover. We are bought up or I was bought up never judge a book by its cover yet that's what people do day-in-day-out and whether they realise it.

HA: That is why I chose higher education for my study because we need to counteract some of those things as a lot of it are untrue, such as single parents are not trying and are happy to be sitting at home.

S: I spoke to someone who use to work for the council and I remember asking her why do they put so many mothers, single parents in temporary accommodation – and she said to me that they don't expect you to go out and work. That's why the rent is so high because you can never pay the rent. And so you will always be on income support, you will never get a job you know. You are just gonna sit there and keep having more kids and that's what was expected of me.

HA: That was society's expectation.

S: Yeah. Even though they don't like single parents on benefits they put us, and I say us because I haven't long come out of that. They put us in such a situation that we had no other choice. Who can go and get a job with little education and earn enough to pay £1200.00 in rent and that's just rent alone. Then there is council tax and everything else, bills, clothes, food you know. It's that's why I have never worked and I thought you know what education go and further, get out of this.

HA: Do you have your own computer and everything at home?

S: That was given to me by the disabled students' allowance.

HA: So you are set up, you have printers and stuff?

S: Yeah, they gave me everything, which was a godsend.

HA: Oh wow well done.

S: Well they helped me out.

HA: Yes, but well done to you for accessing it.

S: Well I never know about it because when I went college I never knew about the disabled student's allowance, and it wasn't until got to my exams at the very end of it that I was very upset and I went and spoke to the lady from South Africa. I forgotten her name now, Yolanda I think it was, and she said to me you know what I think you need to fill out this form now so you can use a computer for your exams and when you come to university you need to find out how they deal with help for disabled students. Because I never knew that, an unseen illness was classed as a disability because my hand shakes so it's very hard for me to write and to hold a pen and stuff like that. I get cramps in my hand and stuff and that's all because of the thyroids. And I never knew none of this. That information isn't offered up freely and maybe it should be.

HA: What specifically would you like to see change?

S: I don't know (laugh).

HA: You don't know. What difference would something make?

S: I honestly don't know I mean my experience is ok. It's not like I can't get childcare which makes things a bit easier, it more of a case of I don't want to use it unless I have to.

HA: If you were given a mentor when you arrived would that have helped? Someone you could contact when you needed, or maybe not when you needed, but if you knew of someone you could call on in the university when you arrived and who had understanding of the system. I know you have PAAs.

S: Yes.

HA: Have you ever used your PAA?

S: Last year when my health was going downhill again.

HA: Was that useful?

S: Yes, RC or RC. She helped a lot and she was understanding and hum yeah.

HA: And that sort of support is helpful?

S: Yeah.

HA: Would you like more of that or not you personally but to see that is operational?

S: I think that from my experience with my Personal Academic Advisor she has made herself readily available to anyone who is in her group kinda thing. So I don't if maybe having more than one Personal Academic Advisor for one group because I believe she does more than my immediate group does in other years so maybe having more than one person to lessen the workload. So that there is more time for other people maybe, but whenever I have emailed her she has gotten back to me and, she was helpful, understanding and I guess you can't really ask for more than that.

HA: Is there anything else you would like to add?

S: No, I am talked out.

HA: Laughed, ok thanks Shona, thanks once again I really appreciate it. And after this interview when I am trying to transcribe all this, if I need any clarification is it ok if I contact you via email or...

S: Nodded

HA: Thanks once again and you now know where to find me, I am somebody else you have now met.

S: I hope it helped.

HA: Of course, thank you.

Appendix 10

Subject and Mode of Study

Pseudonym	Years at Uni	Mode of Study	Age	Subject
Anne	4	F/T	35	Mathematics
Chloe	3.2	F/T	26	Advertising and Marketing Communication with Public Relations
Dyshe	3.5	P/T	36	Accounting and Finance
Gillian	0.4	F/T	45	Early Years
Grace	2.6	F/T	32	Events Management and Marketing
Greg	4.6	F/T	25	Criminology
Julie	1.4	F/T	25	Marketing, Music and Media Management
Jo-Leona	2.2	F/T	36	Applied Psychology
Kerry	1.6	F/T	21	Early Years
Leah	2.5	F/T	47	Community Sector Management
Louise	3.2	F/T	32	Tourism and Environment
Marianna	5	P/T	36	International Relations
Nellie	0.3	F/T	40	Education Studies
Sharleene	0.2	F/T	24	Caribbean Studies and Psychology
Shona	1.2	F/T	26	Caribbean Studies and Education
Sue	2	F/T	37	Public Relations
Teena	3.1	F/T	45	Human Biology