

# **Experiences of Older Undergraduate Students in Higher Education: Constructions of Age and Gender**

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## Abstract

Normative conceptions of age, as with other social markers such as gender, inform how persons are perceived by self and others. This thesis provides a critical view of ways in which age intersects with gender in the context of higher education in Britain. Located with the backdrop of discourses such as 'successful' or 'active' ageing and 'Lifelong Learning', experiences of older age are explored in the context of undergraduate study. Drawing on the accounts of twenty-one undergraduate students and six recent graduates, the thesis explores social constructions of older people, and of undergraduate students, and how these constructions play out in participants' subjective experience of higher education. All (27) participants were aged over forty and twenty were aged over fifty.

Foucault's notions of *Technologies of the Self*, including his concept of power, is used here to explore how participants are positioned by, and also resist, normative discourses of age and gender. Judith Butler's concept of *performativity* is mobilised to explore how performance of age varies according to gender and between subject roles such as student, friend or partner. I argue that the performativity of age is exposed within undergraduate courses. I contend that the presence of older undergraduate students disrupts constructions of what undergraduate study is, and should be, what it means to be a student, what it means to be a mature student and what it means to be older.

The data are organized in three chapters: starting university, being at university and, then, life outside of university. The study reveals how older students' claimed space in the university. I show that neoliberal imperatives, such as are contained in discourses of 'Lifelong Learning' and 'Active Ageing', become the standards by which individuals are measured and measure themselves. I find that participants' age-associations, and identity-conceptions as an

undergraduate student, have implications for relationships outside of the university and involve changed and changing identities.

The participant's stories reveal varied experiences of student life, and thus unsettle notions of the 'traditional student' in new ways, calling attention to the complexities of what being an undergraduate student is like in contemporary Britain. In uncovering links and contradictions between old age and undergraduate study, I seek to illuminate the experiences and concerns of older undergraduates and to contribute to debates in both the sociology of education and social gerontology.

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# Chapter 1

# Introduction and Outline

This thesis explores the experiences of older undergraduate students in a post-92 university in the UK. Using a qualitative approach, and with a focus on older age, the thesis investigates participants' age-associations. In so doing it exposes constructions of age and gender, where behaviours thought to be appropriate to a particular age group can differ across time periods and between men and women. A diverse group of undergraduate students and recent graduates were interviewed about their undergraduate experience. The sample included both men and women and was ethnically mixed.

As the population in the UK ages there has been much debate as to what this will mean for older people, as well as for the population as a whole. Participation in higher education has increased dramatically since the participants of this study were leaving school (in the 1970s and before). According to HESA (2010), mature undergraduate students aged over 45 years form approximately ten per cent of all mature undergraduate students (those aged over 21). Being an undergraduate student is also an atypical state for older people. As such, older undergraduate students, the subjects of this thesis, offer a unique viewpoint of undergraduate study and higher education.

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the context and basis for the study. I draw on critical policy and academic debates on 'lifelong learning' and 'widening participation'. I then locate key issues concerning the 'ageing population'. The second part of the chapter contains the rationale and summary of this study along with reference to the key bodies of literature and theory. This is followed by an outline for the chapters.

## **1.1 Context of the Study**

### **1.1i Older undergraduate students, Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning.**

Older students, under the collective name of 'mature students', are included in the category of 'non-traditional' students; groups who have traditionally not gone to university. 'Mature students' are defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), as those aged 21 years and over (HESA 2012: 22). However, this large age grouping ignores possible differences between students in their twenties and those who are twice or three times older, i.e. including those in their 40s, 50s and older. In order to differentiate them from the mass of 'mature students', the participant students in this study are referred to as 'older students'. Nearly three-fifths of mature undergraduate students are aged under 30 and six per cent are over the age of 45 (HESA 2009). There are more women than men undergraduate students in every age category of mature students. There are only marginally more women in the 21-24 age group, but this gap widens to more than twice the number of women to men in the over forty years age groups (HESA 2009). Black undergraduate students are 'on average, older than White and Asian students' (Connor et al. 2004:19-20) and in post-1992 universities students are more likely to be Black and /or working class (Leathwood 2004; Reay et al 2009). As Read et al. (2003:262) point out 'there may be a considerable degree of overlap in terms of the characteristics of sub-populations of “non-traditional” students'.

Significantly more mature students entered university following publication of the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) and the Labour Party emphasis on 'Education, Education, Education' (Speech by Tony Blair 2001). Encouraged by policy initiatives such as 'Widening Participation' (WP) many mature adults entered university who would previously not have

applied, nor have been considered for entry. Nevertheless, the emphasis of WP has mostly been on younger people (and younger mature students) with the only numerical target in the 2002 HE white paper relating to those aged 18–30 (DfES 2002). More recently, Tatlow (2012) observed that the media and politicians are obsessed with students continuing to university straight from school. This is particularly obvious in, what are considered, the elite institutions where mature students, of all ages, are still a small minority. For example, in Oxford University 3% of first degree entrants were mature students (i.e. over 21) in 2011/12 and the equivalent figure in Cambridge was 4.5%. This is compared to London South Bank University where 52.9% of the first degree entrants were mature students in 2011/12 (HESA 2013).

Widening Participation has frequently been associated with policies, discourses and initiatives concerning 'Lifelong Learning', with purported aims such as building an inclusive society (EU 2000) and escape from poverty (Sabates 2008). A common theme in Lifelong Learning was that learning outside of formal educational contexts was valued (Blackmore 2006). This seemed to be particularly beneficial to older people who had missed out on early education as Lifelong Learning presented the possibility of re-entering education through the recognition of their experience. However, as those such as Coffield (1999) have argued, Lifelong Learning initiatives do not necessarily benefit individuals and can even be seen as a form of social control.

The initial enthusiasm for Lifelong Learning seems to have faded, or at least the version of it that was directed at mature students. In April 2008 NIACE (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) launched a campaign to 'search for lost learners' reporting that 'Over the past two years there has been a fall of nearly one and a half million adult learners on publicly funded courses' (Melia 2008). Eighteen months later Ian Searle (2009), of the University of the Third Age, criticised the Government for failing to recognise that education

in later life can have health benefits. More recently, the National Union of Students and the Million+ University Group noted a drop in numbers of mature learners due to increases in tuition fees (McVitty and Morris 2012). Despite this, the UCAS website in the same year (2012) seems to paint a different picture: 'Increasingly, students are taking up courses at every stage of life. What was once seen as the preserve of the young is now rightfully an arena for all'. Since this study was completed there has been a significant drop in 'part-time UK and EU undergraduate entrant numbers in 2013-14 [to] almost half what they were in 2010-11' (HEFCE 2014). This is particularly relevant to older students for, as discussed by Callender (2014:2), the majority of part-time undergraduates are over the age of 25, and 'are more likely than full-time undergraduates to be female'. Callender argues that the 2012/13 increases in university tuition fees will have had a relationship to lower numbers of mature students entering higher education.

As Field (2000: 249) says, Lifelong Learning is an 'amorphous phenomenon'. In Chapter 2, I draw on a body of critical work which problematises the concepts and forms of subjectivity contained in much of Lifelong Learning; where the self-reinventing subject is the focus of the neo-liberal project of individualism (Leathwood and Francis 2006). Lifelong Learning has commonality with the concept of 'successful ageing', defined by Baltesa and Carstensen (1996:400) as 'intricately interwoven with a sense of meaning and purpose in life'. Both Lifelong Learning and 'successful ageing' reflect neo-liberal imperatives of individual responsibility for success, or blame for those who fail to make the grade. As is discussed further in Chapter 2, 'successful ageing' can be more relevant to the already privileged and ignore the real struggles of many old people. The next section looks at discourses concerning older age.

### **1.1ii An Ageing Population**

The identities and experiences of older students are not only shaped by policies and practices within higher education but also by economic, social and cultural processes and practices concerning ageing and constructions of 'older people'. Being a student is associated with young people but the median age of the population in Britain is forecasted to be above 45 years by 2050 and, worldwide, the number of people aged over 60 is expected to rise by over 1 billion by 2050 (United\_Nations 2010). Rather than celebrate increased longevity and more experienced people, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warns that 'global aging casts an ominous shadow' (Primorac 2011). This perceived threat largely focuses around the expected increase in demand for healthcare (Office\_for\_Budget\_Responsibility 2012). Yet, despite perceptions of older people as dependent, only 18 per cent of people over 80 years and 28 per cent of those over 90 years are in permanent residential care (Audit\_Commission 2008). The dependent image of old people contrasts with one where they are presented as major contributors to the economy, recognised in the commercial sector as the 'grey pound'. According to a report by market analyst Datamonitor (2005), over 40% of the market value of most food, drink and personal care categories is purchased by the over 50 age-group.

Increased levels of longevity give cause to consider the implications for later life. Yet, despite the demographic trends, calls for greater investment in the education of older people (Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser 2008; Crowley 2011) are exceptions. Usually, there is a 'virtual silence' in National Policy on older undergraduates (Duke 2003 on behalf of NIACE). NIACE found that 'public policy has not yet engaged sufficiently with the implications of demographic change' (McNair 2009:11). Despite the arguments for continuous learning until 'retirement age' and beyond, 'Older women and people from minority ethnic groups are least likely to secure university places' (Lipsett 2007 in a Guardian report citing UCAS statistics).

In addition, Brennan et al. found that students aged 30-39 were less likely to receive employer support for their studies than younger students (cited by Little et al. 2005:13). This would suggest that those over 50 would be even less likely to receive employer support.

According to Grant et al. (2006), gender discrimination is underlined by ageist perceptions. They surveyed more than 1000 men and women over the age of 50 and 181 employer representatives, and conducted interviews with 51 people over the age of fifty and 21 employers to find:

overwhelming support for the notion that women faced a double jeopardy of gender and age discrimination, particularly in respect to management and the under-representation of women in senior positions. [...] This gender effect was particularly strong amongst women in their fifties who were often held back or judged in relation to people's perceptions of and expectations about their generation. (Ibid: 53).

Ageing is a feminist issue for a number of material reasons: the gender gap in income widens with age with older women being more likely to be unemployed (Cory 2012). Women are also more likely than men to experience severe poverty in old age, due to being more likely to have been dependent on casual employment (EHRC 2011). Women's 'average personal pensions are only 62% of the average for men' (Sands 2012:5) and 'as many as half of all women are not able to make adequate pension provision for their future'. Furthermore, recent reforms affect women disproportionately (Ibid:12). For example, women have to make up more pensionable years than men because of the process of 'equalising' state pensions.

Perceptions of older people having less mental capacity than those younger may result in them not considering higher education, or not being considered for higher education, or for government or employer funding. Associations between old age and poor memory might suggest that investment in the education of older people would be futile. Yet, it would seem

that most older people do not experience significant memory loss. Figures published by the Alzheimer's Society (2012) show that a third of people over 95 have dementia, which would suggest that two thirds of people over 95 do not have dementia, and that a higher proportion of people aged between 60 and 95 also do not have dementia. As Cuddy, et al. (2005:270) found: 'People are more likely to attribute memory failures of older adults to intellectual incompetence, and memory failures of younger adults to lack of attention or effort'.

Given the financial insecurity that many experience, older people may need further educational credentials in order to continue to support themselves into old age. Many in their 50s and 60s continue to have financial commitments, such as rent or mortgages (McKay, et al. 2008). Furthermore, according to a survey of older people, 48% of 50–55 year olds still support their children financially (Smeaton et al 2009). Long-term unemployment particularly affects 50-64 year olds; '43% of those unemployed aged 50-64 have been out of work for over 12 months, compared with 27% of 18-24 year olds, as at October 2010' (Brough, et al. 2011:9). Yet, an EHRC (Equality and Human Rights Commission) survey found that most over 50 year-olds want to work even after state pension age and twice as many want promotion as want to downshift (Maitland 2010). It may be that many over 50-year-olds would also be interested in higher education but, as discussed in the next section, older people may encounter barriers at university.

## **1.2 Rationale for this Study**

Although the field of education encompasses some of the most age segregated sections of society, the impact that age itself has on the undergraduate student experience is largely unexplored. Classical feminist texts, in particular Beauvoir (1972a) and MacDonald (1984), highlight associations between age and gender, though more recent work on older women in

higher education is minimal. One exception is the research by Maguire (2008) which found that ageism was experienced by women who were academics and that this added to their marginalisation within higher education. Older women, and perhaps men, undergraduate students may also feel that their embodied-self renders them conspicuous in a class of young students.

The existing academic attention to 'mature' undergraduate students is valuable but limited in its primary focus on students who are much younger than 50 years (including: Edwards 1993 and; McGivney 1999). The average age of participants in both Edwards' and Fuller's studies was in the thirties. Postgraduate study is an accepted norm for mature adults but this usually assumes that the student already has a first degree and admission requirements often include professional standing. Older learners are acknowledged through studies concerned with 'returners' in adult and further education. Reay's (2003) observations that returning to education can be risky to mature students are particularly significant, but her participants were all from further education. It is often not recognised that older people might benefit from doing an undergraduate degree. For example, McGivney's (1999) important, and frequently cited, study does not include higher education in the list of possible educational options for 'returning women'. This pattern can be seen throughout the academic literature; either the 'mature' subject tends to be much younger than 50 or the context of the research is not undergraduate study, or both. Furthermore, studies of mature undergraduate students often do not identify the age range in this large category and those where participant ages are stated rarely contain any older undergraduate students. Nevertheless, such studies do offer useful perspectives on the undergraduate experience which may apply to older learners, and these contributions are drawn upon in this study.

Although this study focuses on older students, it also calls attention to the purpose of undergraduate study as applicable to the whole student body. In looking at how older students

perceive the state of being a student, the study shows age intersecting with other geographies of identity to form expectations of higher education. Exploring role expectations experienced by older women and men in the twenty-first century, it observes participants' attempts to maintain their identity or to develop new ways of being when they become immersed in higher education, and when others continue to expect them to perform their previous roles and identities.

### **1.2i My Interest**

My interest in this research came about from teaching undergraduate students in their 50s, 60s and 70s and, as their teacher, I was moved by their stories. In the literature concerned with mature students, I noticed that there was very little which differentiated between the age-ranges under the category of 'mature student'. It seemed to me that university would be a very different place for a 21 year old (a young mature student) than for someone who was 30 years older (in their 50s or above). I also observed how older students were influenced by internalised ageism carried within discourses about the learning capacity of older people; as in expressions such as having a 'senior moment' and idioms such as 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks'. When an older student who was about to give up her studies once quoted this expression in relation to herself, I had to reassure her that firstly she was not a dog and secondly she was not expected to learn tricks. She passed with top grades.

Having embarked on this study in my 50s, I too encountered various reactions to my studying, including some where an element of surprise was expressed at doing this 'so late in life'. Even so, there exists a level of acceptance for late study at postgraduate level that does not exist for undergraduate study. Postgraduate study is frequently aimed at older people with significant skills and experience, whereas the undergraduate student is more likely to be constructed as immature and lacking in skills.

Still deciding on the subject of the study I happened to be on train journey when a couple of my younger fellow travellers returned from a walk through the train to report that they had witnessed a most shocking incident; apparently they had seen a famous female soap actor 'snogging' a man. At first I thought that this must be some act of infidelity, but no, the observers knew that she and the man were married. The commotion had occurred simply because she was old and, thereby, had infringed a much deeper social norm, acting inappropriately for her mature age. I asked about the man involved in the 'snogging', thinking that he might be many years younger, but was told that he was a bit older than the actor in question and was also a celebrity. The observers expressed no reaction to his involvement as if it was merely incidental. This event confirmed that the 'double standard of ageing' (Sontag 1979) still existed and that I wanted to explore this in the field in which I work, undergraduate study.

## **1.2ii This Study**

This qualitative study focuses on the lived experience of undergraduate students. It specifically explores:

- i. the experiences of older undergraduate students who were undertaking a first degree in higher education
- ii. constructions of the undergraduate student as portrayed by the participants, including their reports of how others reacted to their studying.
- iii. participants' age-associations and identity-conceptions in the context of higher education
- iv. changed and changing identities as a result of higher education.

The intention is not to privilege older age; rather to explore participants' lived experience of the university space and thereby consider the implications for student identity.

The university in which the field research took place has morphed from a long history of vocational and technical education. As with other 'post-92' universities (the former polytechnics), the institution recruits more older undergraduate students than do 'old' or 'traditional' universities. According to University publicity the student body is 'diverse'. Reflecting the findings of Connor et al (2004) for universities of this type, a large proportion of its students are from low income groups including many from minority ethnic backgrounds. Most of the students are from local communities, many are the first in their family to go to university, over sixty per cent are 'mature' students and more than fifty per cent are women.

The fieldwork was commenced in 2010 involving focus groups and semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students and recent graduates. There were twenty-seven informants: twenty-one older undergraduate students and six recent graduates (who had recently completed a first degree). Sixteen of these were in their 50s and there were 6 in their 40s, 3 in their 60s, and 2 in their 70s. The participants consisted of 18 women and 9 men and was ethnically mixed consisting of 8 Black African, 3 Black African Caribbean, 10 White British, 4 white other / South American and 2 Asian.

### **Key bodies of literature and theory**

Having established the broader political, social and personal context for the study, I now outline the key theoretical and conceptual tools drawn upon to engage this study's critical exploration of the experiences of older undergraduate students.

Feminist and poststructuralist theories facilitate the review of norms in relation to undergraduate students. The work of Maguire (1995; 2008) is particularly relevant for having explored the identities and forms of marginalisation experiences among older women within higher education, albeit academic staff rather than students. Other feminist writers concerned

with education and social justice, such as Archer and Hutchings (2000) and Walkerdine et al (2001), have highlighted important issues concerning constructions of higher education by non-participants. Their influence on the study has been twofold, firstly helping to frame the background of some of the participants in the study and, secondly, understanding the conflict that some students have with friends and family. Thinking about obligations to act according to one's age, I was drawn to Judith Butler's (1999) notion of *performativity* and have applied her ideas to how age is performed and the genderisation of age. Important to the study is Foucauldian post-structuralist discourse of power, resistance and control which provides a framework for reviewing which and whose knowledge is valued.

Ageing is a physiological process, as well as a social one and critical feminist literature provides important insights into the gendered experience of the body (for example, Rich 1984; Segal 2008; Thomas 2001; Twigg 2007). Relevant also is Foucault's (1998) analysis concerning the medicalisation of the body, for old age has been medicalised, as demonstrated by greater concern with older people's medical complaints than with the social aspects of being old. Individuals are frequently identified by age, but age is a constantly moving social construct: 'our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein' (Foucault 1986:22). Here Foucault argues that, instead of a linear development, we interact in ways which respond to and influence specific discourses. Social gerontologists, such as Biggs (1999 ), provide useful insights into how ageing is constructed. However, Gerontology rarely specifically addresses issues concerning older people in education, just as older people are rarely considered as likely candidates for undergraduate study. Many mature students are little older than traditional students and might be better described as 'delayed school leavers' (Woodley and Wilson 2002:330). Yet mature students are often considered as a homogeneous group in academic literature and policy; sometimes with differentiation in gender, sometimes with age categories broken down, rarely with racial or ethnic differentiation.

I view the experience of higher education as a socially constructed event which holds social, economic and even spiritual meaning for individuals. Drawing on literature which takes a critical perspective of policy and practice in higher education, the study explores the experience of older undergraduate students. Relevant to this is the work of Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) who challenge the denigration of the 'new' university student, Leathwood (2006) who discusses the discourse of the 'independent learner' and Read, et al. (2003) who review issues of student identity, belonging and isolation. Particularly important is Leathwood and Read (2009) who discuss constructions of the student, including the 'needy' student, and highlight discourses around the 'feminisation' of higher education. The physicality of identity is a key theme in this study and is associated with power, control and space (Brah 2000; Massey 2005; Puwar 2004). Age is a physical phenomenon, a feature of the body. As McLaren (2002: 83-84) explains: 'For Foucault, consciousness and subjectivity are not separable from the body'. When older undergraduate students take up a role which is associated with the young, it may generate particular anxieties, and feelings of isolation. In this I draw on Ahmed's (2004) insights into the integration (or not) of individuals and groups. Ahmed's work on shame is pertinent for, as discussed by Laz (1998), individuals are throughout life shamed into performing their age through controls evident in expressions such as 'act your age'.

### **1.2iii Outline of the chapters**

In this final section I provide an outline of the following chapters of the study.

Chapter 2 expands on the discussion above. With the limited academic literature that directly addresses undergraduate students who are over 50 year old, reference is made to literature concerned with 'non-traditional' students in HE, and to studies which include older learners in other settings. I reflect on how individuals make education decisions, particularly looking at issues of age, gender, ethnicity and class. This includes review of the purpose of higher

education and of literature which discusses connections between identity, emotion and learning. Part 2 of Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework for the study. I draw attention to the gendered construction of age and how this applies to the older learner. The essential physicality of age calls for discussion of the body and, in this, I draw on critical feminist literature and introduce Foucauldian analyses of power and of identity.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodological approach and justifies the methods deployed in the study. I review the recruitment of participants and how this influenced the sequence of activities. The approach to the interviews is discussed with reflections on the ethical and methodological dilemmas I encountered in my efforts to build rapport with the participants. I also trace the process of data analysis. A separate section within this is devoted to the ethical considerations of the research overall; in particular, participant sampling, obtaining consent and recording of information. This chapter also provides information on the attributes of the participants who are discussed in the following three chapters.

In the next chapters I present and discuss the data. Chapter 4 discusses the decision to venture into the university space as an older person. Particular attention is given to participants' expressed concerns about going to university, to their first impressions of university and to the emotional journey of attempting to settle in and find acceptance. I examine how constructions of age have informed their student identity and the extent to which the university environment corresponds to their expectations.

Chapter 5 looks at the participants' experiences of teaching and learning support. Tensions and differences in pedagogic approach are reflected in the respondents' accounts. I draw on participants' references to their ability including issues concerning memory. Memory is also significant in relation to participants' memories of their early education.

Since all the participants had already established adult lives, a key theme concerned their lives outside of university. Chapter 6 reports on the participants' accounts of how friends and family reacted to their study. The effect on relationships with friends, partners and children is discussed. The chapter concludes by reviewing the ways in which participants felt that their outlook and identity had changed as a result of their attendance at university.

Chapter 7 draws together the findings to discuss the implications for the participants' future, for academic research in the field, and for education and social policy with regard to older people and universities.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter outlines the key influences on this study. In the first part of the chapter I consider what may have prevented older undergraduate students' earlier attendance at university where I draw on education literature concerned with 'non-traditional' students and social justice. Older undergraduate students are discussed in the context of debates concerning the independent learner and disputed concepts of 'Lifelong Learning' and 'active ageing' (also sometimes called 'successful ageing'). The element of 'age' is considered alongside what Mojab (2005:73) terms 'a critical analysis of the interlocking notions of class, race, and gender'. The work of feminist human geographers has helped to highlight issues of belonging and space as relevant to older people's participation in education.

In the second part of the chapter I outline the theoretical framework used. I begin by looking at social constructions of age and then how Michel Foucault's (1988) *Technologies of the Self* can be used to situate the older undergraduate student within contemporary discourses of education and of age. I then move on to consider how Foucault's (1986) concept of *'heterotopia'* facilitates the identification of possible conflicts between life 'outside' and life 'inside' university. In the final sections of this chapter I discuss how Judith Butler's concept of *performativity* has helped in looking at how constructions of age and gender combine to shape identity and consequent action including the personal and public portrayal of self. The lived body, as highlighted by feminist writers, is central in this discussion.

## **2.1 Older Undergraduate Students**

In Chapter 1 it was shown that older undergraduate students are a small minority of the total number of undergraduate students, and are also a small minority of those aged over 50 years in the UK. However, as Crossan et al (2003:56) highlight, there are unanswered questions as to 'why some people from under-represented groups take up organised learning, while some from highly represented groups do not'. In the following section I consider why some older persons embark on undergraduate study despite many possible barriers.

### **2.1i Going to University as an Older Undergraduate Student**

As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a neglect in the literature, and only limited knowledge, of the experiences, or interests, of older undergraduate students. Although there is an abundance of literature concerned with mature students, most studies relate either to basic education and or to postgraduate education. In some studies of mature students the highest age group is in the 30s, (such as Davies et al. 2002 and McCune et al. 2010). Other studies do include older students, but as a minority, such as that of Chapman (2012) where six of the eight participants were in their 20s and 30s and only one was in his 50s. Some studies show indications of an assumed homogeneity of 'mature' students where the ethnicity of participants is not mentioned (including: Briedenhann 2007; Chapman 2012; Davies, Osborne, and Williams 2002; McCune et al. 2010; Woodfield 2011; Woodley and Wilson 2002).

Despite their heterogeneity, older students may share attributes with many other 'non-traditional' students. They may experience similar disadvantages and lack the resources associated with the 'traditional student' – understood in the extant literature to be modelled on the white, middle class, young and male subject. The route taken by older students towards their eventual arrival at university is characterised by non-linearity for a myriad of circumstances may prevent progression to university immediately following school; including

domestic caring (Edwards 1993; Innes and Scott 2003; Reay 2003) and financial constraints (Hills 2004; Hutchings 2003; Thomas and Quinn 2007). Added to these frequent barriers to higher education, older students grew up when university was much less of an option, especially for women and for those without a family history of university (Walkerdine, et al 2001). When Spender (1989:98) wrote that 'many educationalists start with the premise that girls should make motherhood their vocation, and they proceed to educate them for that vocation', those who are now aged 50 plus would have already long finished their schooling. With careers becoming less predictable (Heery and Salmon 2000), increasing credentialism (Fuller 2007; Woodley and Wilson 2002) and pension ages rising, older people may actually require qualifications in order to maintain or gain employment.

Some reasons for embarking on an undergraduate course may apply more particularly to older people. For example, Parr (2001:56) discovered that education for mature women represented 'a transition from being someone whose life and identity had been considerably influenced and controlled by other people, to someone who was attempting to have power over at least some aspects of her identity'. The discourse of the older choosing individual can be seen in Ussher's (2006:159) suggestion that many older women experience a significant mindset change when they 'can turn to their own needs for the first time in their life'. This turning to one's own needs in later life may be seen to resonate with discourses such as Active Ageing where individuals may be subject to new expectations and demands on their time. Expectations such as an individualised responsibility for one's own development and well-being are seen in discourses such as 'active ageing'. Such expectations reflect the demands on the subject which Foucault (1988) conceived as *Technologies of the Self*. This is discussed further in Section 2.2.ii.

It was the *maintenance* of identity which was highlighted in a Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) supported project where respondents aged 65 to 84 emphasized 'the desire not to "peter

out'" (Hill, et al. 2007:29). Foucault (2003:244) says that a form of government through 'biopolitics' can 'incapacitate individuals, put them out of the circuit or neutralize them'. Foucault (2003:244-245) describes 'biopolitics' as mechanisms through which the state regulates subjects. These technologies of power can include for example, interventions designed to affect the health of the population and campaigns to 'medicalize the population'. Particularly relevant to this study is Foucault's example of how the industrialisation of the early nineteenth century meant that 'individuals, who, because of their age fall outside the field of capacity, of activity' (Ibid: 244). Foucault describes how biopolitics uses 'subtle mechanisms' to control and govern the population (Ibid:244). Foucault (2003:244) speaks of 'subtle, more rational mechanisms: insurance, individual and collective savings, safety measures, and so on' which serve as a technology of power to reassure, and thereby pacify the population. Using Foucault's concepts in relation to old age, such 'subtle mechanisms' could include campaigns for 'active ageing' which encourage older individuals to care for their physical and mental welfare; thus potentially benefiting the individual but also holding them responsible for their own success or failure. If, as Hill, et al. suggest, a major concern of older people is 'the desire not to "peter out"', then the heroic discourse of 'active ageing' could be seen as a subtle mechanism to reassure older people that they can achieve the longevity of their identity through their individual effort.

From a telephone survey with adults aged between 22 and 55, Pollard et al (2008) found that 'personal development' reasons were more likely to motivate the older learners in their study (aged between 45-55 years) although they do not define what such reasons might include. However, suggestions that older people are less likely to have instrumental reasons for study raises questions as to why more older students attend post-1992 universities, which are more vocationally orientated, than the most established institutions. A possible explanation can be seen in work by Reay, et al. (2001) who, in studying students' experiences of higher education, draw on Bourdieu's concept of '*habitus*', which relates to the individual's

perception of their own, and others' position (or place) and the subsequent adoption of particular identities, ways of being and social interactions. They argue that working-class and minority ethnic students tend to 'enter different universities to their middle-class counterparts' (Ibid: 858). However, this does not seem to be simply because of differing entry requirements because, as Reay, et al. show, working class and minority ethnic students often show 'a Bourdieran sense of place': a sense of where they would be more welcome (Ibid:864). Reay, et al. (2001:858) explain that the field of higher education has shifted from one where there is 'a relatively straight forward class-based inclusion and exclusion' to an 'emergence of a new hierarchy of institutions in which prestigious research universities have emerged as a top layer of elite institutions'. This is relevant to this study in two ways. Firstly, a much higher proportion of mature undergraduate students attend post-92 universities (HESA 2013). Like other similar institutions, the post-92 university where the research was carried out attracts many non-traditional students, many of whom are mature. Secondly, older students are likely to feel more welcome where they find commonality with others. The sense of belonging is closely linked to a primary aim of this study to uncover identity-conceptions of older people undertaking higher education.

The question 'But what are you doing it for?' can evoke childhood memories of being asked about plans for adulthood (a mature further education student in Arksey et al 1994: iv). It can also suggest being too old. Returning to formal education as an older person may evoke forgotten memories and long-hidden fears and can mean challenges to individual identity. As highlighted by Ahmed (2004), identity is maintained through memories of former lives. However, former lives may have included marginalisation in school which, as various writers have shown, would have been likely to have impeded progress (Demie and McLean 2007; Gillborn and Kirton 2000; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Stephen 2008). Minority ethnic students who came to Britain as children in the 1950s and 60s, often found that they were not expected to achieve (Tomlinson 2008). Black children were often discouraged from going to university:

'We weren't as clever as white boys or girls, they told us, and when we wanted to go to University or have a career they wrote on our reports that we were "unrealistic" or "overambitious"' (Phillips cited by Griffin 2000:174). Older students may retain memories of school, which would have been very different from twenty-first century UK schools. This study looks at what happens when older people reject the norms for their age group and perhaps retrace their histories in the process.

Webb's (2001) research usefully illustrates how lives are shaped by early events. Webb explored the educational histories of 1145 students who, like many older students, entered university without what she describes as 'the "standard" entry qualification of two A levels or their equivalent' (Ibid:39). Webb found that 50% of participants had left school because of others' expectations and 29% felt that they could have done better at school. Many in this 29% were women and/or working-class and they frequently blamed themselves for lack of progress. Although the participants in Webb's study were of a different generation to those in this research, their experiences show the gendered and classed nature of educational decisions.

Older individuals who do decide to go to university may gain entry to their course on the basis of the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). However, this mode of entry tends to be seen as inferior to the standard school-leaving qualifications. As Peters (2005:275) observes, the prevailing perception of university is of 'a place where people come to learn, or to be taught rather than one where people bring their existing knowledge for recognition or sharing'. Furedi's (2004: 66) dismissal of APEL is an illustration of Peter's analysis, for he criticises those who maintain that 'insights gained through the banal routine of daily existence are qualitatively similar to the knowledge gained through systematic study'. Furedi's example of 'homemakers', and use of the word 'banal', reveals his gendered notion of legitimate knowledge. Significantly, Furedi's criticism does not extend to the endowment of honorary degrees to those whose lives are officially considered not to be banal. This study looks at how

older students came to undertake higher education when this was not always an option, or at least an expectation, earlier in their lives. Constructions of older age, as they intersect with other markers of identity, in particular gender, are explored in the second part of this chapter.

### **2.1ii Lifelong Learning and Active Ageing**

Lifelong Learning; defined by the European Commission (2006:2) as 'all forms of learning undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training' seems particularly relevant to older people. Lifelong Learning is supposedly a voluntary activity. However, public policy now mainly focuses on improving work skills rather than on the voluntary engagement in learning for the enrichment of self and community (Jackson 2011; 2012). As Davies et al (2002:89) argue, a genuine attention to learning through all life stages 'is not always evident in practical policies' and, as discussed in Chapter 1, central policy initiatives are mainly targeted at those under 30 years. This was illustrated by Kamler's (2006) biographical project to celebrate changes in the lifecourse and tell 'Stories of Ageing'. Kamler found that Lifelong Learning initiatives do not 'develop multi-age learning communities that genuinely span the lifecourse' but seek to 'create a disposition to learning in *younger* students' with little thought given to older learners (Ibid:154).

Despite it being no longer about learning at all stages of life, aspects of Lifelong Learning overlap with the ideals of 'active ageing'. The neo-liberal individualism of Lifelong Learning, such as independence, self-responsibility and self-autonomy, can also be seen in the description of 'successful ageing' by Rowe and Kahn (1996: 433) as: 'the maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities'. As discussed in Chapter 1, discourses of 'active ageing' may influence expectations of and by older people. For example, the impetus to be active and successful might be fulfilled by going to university, which Lifelong Learning discourses would reinforce. Some writers on ageing

specifically emphasize cognitive and emotional wellbeing. For example, Jeste and Depp (2009) say that what they refer to as 'successful' ageing is often associated with older individuals undertaking new pursuits. These might include academic study.

However, someone's ability to be successful depends on the social context and the definition of success, not just on their own activity. As Holstein and Minkler (2003) argue, the moral impetus of independence contained in what they call 'successful' ageing could disadvantage those already marginalized; particularly women, minority ethnic and low-income groups, who may lack the economic resources and time to participate in such forms of 'self-work'. Similarly, Cruikshank (2006:40) links 'questionable prescriptions such as "successful aging"' to marketing strategies for products and services available only to the privileged. Furthermore, as Jones and Higgs (2010) point out, discourses of 'successful ageing' can promote unrealistic expectations and Biggs (2008:118) cautions against 'pretending that the priorities of youth or midlife are the same as those of late life'. Biggs shows how removing age restrictions on working life can contribute to 'New forms of ageism' which overlook 'the years of social and political struggle that took place to remove the tyranny of work into deep old age' (Ibid: 119). Aspirations of independence, core to discourses of Lifelong Learning and Active Ageing, are discussed further in Section 2.1iv, and in Chapter 4 which explores participants' expectations for university. Barriers to the realisation of such expectations are explored in the next section.

### **2.1iii      Space and Fitting in**

This section draws on the work of feminist sociologists and human geographers who recognise that issues of power, which are often concealed in unwritten social norms, are physicalized in how bodies use public space. I explore how older students inhabit university space. This may be seen by older students as a privileged space holding a 'mystique of unfamiliarity and remoteness' (McGivney cited by Pollard et al 2008:26).

Universities are social spaces and, as Biggs (1999 :172) observes, 'social spaces are age-sensitized spaces'. Since many institutions focus 'on accommodating home students in the 18–21 age group' (Cavanagh 2008:34), older students may feel out of place when entering university. This may mean that they avoid the social milieu of the university, and may also be avoided by other students. However, student-peer friendships can be particularly important for those who are in a minority in the learning environment (McGivney 2004) and integration has been found to be significant for student retention (Christie, et al. 2004). Christie et al. focused on younger students but Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011), who did include some older students, also observed that those not forming social relationships were less likely to have a successful outcome. Particularly relevant is the study by Read, et al (2003:269) which found that, for some non-traditional students, 'the existence of a substantial proportion of students "like them" did indeed give them a greater sense of "belonging"'. They give the example of a 26-year-old student who was pleased to have people around her of 'a similar age'. If this was significant for a young woman who was only a few years older than a traditional student, how significant would it be for someone in their 50's, 60's or 70s?

University could be considered a public space, but access to public space has been shown to be gender related. Wex (2009), who photographed people using public space, observed that men typically expanded their limbs whereas women typically diminished themselves to occupy less space. Wex concluded that the women acted as if they had less right to inhabit the space. The increased numbers of women students and employees in the academy has fuelled debates concerning the 'feminisation' of higher education. However, as Leathwood and Read (2009:19) argue, women still largely remain in lower paid or less prestigious positions in universities despite them being 'seen to be increasingly encroaching upon a space that was previously the preserve of men alone'. Although women make up the majority of students, they do not receive the same returns on their degree in terms of pay and status within the graduate labour market (Purcell et al 2013). Recent research by Phipps and Young (2013)

revealed sexist and misogynist behaviours in some student communities. As Phipps and Young argue, 'This is problematic if higher education spaces are not empowering for all types of students, and in particular if the most privileged male students are reacting against widening participation by policing what they consider to be their territory' (Ibid:21).

Ahmed (2003) effectively illustrates how existent power structures are evident in the use of space, discussing how immigration is feared as an invasion (Ibid: 392-3). Her work is relevant to how some 'new' students, including minority ethnic and older students, may be seen as invaders by those who have traditionally occupied the space of higher education. The moral panic of being overwhelmed by 'helpless', or even 'parasitic', old people plays on fears of losing space (for example, as seen in the IMF report by Primorac 2011). Yet it is not the affluent and powerful old people who engender moral panic; 81 year-old Rupert Murdoch is still welcome to the Olympic games as a special guest of the London Mayor (BBC 2012). Rather, it is those who lack resources who are most feared. Puwar (2004:150), speaking of "'black" bodies in predominantly white spaces' and women in traditionally 'male' occupations (including academia), says that 'within these places there is very little space for those who do not want to undergo self-erasure and conform to the cultural norm' (Ibid:151).

Older undergraduate students, the majority of whom are women and many of whom are Black, could represent an anathema to a market-driven, image-conscious educational institution. Older students rarely feature in university publicity which is dominated by young, slim and conventionally attractive students who are 'able-bodied; wearing Western and "gender appropriate" dress' (Leathwood and Read 2009:91). Although often invisible in university publicity, older students may be hyper-visible in the classroom where everyone else is at least half their age. Chapter 5, in particular, examines how the participants receive such contradictory messages when at university.

Parallels have been drawn between constructions of old age and those of disability (Hockey and James 1993). Thomas (2001:69), who identifies as a disabled woman, draws on the 'social model of disability', recognising systemic barriers and negative attitudes as key factors in disabling people. Thomas finds that disability is experienced differently in terms of how individuals construct their identities concluding that, rather than university being particularly difficult for disabled women, it may offer them greater space than they have experienced elsewhere. This reflects other research which found that, for 'outsiders within', higher education can provide 'an enabling space, allowing changing identities to flourish' (Anderson and Williams 2001:174) and where university is seen 'as a haven' (Quinn 2003b:131-4). Whether university offers older people an enabling space is discussed throughout the data chapters.

Fiske et al. (2007:81) found that 'pitied groups (e.g. older and disabled people) elicit active helping and passive neglect; for example, institutionalizing older or disabled people actively aids them but socially isolates them'. Older students might be pitied (seen as fragile) but, without recognition of their experience, they may feel disorientated and neglected. The next section looks how discourses of 'fragile learners' coincide with gendered and ageist images of older people.

## **2.1 iv Discourses of Fragility and Frailty**

Notions of independence and personal autonomy are rewarded in higher education where students are expected to be self-directed. However, non-traditional students are seen by those such as Füredi (2004) as weak in this respect and constructed as having 'fragile' and deficient learning identities. Terms such as 'fragile', and 'frailty' are also commonly associated with women, as well as old people. Since, more mature undergraduate students are women, it is perhaps unsurprising that mature students tend to be equated with fragility.

Mature students frequently enter higher education via access courses but Crossan et al (2003:65) comment that the learning identities of students from access courses 'can be extremely fragile and vulnerable to sudden changes in the learner's immediate social milieu'. Knowledge gained between episodes of formal education is not only often disregarded, but sometimes even seen to indicate fragility. For example, Johnston and Merrill (2009:130) say that 'A non-linear learning identity reflects the fragmented, risky and sometimes unstable experiences of the lifeworld in postmodernity'. A linked school of thought assumes mature learner fragility but suggests that it is 'more to do with aspects of confidence and levels of self-belief about achieving or feeling "good enough" to participate' (Canning 2010:59). Davies, et al. (2002:89) describe the *decision* to become a student as 'fragile', rather than the learner themselves being fragile. They suggest that mature students frequently consider 'collective' risk; the impact on their dependants, not just the risk to their own finances and time. However, the literature rarely considers the potentially different circumstances when former responsibilities are reduced, such as when children leave home.

Some writers seek to challenge the perception of mature learner fragility. However, this is frequently done by drawing binary contrasts between generations. For example, Dibiase and Kidwai (2010:299), following an investigation of 'the counter-intuitive observation that older students tend to thrive better than younger students in online classes', suggest that older learners are more able to regulate their learning than younger students. Similarly, Murphy and Roopchand (2003:256) argue that mature students experience 'higher levels of intrinsic motivation compared to traditional students', thereby they not only categorise mature students as a homogenous group, but also take an oversimplified view of the 'motivated' student.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2009a) argue that the entire discourse of student fragility (whatever the age group) is extraneous to higher education. They claim that a 'therapy culture' increasingly dominates education policy embodying a 'misanthropic theory of human beings'

(Ecclestone and Hayes 2009b:380). Here again is the discourse of the independent learner. This discourse of 'independence' indicates what Francis et al (2014:10) describe as the 'constructions of the confident, rational, agentic, "naturally talented" male subject as the authentic subject of academia'. The devaluing of subjective experience by Ecclestone and Hayes situates the academy 'as a place of pure, unfettered male reason devoted to the objective pursuit of truth' (Leathwood and Hey 2009: 434). Similarly, Francis et al (2014:10) draw attention to 'constructions of the confident, rational, agentic, "naturally talented" male subject as the authentic subject of academia'. In their research with undergraduate students, they find that this 'heroic discourse' can perpetuate stereotypical gender constructions where masculinist attributes of independence are given credence. The same could be said of the perpetuation of stereotypical constructions of age.

Differences in research findings about the fragility or otherwise of mature students are, at least partly, due to variation between participant populations of the various studies. Variations are not just in age but also in, for example, social class, ethnicity and level of previous education. Despite this, there is a tendency in the literature to attach specific attributes to mature students (sometimes positive, sometimes negative). However, such is the heterogeneity of older students that it is unlikely that attributes or needs could be identified that would be applicable to all, or even most, older students and this study does not aim to do so. Instead the aim here is to tell the stories of some older people daring to challenge existent university norms by embarking on undergraduate study in later life. Drawing on feminist writing, Grenier and Hanley (2007) discuss the ways in which older women in a health care context resist the 'frail' label but also use 'frailty' to resist. They show that some older women strategically used 'frailty' to negotiate assistance, but for others it was unacceptable to use 'frailty' even to subvert the system because 'accepting the "frail" identity would mean relinquishing their sense of self' (Ibid: 218). Becoming an undergraduate student when one is

over 50 could be seen as resisting gendered constructions of age, and perhaps of frailty. This is discussed more fully in sections 2.2. and 4.4.

## **2.2 Theories applicable to this study**

This study explores the influence of age on undergraduate study and the following sections outline the key theoretical influences. Section 2.2i looks at social constructions of age and the possible implications for older undergraduates. In section 2.2ii I discuss two of Foucault's works and their application to older undergraduate students. How older students are perceived, and perceive themselves, including how they perform their age in the role of student is core to this study and Section 2.2iii looks at the significance of Judith Butler's theory of *performativity* as applied to the performance of age.

### **2.2 i Social constructions of older age**

Age-segregation often goes unchallenged in UK schools, where the curriculum and type of school are age-restricted to the extent that a pupil can be placed a whole year behind another who is one day older. More subtle age demarcations exist as social norms, which may constitute barriers to access or progress in higher education and may influence the development of learning identities.

Despite age-specific boundaries, old age is a fluctuating concept which is regulated differently depending on the social context. Women aged over 40 are considered old where high mortality levels exist (Ussher 2000), as in nineteenth century England (Woods 2000). Yet, despite ambivalence as to who is old, specific characteristics are frequently attached to individuals based solely on their age. One study which asked students about age-related characteristics was that of Chur-Hansen (2003) where four medical students aged from 30 to 41 years reported that they were more responsible, used more initiative and had more ability

to self-reflect than younger students. Wrenn and Maurer (2006:236) also looked at age-related characteristics. When they asked 217 undergraduate students aged 17 to 38 years 'what age is an older worker?', the mean, median, and mode responses were all 50 years when 'energy, scholastic aptitude, and resilience' were perceived to start to decline, while 'self-objectivity, leadership, and integrity' were perceived to increase. Wrenn and Maurer also highlight the widely held perception that older people resist change which, if the case, would disadvantage older learners as openness to change and to new ideas is intrinsic to education. Conversely, Westerhoff (2008) argues that some people actually become *more* open to new experiences at around age 60 due to the alleviation of family and other responsibilities at this age. The older person as the ultimate self-governing subject is suggested by Jacobs and Berkowitz King (2002). They observe that having pre-school age children impeded progress for students under the age of 25, but that 'Older women may be better situated to juggle school and family demands' (Ibid: 225). For Jacobs and Berkowitz King, however, 'older women' only included those up to the age of 44.

Despite attempts, such as those cited above, to identify specific characteristics related to old age, others highlight the diversity amongst older people. For example, McNair (2009) found that, although older people may share some experiences and challenges in their entry to and transitions through education, individuals differ considerably particularly in terms of their reasons for study and also health, economic status and access to resources. Gott and Hinchliff (2003:1627) found *such* varied attitudes about, and by, older people to lead them to refer to the 'heterogeneity of later life attitudes' and to conclude that 'commonality by age [ ] rarely exists'. Roles and social constructions of old people vary, from 'High Court judges and members of Parliament alongside the "little old lady"' (Hockey and James 1993:46) and perceptions of old women range from serene to sexually repulsive (Beauvoir 1972a; Beauvoir 1972b). Contradictory perceptions of old people are also reflected in discourses concerning the 'ageing population'. Gloomy forecasts contradict hyper-optimistic expectations of '60 is

the new 40', accompanying claims of new age-extending treatments (see, for example, Harrison et al 2009). Likewise, fears of being swamped by elderly dependants are at odds with promises of healthy old age when older people continue to work.

Despite ambivalence concerning old age, discourse regulates appropriate behaviour for older persons. For example, the relatively minor incident of the old woman who chased off armed robbers using only her handbag (Courtenay-Smith 2011) was considered so newsworthy that it appeared in several newspapers and was also reported internationally. The incident conforms to Cassady's (1998) view of the fundamentals of comedy: incongruity, automatism, character inconsistency, surprise and derision. The agentic older woman is incongruous, with the more familiar image of her as a frail and passive victim. Regulatory influences concerning age are often gendered. This is reflected in art and literature such as in Thomas Mann's novel 'Death in Venice' where Aschenbach, who is in his early fifties, sees an extravagantly dressed man cavorting with a group of young people. Initially assuming the man to be young too, Aschenbach then 'realised with a kind of horror that the man's youth was false' and began to feel that the world was 'becoming increasingly deranged and bizarre' (Mann 2008: 211). This incident pre-empted Aschenbach's sad death, when he is found using methods to fake youth more frequently employed by women: hair dye and make-up. Gendered regulatory controls directed at age non-conformity are also seen in the newspaper article: 'Madonna's wrinkly, veiny hands will always betray her true age' (Moody 2006). This report appeared in the Daily Mail after other publications had criticised the pop singer for having freakishly mannish looking arms, again this uses gender to regulate age non-conformity. Phrases such as 'old girl' (indicating a state of absurd infancy) may be rarely used in educational circles. However, by existing in the public forum, they influence all ages of students. Chapter 5 discusses how older students felt that they were received at university, including by their peers in the student body.

A principal regulatory control with regard to old age itself is to avoid it altogether. I have already discussed the limited acknowledgement of older undergraduate students in the academic literature. The old body is almost taboo. The old female body, in particular, is associated with fear; as illustrated by the long history of older women being avoided and outcast, particularly those outside familial roles. Black [young] bodies tend to be sexualised in Western media (Yancy 2008) but older black bodies are rarely seen, except in relation to issues such as poverty and deprivation. According to Taylor and Gosney (2011), even healthcare professionals often show signs of embarrassment when dealing with older bodies. Observing that older people, especially women, are expected not to display sexuality, Twigg (2007) cites Ilanen's research showing that dress designers tended to avoid choosing the colour black for women in their fifties and sixties because of modern associations with fashion and sexuality. Just as 'older people's sexuality' appears as an oxymoron, so too there is incongruity concerning old people and education, particularly education which extends beyond the hobby level.

When the participants in this research were still young adults, Beauvoir (1972a) was highlighting the invisibility and negative stereotypes of older women. A decade later Rich (1984) pointed to the silence on aging and MacDonald (1984) observed how people avoided her because she was old. Calasanti (2008:157) found that little had changed with most writers avoiding direct concern with old people. One recent acknowledgement of older women is Chapin's (2012) painting of an older woman confidently looking directly at the viewer. Personifying character and experience, the portrait destabilises the image of the passive female, which is familiar in the visual arts. However, it engendered a barrage of 'revulsion' (see Sewell 2012 in the London Evening Standard). The level of Sewell's criticism, and its emotive tone, far exceeds what might be expected from an established art critic. Such a negative reaction to an older woman occupying the central position reflects Maguire's (1995:564) observation: 'it may be that an older, more experienced woman is perceived as a

threat to the status quo of gender power relations'. It may also be that an older student, particularly if a woman, would threaten classroom conventions.

Expectations to 'age gracefully', accepting the societal role for one's chronological age, particularly apply to women who were never expected to speak too loudly in the first place and certainly not to start speaking, or to start a career, aged over fifty. With regard to old age, 'graceful' can imply quietly sliding into oblivion. Older men, particularly those whose physical strength is core to their identity, may also experience ageing with a sense of loss and decline (Hanlon 2012). Sontag (1979:102) observed that older women experience 'a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification'. This is seen in Freud's shocking statement that:

'women often alter strangely in character after they have abandoned their genital functions. They become quarrelsome, peevish, and argumentative, petty and miserly; in fact they display sadistic and anal-erotic traits which were not theirs in the era of womanliness' (Freud cited by Segal 2008:313).

Freud's statement, which is particularly shocking by being made by a leading academic, suggests that post-menopause may offer women opportunity for change and for resistance to expectations for 'womanly' behaviour. However, older age brings with it additional challenges where 'older people are often expected to act more like children, relinquishing a degree of agency, responsibility and control over their lives' (Golub et al. 2004: 278). The dis-identification of old people is further discussed in the section 2.2iii drawing on the work of Judith Butler.

## **2.2ii Foucault's concepts of self-regulation and regulating discourse**

As indicated in the previous sections, social constructionism and feminist theory have guided thinking about age and how age interlinks with gender within the context of higher education. Poststructuralist theories of knowledge and discourse are also relevant and I have drawn particularly on the work of two theorists, Foucault and Butler, as discussed below.

As Besley and Peters (2007:177) say, Foucault's writing is relevant to education in that it focuses on the 'conditions which subjects are constituted objects of knowledge and constitute themselves as subjects'. As introduced earlier in this chapter, issues of power are important within this study and I am using Foucault's (1972) concept of discourse to explore this. Foucault defined discourse as 'a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation' (Ibid:117) which, he postulated, is determined by a particular set of regulations and structures which are meaningful within a particular time and social environment. As previously mentioned, one contemporary discourse of particular relevance to older people is that of 'active ageing'.

Foucault (2003) distinguished between 'discipline' and 'biopolitics'; the former being that to control behaviour and ensure a productive workforce and the later relevant to the body itself, for example, the health of the population. When read through a Foucauldian lens, 'active ageing' contains elements of both 'discipline' and 'biopolitics'. As a biopolitical mechanism, 'active ageing' acts to, for example, justify measures to delay the age for pension eligibility, and also promotes activity which may have a positive effect on physical and mental health. This is done through the self-regulating discipline whereby individuals are seen as responsible for their well-being. As previously discussed, taking up new pursuits such as higher education is sometimes seen as an element of 'active ageing'. In this study I am looking at how such influences may apply to older undergraduate students.

According to Foucault (1972), 'discourse' is the means by which individuals 'govern the self' and also 'govern others'. So for Foucault, the level of 'choice' open to an individual is very limited if it exists at all. Of course, contemporary life contains multiple discourses which sometimes conflict and contradict each other. As such, an individual might be positioned by different discourses which hold differing significance for individuals as they move through different social spaces and encounters. An example of this is the 'active ageing' discourse

which encourages a conscious optimisation of opportunities versus the 'ageing gracefully' discourse which advocates an acceptance of changes including an acknowledgement of the limits of the individual. The act of becoming a student would seem to place the participants with the former discourse. However, what happens when they meet with the 'ageing gracefully' discourse, or how do these discourses coincide in the same subject?

Rose (1999:103) builds on Foucauldian concepts of governmentality in his discussion of 'the citizen as a choosing self [entailing] a new image of the productive subject'. Rose speaks of the worker as 'an individual in search of meaning, a sense of personal achievement' (Ibid:103). Although my study is concerned with *students*, rather than *workers*, the participants have much in common with workers; not just because, as mature adults, they all are or have been being a worker, but also because of, as discussed previously, the increasing expectation of the instrumentality of education. Just as Rose presents work as 'an activity through which we produce, discover, and experience our selves' (Ibid: 104), so too is education thus presented. Ideas around governmentality of the self are further developed by Miller and Rose (2008:215) who discuss:

the "reversibility" of relations of authority: what starts off as a norm to be implanted into citizen can be repossessed as a demand which citizens can make of authorities. Individuals are to become "experts of themselves" to adopt an educated and knowledgeable relation of self-care in respect of their bodies, their minds, their forms of conduct and that of the members of their own families.

The above statement reflects how the individual is now expected to take personal responsibility and to operate in a way which reflects the discourse of the 'self-directed' student discussed earlier in this chapter. Government is in the form of the Foucauldian panopticon where the authority is unseen but omnipresent and the individual is controlled through their own efforts. Besley and Peters (2007:155) utilize a Foucauldian perspective to identify 'the rejuvenation of *homo economicus* [ who ] invests in his/herself at critical points in the

learning life cycle'. This study explores how older students view their study, including if they see this as an economic investment.

I draw on Foucault's (1988) *Technologies of the Self* to consider what higher education represents for older people enrolled on an undergraduate degree. Foucault (1993: 203) emphasised that, despite societal variations, there exists 'in all societies whatever they are':

techniques which permit individuals, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power.

I have highlighted earlier the importance of discourses such as Lifelong Learning and Active Ageing to this study. Such discourses may influence older students to undertake a first degree and thus represent contemporary *'technologies of the self'*.

The individualistic characteristic contained in discourses such as 'active ageing' can be critically theorised through Foucault's concept of *'technologies of the self'* which I am using to explore older students' expectations and experience of higher education. I am asking how older students are incited to work on / transform themselves in particular ways, to modify their behaviour, transform the self and so on, according to discourses circulating within higher education. I am concerned with how they negotiate the various discourses in the production of their subjectivities as older students.

Foucault highlights acts of completion and disclosure of self in writing; 'examination of self and conscience, including a review of what was done, of what should have been done, and comparison of the two' as well as 'remembering' (Foucault 1988:34-8). The act of 'remembering' and the review of previous actions feature in many academic disciplines. They also may be particularly important for older people as they remember and review their lives.

The concept of *Technologies of the Self* has helped in interrogating the data as to why participants undertook a first degree and whether their study produced the outcome which they had anticipated.

### **2.2iii Butler's theory of performativity**

The other key theory used in this study is Butler's theory of gender *performativity*. Butler (1993:2) references Foucault's concept of a 'regulatory ideal' to argue that 'bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled'. The concept of 'old' is seen in this study as such a regulatory ideal; for who is old, when 'old' begins and what age are the 'old, old' varies between time-frames and cultures (Thane 2003). Despite this, as discussed earlier, older people, are presumed to share specific characteristics. Butler (1999) does not specifically identify possible effects of ageing on gender but does include 'celibate' in her list of genders, a state which is frequently associated with older people. Although celibacy may occur at any age, with older people, celibacy is the assumed state in the deficit model of old age. As argued in Section 2.1, one effect of the norms of gender is the assignment of asexuality to older people which, as Twigg (2007:293) suggests, equates to 'social retirement, or a withdrawn and sidelined status'.

Butler (1999) considers gender to be fluid, and she developed this further in 'Undoing Gender' (Butler 2004), arguing that gender is continuously undone. This raises questions about how gender might change with age, the nature of desire and aspiration and, in the context of this study, what this means for the permitted activities at any given age. Older people are subject to pre-contemporary discourses due to the timespan of their life for social constructions of age, and of gender, were very different in the 1950s than they are today. As such, *age* can be seen as being 'continuously undone'. For example, the 'active ageing' discourse is relatively recent and did not exist, at least in its current form, when the participants were young adults.

Butler illustrates how agency can be lost when gender is inconsistent with social expectations as seen in her critique of Foucault's reading of Herculine which 'appears to romanticize h/er world of pleasures as the "happy limbo of a non-identity"' (Ibid:120). Similarly, rejection can occur when age is inconsistent with social conventions and, as was explored in Section 2.1, this is augmented with issues of gender. Butler argues that Foucault fails to recognise that, when those who do not conform to conventions are thereby relieved of their identity, their power is also removed:

'the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined' (Butler 1999:17).

The supposed asexuality of old people places them as *personae non gratae* while overt display of self, such as enrolling on a course populated by young people, could result in their failing to conform to 'cultural intelligibility'. Twigg (2012) argues that recent trends for older women to be fashion conscious: 'entails the colonisation of their [older women's] bodies by new expectations, new requirements – ones that demand that they be fashionable or well dressed, and present the body in such a way that age is – as far as possible – effaced' (Ibid:21).

I draw on Butler's writing on gender to explore the performativity of age. Butler (1999) suggests that gender is *performative*: and 'there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction' (Ibid: 180). Just as Butler (2008) emphasizes that 'gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts' (Ibid: 214), so too is 'age' produced over time. If gender is constituted as a '*social temporality*' (Butler 2008: 214 italics in original), *age* can be similarly conceptualised.

As referenced in Chapter 1, individuals are shamed into performing their age through regularity discourses evident in expressions such as 'act your age' (Laz 1998). Butler (1993) distinguishes *performativity* from performance in terms of its insurmountable nature that deprives the performers of volition. She views gender as discursively and materially constructed: 'acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporal signs and other discursive means' (Butler 1999:173 - italics in original). Butler's work is used in this study to interpret data concerning age identity.

In addition to being socially constructed, the constitution of '*old*' changes at the personal level. For example, someone in their 20s may consider those in their 50s old but, when the same person reaches 50, they may consider themselves middle aged. The idea that felt reality may not reflect chronological age is explored by Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) using the image of 'The Mask of Ageing'. Since undergraduate study is associated with youth, it may be that older students feel younger than their chronological age. However, some discourses of Active Ageing can ignore evidence of bodily limits. As Butler points out 'the body sets limits to the imaginary meanings that it occasions, but is never free of an imaginary construction' (Butler 1999: 90). Students' perceptions as to how age has affected their study are discussed in the data chapters 4-6.

Butler (1999:63) uses the image of the mask to argue that 'every refusal is, finally, a loyalty to some other bond' and that the mask simultaneously 'preserves (and negates) [ ... ] loss through its concealment'. Butler's analysis has significance for major life decisions and changes, including the decision to go to university. It is used in this study to investigate what, or who, older undergraduate students may have to refuse in order to complete their course, perhaps also resisting old age. In commenting on Butler's work I am also addressing Beauvoir's

(1972b: 293) claim that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman' and asking: what does it mean to become an *old* woman, or man, and what are the implications for older undergraduates?

## **Chapter Summary**

This review has highlighted the very limited attention in the research literature given to older people studying at undergraduate level. It has been noted that academic and policy literature rarely distinguishes between the various age groups of 'mature students', and 'old age' is frequently either excluded entirely or subsumed in discourse regarding 'mature' students. As discussed, the literature concerned with older people and education tends to address either the most basic level of education or postgraduate study and professional development. Reference has been made to the continued focus on the 'traditional' student within many universities. This, along with other issues of difference, have been addressed drawing on authors such as Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) and Reay et al (2010) and on feminist post-colonial theorists such as Ahmed (2004). Undergraduate study is increasingly seen as career-related, and this may affect the integration of older students at university.

Old age has been shown to be a fluctuating and relative term. Nevertheless, there may exist particular aspects of getting older that make an academic course attractive to older people. For example, discourses of 'successful ageing' and 'Lifelong Learning', with the accompanying undertones of neoliberal individualism, may have influenced some older people to go to university. By exploring the expectations and experiences of older undergraduate students, this study identifies perceived and actual barriers associated with the undergraduate student experience as a whole, as well as for older individuals. Writers who have commented on ageism (including: Beauvoir 1972a; Calasanti 2008; Maguire 1995; Twigg 2012), have helped provide explanations for the ageing embodied self. The gendered characteristic of age, added

to which most older students are women, is seen here as central to further understanding of older students.

The participants' accounts which are discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 may help increase understanding of this diverse group of, largely unseen, older undergraduate students and, in the process, gain insight into undergraduate education. In the next chapter I move on to discuss the methodology of the study.

## **Chapter 3      Methodology**

The focus of this study is the experience of education as a socially constructed event and the social, economic and even spiritual meaning that university may hold for older adults. It is informed by the embodied experience of older undergraduate students located in the particular space of an post-92 English urban university. The study specifically aimed to explore age-associations and identity-conceptions, including how age intersects with gender, ethnicity and class. Core to this enquiry was how undergraduate study was experienced by the participants; including the effect of others' reactions to them going to university as an older person. Section 3.1 reviews the epistemological approach underpinning the study. I then set out the research design followed by a description of the methods used including the recruitment and sampling of participants and the ethical considerations. The final section in this chapter discusses the data analysis and introduces the data chapters.

### **3.1 Epistemological Approach**

As discussed in Chapter 2, social constructions of age influence how education is organised and which knowledge is seen as valid. Also, as previously discussed, how age is experienced and understood differs according to gender, ethnicity and class. I draw on critical feminist writing, including feminist poststructuralist theories, to facilitate the review of norms as they impinge on the lives of older undergraduate students. As with this study, critical feminist theories address questions of difference and of identity. 'Older' students are differentiated here from their younger counterparts. As Brooks et al. (2014:113) demonstrate, "Naming" any group or community is a political process that can inadvertently maintain patterns of marginalization and exclusion' but "Naming and positioning may frame individual experience

in ways that can potentially emancipate'. This research has provided the opportunity to tell the stories of older undergraduate students. As Eder and Fingerson (2002:223) say: 'Exposing and redressing women's invisibility as social actors has been one of feminist researchers' important accomplishments'. This study focuses on exposing and redressing older people's invisibility as social actors with, as discussed in the previous chapter, evidence that older women are particularly affected by ageism.

Although carrying elements and memories of their younger self, the older student is no longer their younger self. Here I draw on Butler's (1999:179) analysis of the unstable nature of identity which she applies to gender: the 'illusion of an abiding gendered self'. Post-structuralist feminism emphasises the temporary and fragile nature of social constructions (Haraway 1991). This approach is particularly relevant as 'age' is a constantly fluctuating identity. Not only do individuals constantly change their age, but their age is constituted according to many factors including gender, ethnicity and social class. 'Feminist research strives to represent human diversity' (Reinharz 1992:240) and this means recognising the differences between women, as well as between and with men.

An individual's ascribed age identity, including their chronological age, and how they are identified by others, may not match their subjective age identity. The sense of a 'true' age may rely on how one sees oneself as a member of any subset of age norms or roles. Feminist ontology recognises that interpretations of reality reflect different social, cultural and environmental situations. Drawing from post-structuralist feminist theory, I take the view that 'the self is not simply a passive recipient of socialisation, but actively constructs and impacts upon the world' (Francis 1999: 392). As such, the participants' accounts are central to this study.

Foucault (1980) argued that discourse exists with resistance: that one may be positioned as powerless by one discourse but powerful in another. As such, the self is not fixed but is positioned and positions itself through discourse. For example, an old person could be positioned, or position themselves, as experienced, reliable, calm and wise. Alternatively they could be positioned, or position themselves, as out-of touch, vulnerable, forgetful and silly. Similarly, older students could be positioned as hard-working and keen to achieve high results or as slow and unable to cope with modern communications. Such positioning would depend on a wide range of factors, including gender, ethnicity, social class and so on. As argued in Chapter 2, women experience ageism more frequently than men; role norms relate to age, but differently for men and women. Social reality is thus formed through individuals' location in discursive structures which make some ways of thinking possible and others impossible (Foucault 1972) rather than one consistent and absolute 'truth'. However, as Alsop, et al. (2002:202) say, while reflection on discourse is important, there is a 'danger of leaving experience out altogether'. Subjectivity, the body/emotion/feelings/personal experience side of the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy, tends to be associated with female ways of being (Leathwood and Hey 2009). Lloyd (1984) is one of those who demonstrates how the mind/reason side of the Cartesian binary, associated with man, has been set above subjectivity but, as Code (1991:31) notes, 'objectivity requires taking subjectivity into account'.

There has been considerable debate as to the incompatibility of post-structuralism with feminist values, particularly with regard to subjectivity and the recognition of individual experience. However, as Weedon (1987: 125) argues, 'Foucault's work offers feminists [ ] a contextualisation of experience and an analysis of its constitution and ideological power'. When power is viewed as from a single source (for example, the state or patriarchal social structures) the Foucauldian concept of the capillaries of power can be seen as incompatible with can be feminism. Fraser (1989:18) explains the apparent dichotomy between Foucault's

ideas and that of the feminist project of women's emancipation as follows: 'Foucault's account establishes that modern power is "productive" rather than prohibitive. This suffices to rule out those types of liberationist politics that presuppose that power is essentially repressive'. However, as Fraser adds, 'Foucault enables us to understand power more broadly' (Ibid:18). Lather (1991:48) expands on this saying that: 'postmodernism has much to offer those of us who do our work in the name of emancipatory education'. Reflecting Oakley's (1981:49) call for 'reciprocity' between researcher and researched, Lather proposes that 'the goal of emancipatory research is to encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the researched' (Ibid: 60). Echoing Lather's proposal, this study might encourage participants' self-reflection though, like Wolf (1996:25-26), I question the amount of deeper understanding produced by a short meeting.

Possible tensions, which can arise when using more than one theoretical foundation, can also serve to highlight the contradictions contained within the data (Aspland 2003). This is clearly illustrated by Francis (1999) who highlights commonalities between feminist methodology and Foucauldian post-structural theories. She draws attention to the shared 'criticism of the scientific discourse of the Enlightenment, which takes a "rational" approach to the world' (Ibid: 383). Francis promotes the idea that 'the repudiation of a fixed self means that gender is not fixed, but that the self is positioned in gender discourse' (Ibid: 383) and that this means that 'we are positioned but also position ourselves' (Ibid:384). Francis argues that Foucault's 'kind of post-structuralist discourse analysis offers an explanation for some of the theoretical complexities that have challenged feminism; for example, the ways in which power is constituted between women (and between men)' (Ibid: 383). Francis recognises that the definition of 'pure' post-structuralism, as deconstruction of 'principle positions' 'is incompatible with the feminist emancipatory project' (Ibid: 381). However, she argues that 'pure' post-structuralism, itself, is a fallacy for: 'discourses which preach disorder and deconstruction are also grand narratives' (Francis 1999: 390).

My approach is to use Foucault's work alongside that of Butler and critical feminist theory in order to expand the established understandings of older people, and older undergraduate students in particular. Sawicki (2006:380) describes one of the aims of Foucault's work as 'to alleviate humanly produced suffering associated with processes of "normalization," or what he ultimately referred to as "the government of individualization" '. In this study I use poststructuralist theory to explore how older students are positioned and position themselves. As with Standing (1998:196), I believe that 'post-structuralism offers possibilities for challenging and contesting dominant ideas and the way less powerful groups are represented'.

I also draw on critical feminist theory which refutes the possibility of 'hygienic' social research, 'untainted' by who and where it is carried out (Oakley 1981:58). In adopting an interpretivist philosophy, I recognise that the researcher is part of the subject that they study, informing the research encounter, accounts given, interpretations made and hence knowledge produced. Here, the researcher is a white female university employee in her 50s who asks questions to students of a similar age. I could be, and have been, positioned as older / younger, a daughter / mother, a student / teacher, British / non-British and so on. The researcher's multiple identities influence both her questions and her interpretations. Denzin (1997) and Davis (2002) advocate that researchers reflect on their relationship with participants. As an older student myself who studied for my first degree when a mature student, I could qualify for what Brooks et al. (2014: 100) call 'biographical similarity, or matching' . However, I was much younger (in my 20s) than the participant group when I studied for a first degree, though at the time (1970s) it was rarer to be a mature student. Having said this, I am cautious about too much focus on myself. For, as explained by Ribbens and Edwards (1998:3), 'even as the researcher may seek to make herself apparent as the translator, via self-reflexivity, she risks making herself more central to the discourse'. Nevertheless, although my age and my history give me some commonality with the

participants, my current status as a university lecturer – and the power this endows - differentiates me from them. With this in mind, I did not include any of my own students in the research and did not meet them in a classroom (see Jowett and O'Toole 2006). I also made a point of clarifying that I did not know the answer to any of the questions I would ask. I started the interviews by briefly introducing myself, including my age, my educational history and that I was a mature student.

Metz (2000) emphasises the role of the researcher as 'learner' and this emphasis on self-reflection as an ethical commitment is discussed in more detail in this chapter. The research design is discussed in the next section.

### **3.2 Research Design**

The focus of the study is to learn about the lived experience of older undergraduates students.

It specifically explores:

- i. the experiences of older undergraduate students who were undertaking a first degree in higher education
- ii. constructions of the undergraduate student as portrayed by the participants, including their reports of how others reacted to their studying.
- iii. participants' age-associations and identity-conceptions in the context of higher education
- iv. changed and changing identities as a result of higher education.

A qualitative approach was chosen in order to generate accounts emanating from the narratives of the research participants. A quantitative study would not have provided the nuanced detail required by the aims of the study nor would it have facilitated the level of participant participation implied by the epistemological approach. Participant observation or participatory action research might have linked to the research aims but would have presented

too many logistical and ethical issues given the power differentiations between student and lecturer and the nature of the institution where the study was undertaken. A literature review accompanied the field research in order to widen the scope of interpretation.

The purpose and context of the study clearly indicated that issues of age, gender and ethnicity would be important and a pre-interview form was designed to collect this data (Appendix 1). Participants were invited to state place of birth and self-define their ethnicity. As part of making the interview accessible, participants were asked if they had any disabilities. I had not anticipated it, but issues of disability also featured strongly in the data.

Although I did not ask participants to identify their social class, I did encourage them to talk about their background and, as such, social class featured strongly in some accounts. Participants were not specifically asked to define their social class as I felt that, because class is such a complex issue, questions about class would distract from the main focus of the research. That social class is 'increasingly complex and contested' (Thomas and Quinn 2003: 83), can be observed in The BBC's Great British Class Survey (GBCS) 2013 which attempted to look at social class by asking questions in three areas: social capital, economic capital and cultural capital. Woodward et al (2014) edited a response to this survey, the content of which is far too detailed to do justice to here. However, given the ethnic mix of the participant population in this study, one phrase stands out: 'Skin colour acts as a form of embodied capital that disrupts and lessens the worth of the cultural capital held by black middle classes. They are perpetual outsiders because of their race, irrespective of class status' (Rollock 2014:448). As Heyden (2013) suggests, there can be a disconnection between background and present circumstances. For example, when I took the test I came out as 'established middle class' even though my father was a factory worker and I still feel working class in many circumstances. Needless to say the GBCS did not contain any questions about family background and thus did not represent my history, culture and experience (see Maguire 2005

for a discussion on when working class women become teachers). When 'manual' occupations are classified as working-class and 'non-manual' as middle-class, this does not account for routine, low paid jobs located in white-collar environments. Such jobs, which are often performed by women in the UK, might be classified as middle-class while some complex and well-paid jobs including a physical component are seen as manual and working class, such as heating engineer. Other complexities which are not addressed with the emphasis on paid work relate to normalised gender roles concerning, for example, childcare. Furthermore, 'class is not the same everywhere' (Ball 2006: 7). Since there is insufficient space here to do justice to the considerable debate concerning definitions of class (see, for example, Biressi and Nunn 2013; Skeggs 2004), for the purpose of this study, I draw on the definition used by Quinn, et al. (2005). Quinn, et al. defined as working class those students who lived locally to the university and were first-generation learners. Using this definition most, if not all, of the participants in this study were working-class.

Two fieldwork methods were chosen: focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Focus groups are used to identify initial themes. Focus group members can encourage each other to talk and to gain assurance through peer group involvement (Madriz 2000). As Wilkinson (1998:121) argues, the use of focus groups recognises 'the fundamentally social nature of talk'. A further advantage is the possibility of participants meeting others in similar circumstances to share and compare stories. This feature of focus groups particularly relates to the epistemological position of the study. Like Jowett and O'Toole (2006:455), I hoped that using focus groups would offer 'greater control on the part of the researched' and a disruption of the power relationships within the research context, which have always been a key concern for feminist researchers'. However, as discussed in section 3.3 below, the participant numbers were much smaller in this study than in that of Jowett and O'Toole, where participants in a group of eleven were seen to be 'nervous and uncomfortable' (Ibid:

459). Although the much smaller size of group in this study was only one factor, it did offer more opportunity for participants to make their contributions.

The interviews were used to allow follow up on points of discussion initiated in the focus groups and the possibility of obtaining detail which some participants might not have wished to share in a group. As Eder and Fingerson (2002:192) found, this allowed themes to be discussed, such as friends and partners, which were 'important and relevant to the participants'. Cohen et al (2011:409) clearly establish that the interview is a flexible tool 'enabling multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard'. As they point out, interviews can be controlled 'while still giving space for spontaneity, and [ ] responses about complex and deep issues'.

Open-ended questioning was used in the focus groups and also in the interviews as a way to support participants in influencing and making use of the discussions. The digressions which participants chose to make allowed different levels of constructed meaning to emerge and be explored. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002:206) suggest that, when interviewing men, 'Questions calling for answers that put control, autonomy, or rationality into doubt, if only implicitly, may be experienced as threatening. The threat may be heightened if it seems that the interviewer is interested in gender'. Having said this, they also point out that 'the category "men" is internally diverse, and therefore all generalizations about how men will perceive and respond to the threat potential of an interview' (Ibid:206). With this in mind, I was careful (with women as well as men) to phrase questions which did not, at least overtly, put control or rationality in doubt. The interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient to the informants. The ideal of a participatory approach including, for example, encouraging participants to become involved in the editing (Oakley, 1981) was not practical due to the participants' time constraints, as Kelly et al (1994) also found.

### 3.3 Methods Used

This qualitative study was carried out in a post-92 university and commenced in 2010 using focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The sample was 21 undergraduate students (14 women and 7 men) and 6 recent graduates (four women and two men). Participants were all home students from a range of subject disciplines. The selection criteria for the participants were age and level of study. As was hoped, individuals from a range of backgrounds responded to the invitation to participate. Table 1 shows the sample of undergraduate students, including whether they attended a focus group, an interview or both. Eleven undergraduate students just attended a focus group, six attended a focus group as well as an individual interview and four attended just an interview. The sample of recent graduates is shown in Table 2. Further details of the samples, including the pseudo names, can be seen in Appendix 3. The members of the first focus group were in their 40s but were less interested in discussing issues around age than I had expected. In order to focus more on age, I then changed the criteria for future participant students to 50 years plus.

**Table 1 Sample of undergraduate students**

Pseudonym	Age Range	Male/ Female	Ethnicity / Place of Birth	Disability	Attendance
Angela	55-59	Female	white other than uk	None referred to	Focus group
Cathy	50-54	Female	white British	"	Focus group
Cynthia	70+	Female	Jamaican	"	Interview
Ethel	40-44	Female	African	"	Focus group
Irene	55-59	Female	white British	"	Focus group
Janet	40-44	Female	African	"	Focus group
Lavinia	50-54	Female	African	"	Interview
Sara	55-59	Female	white British	"	Focus group
Sharon	40-44	Female	African	"	Focus group & interview
May	55-59	Female	Chinese	"	Focus group
Evelyn	50-54	Female	White	Deaf	Focus group & interview
Joan	60-64	Female	British	Arthritis	Focus group
Pam	55-59	Female	white British	Memory	Focus group
Sirimavo	70+	Female	Asian	Arthritis, Dyspraxia	Focus group
Samuel	45-49	Male	Black African	None referred to	Focus group & interview
Danny	50-54	Male	white British	"	Interview
Jack	50-54	Male	White	"	Focus group & Interview
Carlos	50-54	Male	Latin American	"	Focus group
Nigel	50-54	Male	Afro Caribbean	"	Focus group & interview
Frank	50-54	Male	white other than uk	severe back & leg injury	Focus group & interview
Derek	50-54	Male	white	severe lung disease	Interview

Various recruitment methods were used. Initially it was difficult to locate participants as most older students were attending postgraduate or short courses. The first participant was asked to bring some of her student colleagues and this helped form the first focus group. This 'snowballing' method of recruitment method is useful when there are low numbers of potential participants or they are difficult to locate (see, for example, Browne 2005). Some further recruitment was via posters on notice boards (see Appendix 6) but was mainly via a senior university administrator who identified all undergraduate students in the institution who were aged over 50 and sent out an email with an invitation to contact me. Recent graduates were located via an advertisement placed in the alumni newsletter and colleagues were asked to publicize the research. All of those who responded were contacted by email and invited to attend a focus group.

**Table 2 Sample of Recent Graduates**

Pseudonym	Age Range	Male/ Female	Ethnicity / Place of Birth	Disability	Attendance
Elizabeth	60-64	Female	Black Caribbean	Dyslexia	Focus group
Sebastian	60-64	Male	Black African	None referred to	Focus group & interview
Peter	50-54	Male	Black African	"	Interview
Valerie	50-54	Female	white British	"	Interview
Cassie	40-44	Female	Black African	"	Interview
Harriot	45-49	Female	white other than uk	"	Interview

**Table 3 Focus Groups**

	Who was invited	Who attended
Focus Group 1	Undergraduate students (over 40 years)	4 (3 women, 1 man)
Focus Group 2	Undergraduate students (over 50 years)	3 (1 woman, 2 men)
Focus Group 3	Undergraduate students (over 50 years)	5 (5 women)
Focus Group 4	Undergraduate students (over 50 years)	3 (3 women, 1 man)
Focus Group 5	Undergraduate students (over 50 years)	2 (2 men)
Focus Group 6	Recent graduates (over 50 years)	2 (1 woman, 1 man)

There were six focus groups, with the attendance in each group as in Table 3. However, because of the low numbers in these groups, some would be better described as paired or triad interviews (Ritchie 2003: 37). All participants contacted were invited to attend a focus group. However, some were unable to meet any of the set dates and just took part in an interview.

Some participants attended a focus group followed by an individual interview on a later date. This was because I felt that they had much more to say than there was space for in the focus group. The focus groups were interspersed with individual semi-structured interviews and, as Figure 1 on page 58 illustrates, this was to some extent an iterative process. I used the same interview guide but also drew on the previous interviews / focus groups in order to test out or develop emerging themes.

In organising the focus groups, it was difficult to find times when several potential participants could meet together. Some, particularly the men, could not attend any meetings or did not turn up to the meetings they had agreed to. My attempt to bring together what I considered to be an ideal focus group, that is a mixed group of at least four members, created the need to conduct more groups than originally intended. Allowing these alterations to the original plan was also to acknowledge the myth of 'hygienic research'; 'the censoring out of mess, confusion and complexity of doing research so that the accounts bear little resemblance to the real events' (Kelly, et al. 1994:46).

The interviews lasted on average one and a half hours. Eleven of the undergraduate students and six recent graduates were interviewed individually. Some participants attended an interview as well as a focus group. The students were asked about their experiences while at university and recent graduates were asked to review their time at university. Where appropriate, participants were encouraged to provide examples to illustrate their experiences. Open-ended questioning was used, in order to make possible the identification of ambiguities. As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007: 117) show, this form of questioning is appropriate for exploratory data gathering. The interview guide can be seen in Appendix 4. A tape recorder was used to record each focus group and individual interview, so that verbatim transcripts could be obtained for data analysis and the actual words of participants could be used to

report on the data. Aspects that could not be captured in a recording, such as facial expression and behaviour were noted.

I used the interview guide as a prompt rather than a fixed list of questions. This enabled the questions to be re-phrased and re-ordered in response to what the participant was saying. This open ended approach to the interviews allowed participants to influence and make use of discussions. It enabled participants' concerns to arise as part of an extensive conversation; rather than as answers to a fixed set of questions. I avoided the 'why' question as this has been found to produce answers which seem reasonable on the surface but are likely to be an 'intellectualized' response rather than one from 'deeper forces that motivate behavior' (Krueger 1998: 33). I also avoided presenting issues as binaries since this could miss nuanced details, beyond simple agreement or disagreement, and could cause division between participants or prevent some voices being heard. As already discussed, this study includes men as well as women and Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002:206) helpfully suggest that, when interviewing men, 'Questions calling for answers that put control, autonomy, or rationality into doubt, if only implicitly, may be experienced as threatening. The threat may be heightened if it seems that the interviewer is interested in gender'. Having said this, they also point out that 'the category "men" is internally diverse, and therefore all generalizations about how men will perceive and respond to the threat potential of an interview' (Ibid:206). With this in mind, I was careful (with women as well as men) to phrase questions which did not, at least overtly, put control or rationality in doubt.

Since the 'construction of self-narratives is a continuous and incomplete activity which is affected by the contexts in which the stories are told' (Webb 2001: 41), it was essential to build and maintain rapport, which feminist and qualitative researchers argue is important (see for example: Oakley 1981; Pitts 2007). To achieve this, all fieldwork events took place within the student's university and were conducted during a convenient time for the participants.

Conscious that some participants were giving up their lunch break by attending a focus group, I supplied light refreshments for the first three groups which, on reflection, may have given me too much influence. It also sometimes obstructed conversation as participants could not always eat and talk simultaneously, and very little was eaten during the sessions. However, the participants did take all the uneaten food when the session finished; at least this indicated that they were not being super polite. When I dispensed with the food for subsequent groups, there was no reduction in the intensity of discussions. In fact two subsequent groups, the two all-women groups, were the most intense of all. My inclination is that the intensity of these two groups related to them all being female and myself being female. The all-woman focus groups, in particular, were characterised by interludes of good humoured laughing interspersed with some 'serious' stuff. Sometimes, I felt like an honorary member, in that I spoke very little but could change the subject without being challenged. At other times there was a sense that I was an audience (which of course I was) with a performance being played in front of me.

The sense of occasion that characterised the focus groups was not present to the same extent in most of the individual interviews. There were different power dynamics in the individual interviews from the focus groups, where I was outnumbered by the participants. Interestingly, I felt more comfortable managing the focus groups than in some of the individual interviews, where, particularly with some of the men, I felt slightly cornered. My experience as a lecturer on undergraduate courses allowed me the advantage of familiarity with the participants' environment (Robson 2002) and also group facilitation skills. However, although the participants were not my students, their relationships with other lecturers could reinforce the power relationship intrinsic to the research interview. Lather (1991: 47) cites Said's statement '*who speaks is more important than what is said*'. With this in mind, I facilitated discussions so that each participant could be heard.

### 3.4 Ethics

I continued to reflect on my own practice as a researcher with the help of my supervisors as well as colleagues. When the researcher is clearly privileged it problemizes the possibility for non-authoritarian research methodology, which forms the principle of feminist research (Wolf 1996). In order to mitigate the possible power imbalance between lecturer and undergraduate student, I decided to reveal more of myself where it fitted with the general tone and topic of a discussion. I noticed that, with the men, talking about myself was more difficult than with the women. When I did say something about myself to one of the men, it was either not acknowledged or produced an uncomfortable pause in the discussion. This contrasted with most of the interactions with the women participants who, after been offered a small amount of my own experience / history /education, tended to respond with more information about themselves. Initially, I felt that perhaps I was being unfair to the men participants and then found that other women researchers had experienced similar situations. Kelly, et al (1994:38) argue that: 'Where our research involves studying men or institutions, how we think about power and the "power" of the research, shift dramatically'. I also observed that most of the men participants needed very little encouragement to talk; to the extent that, in these interviews, I often needed to intervene in order to focus the discussion.

Another reason for feeling somewhat uncomfortable about talking about myself was the participants' limited time; I felt privileged that they had agreed to talk to me. My discomfort went beyond this for, although I was apparently fully entering into the conversation, I was still controlling it, still conscious of my research questions. I became worried that I was being duplicitous; feigning friendship. Exploring ideas of friendship and friendliness within feminist fieldwork, Kirsch (2005:2163) noted that the very attempts made by researchers to equalise the research relationship could result in participants' 'sense of disappointment, alienation, and potential exploitation'. Checking the transcripts to see if I had mislead the participants into thinking that there was anything more than a temporary meeting of minds,

phrases like 'it made a change to talk about these things' reassured me that the participants understood the nature of the relationship. Over a year after the fieldwork had been completed, and on two separate occasions, I noticed two of the participants walking in a public place. Neither of them recognised me. It felt strange as the participants had been living as characters in my head, but it also clarified that the research incident for them was as a conversation at a bus stop. Reflecting on Foucault's statement that his writing was a work of fiction, I realised that I had actually forgotten the real names of most of the participants and they lived for me under their pseudonyms. This reminded me that a 'true' account was always going to be an interpretation and cautioned me to be more aware of this.

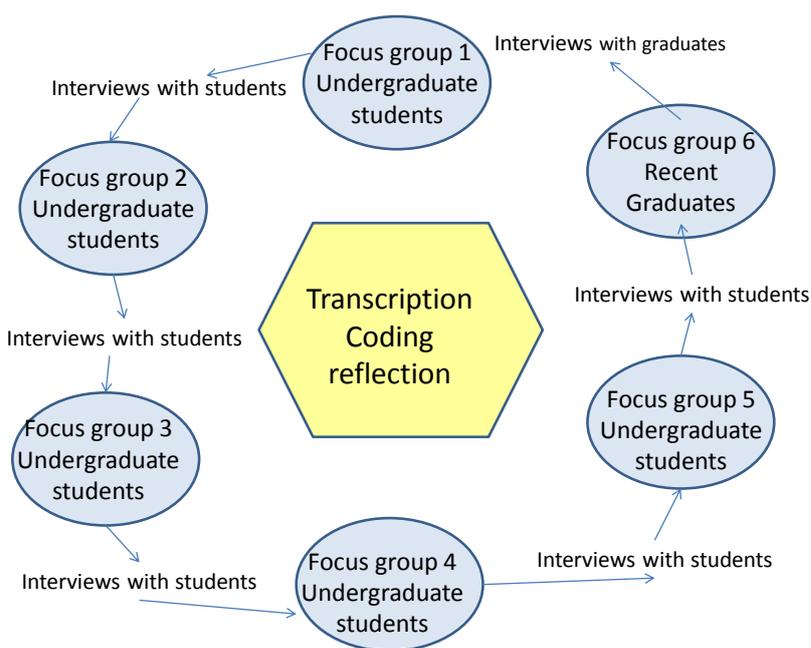
Guided by British Educational Research Association (BERA) principles, potential participants were offered background information on the study. Consent to be a research subject was obtained through prior written agreement with each informant, which included the option of opting out at any stage (Appendix 2). Before each fieldwork event, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw or not answer specific questions. Participants were encouraged to ask questions at all stages of the process and it was emphasized that their involvement would not influence their personal situations or courses. Participant anonymity was protected by replacing all names with a pseudonym in all reports of data and in the theses; and will be so in any future publications or presentations. Likewise, the names of institutions involved do not appear in written material or presentations. Data was stored securely without reference to the actual name or identity of the participants and audio recordings were transcribed using the pseudonyms. In order to ensure data protection, consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet.

Since individuals are frequently sensitive about providing their date of birth, not least because such information could be used fraudulently, I only asked participants to identify their age within a 5-year band. Participants were asked to describe their ethnicity and place of birth. I

did not ask participants about their sexuality, feeling that this would be too intrusive given the environment of the study. On reflection, this may have meant the loss of important information concerning gender roles and support from associates.

### 3.5 Data analysis

The data analysis was an ongoing and iterative process using a 'Framework Analysis' approach (Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Ritchie and Spencer 1994). This approach allows themes to emerge throughout the research. It comprises of five stages (1) Familiarisation (2) Identifying a thematic framework (3) Indexing (4) Charting (5) Mapping and interpretation. Immediately following each fieldwork event I immersed myself in the raw data by listening to the interview tapes, transcribing, reading and re-reading the transcripts. Interpretive methods involve prolonged engagement with the data and reflexivity (Gaskell and Bauer 2000) and reflection on the data and relevant literature took place throughout the whole process, including the mapping and interpretation stages. Interim analysis took place following each research incident, and during the transcriptions of the recordings. The themes identified through the focus groups formed the basis of subsequent field work.



**Figure 1 Sequence of Fieldwork**

The transcripts were coded using NVIVO. With a focus on issues related to age and identity, frequently used words, strongly delivered comments, contradictions and repetitions were seen as significant. With reference to the literature and theoretical approach, the thematic framework was reviewed and refined.

As indicated above, the development of the framework was an iterative process involving modifications based on reflection as new data was collected and on discussion with my supervisors. I initially drew on *a priori* issues: of shifting identity, constructions of age and links between ageism and gender. In exploring students' decisions to go to university, it emerged that their decision was often mediated by how others felt about it. This formed the tree code 'other's perceptions' and linked to reasons why participants had joined the university which formed another tree code. The theme of 'Identity' also lay beneath issues that arose regarding dealing with adversity as a student and coded under 'coping methods'. Despite the diversity of participants' experiences, some common themes emerged which were grouped into the following categories.

1. Age and other Social Identities
2. Coping Mechanisms - Being a Student
3. Learning experience and Support
4. Other's Perceptions of their student Identity
5. Perceptions of university and Reasons for Study
6. Time

The full thematic framework for this study, comprising of the main themes and subtopics, can be seen in Appendix 5. The themes and sub-themes became markers for the codes. Working within this framework the transcripts provided the basis for analysis and a profile of each respondent across all themes. Data was indexed using the textual codes from the framework and was grouped in three areas: 1) participants' decisions to undertake their course and arrival

at the university, 2) being a student including relationships with other students and staff, 3) other aspects of their life while studying, in particular, relationships with family and friends. These three broad areas were used to describe participants' views in each theme and sub-theme, and the findings linked back to the literature. This formed the basis of the interpretation of the data as seen in the next three chapters where verbatim quotations are used to illuminate key points from the participants' narratives. There now follows three chapters where the data is discussed as above.

## **Chapter 4                      Starting university as an older undergraduate student**

A key area of inquiry in this study concerned how older people came to commit to three years, or more, of study when others of their age were retiring. Narrow distinctions between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation do not do justice to the complexity of reasons, nor to the multiplicity of routes by which participants arrived on their undergraduate course. The participants' given reasons for coming to university included: gaining employment, a desire for inclusion, to keep the mind active, greater independence and self-sufficiency, altruistic reasons and desire for self-actualisation. Reasons for study frequently overlapped and students sometimes discovered new reasons for study than their original reasons. These reasons are discussed in the following three sections which address employment, altruism and individualism. I then look at students' engagement using Foucault's concept of *Technologies of the self* and consider university as a place of resistance. The final section of the chapter discusses the participants' doubts as to their right to be at university.

### **4.1      Employment-related reasons for study, credentialism and desires for inclusion**

This section explores employment-related reasons for coming to university which were given by nearly two thirds of those interviewed. Some, such as all the members of the first focus group, were studying a directly vocational course involving work-placements. Others said that they aimed for a better paid job, but did not specify what job that might be. A few respondents planned to work on a self-employed basis, or to develop their own business, and several said that they had reached a career plateau and needed a change. However, underlying these apparently 'rational' reasons, there were often more complex reasons for going to university. These included feelings of exclusion and inferiority which some participants associated with not having a degree qualification.

Lavinia (black, African 49-54) initially said that she wanted a degree because employers seemed to just want graduates. She also related her lack of a degree to feelings of exclusion and inferiority saying that she felt '*ashamed*' as the only non-graduate in her social group:

*what actually motivated me to come to Uni was because of my husband's friends...All of them they are graduates... and I'm the only person that mixes with them that is not a graduate...So I was even ashamed any time like that, and each time they talk of "Oh when we were at Uni"...that really dented my confidence a lot*

Lavinia's interest in becoming more like her husband is relevant to Modood's (2004:100) suggestion that the high proportion of BME groups participating in higher education is due to 'familial adult-child relationships, transmission of aspirations and attitudes and norms enforcement'. Modood however, mainly focused on adult-to-child influences; younger people being inspired or persuaded by their parents. Lavinia's account illustrates how cultural capital can also be transmitted through familial adult-to-adult relationships.

Like Lavinia, Cathy (white, British 49-54) said that she had enrolled for a degree to be taken more seriously within her workplace where she had felt undermined. After being at university for a while, Cathy realised that she had other options and no longer wanted to return to her previous workplace. Both Cathy and Lavinia said that not being a graduate made them feel like an outsider, and obliged to accept a work role which did not reflect their perceived capabilities. Lavinia, in particular, framed this as exclusion from important social circles in her life. Rising credentialism, and the consequent greater significance of degree qualifications, are argued to be not just employment-related but also 'part of a process whereby people's lives and identities are redefined in accordance with new cultural norms' (Furedi 2005). Both Cathy and Lavinia expressed their perception of being placed outside of cultural norms due to not having completed the rite of passage which a degree offered. Their given reason for study, employment, concealed a more basic necessity, to be accepted on an equal basis.

Some participants said that they were studying to improve self-employment or business opportunities. Angela (Irish 55-59) said that she wanted to gain '*independence*', suggesting that she had less interest in the type of acceptance sought by Cathy and Lavinia. She said that she had hoped that an HND would provide the credibility and the skills to develop her craftwork on a self-employed basis. Angela said that she came from a working-class background and had never been particularly good at school. She said that she had thought that graduates were very clever, and therefore had initially only committed to the diploma, rather than the full degree. Angela, at the age of nearly 60, doubted her right to participate in higher education. This reflects a wide range of research (with much younger participants) showing that, in comparison to the middle-classes, working-class individuals tend to display a reduced sense of entitlement to education (Bamber and Tett 2000; 2001; Reay 2009) and relates to the normative culture of higher education being white, male and middle-class (see, for example, Marchbank et al 2003). Barriers to higher education would have been far greater for women, such as Angela, who left school in the early 1970s when working-class women rarely considered, or would have been considered for, university.

Angela's views, which are discussed further in Chapter 5, express the values of choice, independence and self-sufficiency associated with '*successful ageing*'. She described how she grew in confidence as she progressed with her course: '*You can choose what you're going to do and let the rest of the world go by*'. May (Chinese 55-59) also wanted to develop her business. For more than twenty years she had helped her husband run a business. When he retired, she bought his customer base and started bidding for bigger jobs. May had been told that formal qualifications would help her win contracts and had enrolled on her course to provide her with the management skills to be her '*own woman*', and no longer only the minor or supporting partner in the business. The higher education ideal of '*independence*'

(discussed by Leathwood and Read 2009) presented the very condition sought by participants such as May. May's comments on gender issues are discussed in Chapter 6.

#### **4.2 Altruistic Reasons for study**

Joan (white, British 60-64) also expressed her reasons for study as work-related. However, despite expressions of disbelief from others in her focus group, she insisted that she would not be seeking paid employment but only wished to develop her voluntary work and needed qualifications to validate this role. Joan said that she was not financially well-off; her income came from a disability allowance related to an injury at work and that the opportunity for going to university was never there in her early life. Her community-orientated reasons for study reflect those of mature women studying at further education level in Reay's (2003) research. Reay takes issue with Beck's model of the 'individualised individual'. She argues that some people are more interested in collective, rather than individual or egotistical, goals and that 'projects of the self can be aligned with a strong sense of community commitment and a desire to "give back"' (Ibid: 306). While Foucault's *Technologies of the self* are based on individualistic models, Reay here shows that caring for the self, or in this case educating the self, can be a necessary precursor to caring for others.

Apart from Joan, nobody specifically mentioned plans to do voluntary community work. However, others did have what could be described as altruistic reasons. Some of the younger women said that they were hoping to provide their children with better opportunities. This supports other research, such as that by Davies and Williams (2001). Some of the men, for example, Sebastian (black African 60-65) also expressed similar 'altruistic' reasons. Sebastian, who was undertaking a postgraduate course and interviewed as one of the graduate participants, said that he wanted to provide an example to his son. However, he expressed frustration that his (middle-aged) son kept asking why he (Sebastian) went to

university as he had no chance of getting a relevant job at his age. Sebastian said that his son could not conceive of any other purpose for going to university.

It emerged, however, that Sebastian's altruism hid more complex and individualist reasons for study. Sebastian's journey towards university had spanned several decades; from when he first started a degree course in the 1980s. His aim was to be a social worker. Following a break of ten years when he had to focus on paid work, he applied to university again but his school certificates were so old that he was advised to do an access course, on completion of which he applied to do Social Work but was refused by several universities. Eventually he was accepted on a non-vocational degree and progressed to a vocational postgraduate course. Such interruptions to formal education reflect what has been seen as the continuous and fractured nature of lifelong learning (Laing and Robinson 2003; Quinn 2010b). Concerns have been expressed that an emphasis on vocational relevance may reduce the potential for the undergraduate student 'to be transformed into a scholar' (Molesworth et al., 2009:277). For Sebastian, the vocational reason provided him with the justification to participate in higher education so that he could achieve his more altruistic aims.

Nigel (Black Caribbean 50-54) also expressed altruistic motivations, indicating that the symbolic capital gained through education would help him make a difference socially and politically. As Rubinstein (2002) argues, the aims and aspirations of older people goes beyond those described in Erik Erikson's 'life stages'. 'It may mean not only a concern with parenting and grand parenting and guiding the next generation, but also, more globally, a concern with what will happen after one's death and the dissolution of the self' (Ibid:33). As with other participants, Nigel perceived that a degree would provide credence and open the access to fora from which he had been excluded:

*'my approach towards University is that there are certain things I want to say [ ].. issues for argument's sake of culture. Issues of race, issues of identity across the*

*board. How people represent themselves. People's voices. And funny, you know, if you've got some kind of university education, you can say much more, and people perhaps listen to you [more than] if you're just a layman with no qualifications'.*

In order to gain entry onto an access course, Nigel said that he had given employment-related motives. However, he clearly stated that, although work would be welcome, he was not studying in order to gain employment. Nigel positions himself outside the institution's employability agenda as follows: *'University really is all about getting people into the workplace. And clearly from my point of view I'm at the other end of the workplace, the other end of it my views are a little bit different'*. Interestingly, Nigel talks about *'getting people into the workplace'* as opposed to, for example, *'improving their career prospects'*; thus showing employability to be what Boden and Nedeva (2010:37) describe as *'the ongoing neoliberalisation of higher education'*, which suggests that the *'pursuit of employability agendas may well be creating two tiers of universities - those that produce docile employees and those that produce employers/leaders'*. The implication here is that post-92 universities are more likely to be engaged in the former. Yet, Nigel said that he was aiming for leadership, though not necessarily in paid employment.

### **4.3 The Individual**

There was a sense from some participants that they could, at last, develop as an individual through embarking on a degree. Their stated reasons for study reflect discourses such as that of *'active ageing'* and *'lifelong learning'*, which can provide encouragement to individuals, but can also be conceptualised in relation to Foucault's *'Technologies of the self'* as regulatory mechanisms through which individuals seek to transform the self. Participants frequently referred to being at a stage in their lives when they finally had the wherewithal, courage, time etcetera to engage in activities they had always been interested in. This went beyond the level of concrete achievements, such as increasing employment prospects or becoming more

independent, it was about attending to the 'soul'. For some it was what Brown, et al. (2010:41) described as the 'revisiting of the "dream" later in life'.

For some participants it was less about *revisiting* the dream than *discovering* their 'dream'. For example, Sirimavo (Asian 70+) discovered her dream through attending a carers' support group when her husband was ill. She said that she became passionate about painting and wanted to play a part in the art world. Arguing with others in the focus group that her aim of obtaining the Turner Prize was completely achievable, she asked: *'But then Art is what? Somebody's Art is not Art for the other person. So Art is how you interpret things anyway. You see some person revealing her feelings in Art and that could be a Turner Prize. You never know'*. Inspired by Sirimavo's input, Pam (white 60-65) said:

*'It was something I've waited to do. I've always wanted to do it. And therefore, yes, it has a different feel to it than stuff that you do because you've got to for one reason or another..... but [ ]because you're older, it's looked at that you are probably ..... filling in time. You know there are assumptions made that you have a certain kind of life. Therefore this is something you are dabbling with. Which is a bit irritating.... it's quite subtle. .... Behind that there's that sense of .. Don't put me in a box.'*

The word '*rushed*' appeared in several accounts of course admission. Some who were offered a place through clearing said that they had little time to prepare for the course. For example, Joan (60-64, white), who also expressed great delight at being at university, said that her enrolment felt so fast and, as she had been away from education for so long, she had not really expected to be accepted: *'It was a bit of a rush for me really .....So I think I phoned up on 16<sup>th</sup> and by the 21<sup>st</sup> I was enrolling. It was like just a huge shock'*. This builds on the Quinn et al. (2005:18) study which found that the process of choosing a course was frequently rushed for young (under 25 years) working-class students entering post-92 universities. Being rushed to start a course might feel particularly strange to those who have been away from formal education for some time, compounding the unfamiliarity they

experience. Frank (white European, 50-54) was the only participant who explicitly referenced personal temporality. This may have been at least partly due to his narrow escape with death when an accident left him with permanent injuries. His philosophic approach showed in statements such as: *'The problem with getting older is you're running out of time'*. So although Frank, and others, might have felt that course enrolment was hurried, there also existed a sense that the time left was particularly precious due to its paucity. As Foucault asks, 'what is this ever so fragile moment from which we cannot detach our identity and which will carry our identity away with it?' (Foucault 2002:443).

Despite viewing himself, and being viewed as, a serious student, Frank had no fixed aims: *'I have this weird idea that I will find out in due course what I will do ..... I hope to find answers to the questions I have and possibly do a PhD'*. Frank presented himself as one on a continuous journey of self-discovery, asking himself why he had not gone to university earlier because he had similar questions twenty years before. The elements of self-discovery in Frank's and others' accounts correspond to the technology of the self which Foucault summarises as the injunction to *'know yourself'*. Foucault traces 'technologies of the self' to two main origins: *'know yourself'* and *'take care of yourself'* observing that the original *'take care of yourself'* is much less prevalent in modern society than the later *'know yourself'*. Foucault finds an inversion between the hierarchy of these two versions: 'In Greco-Roman culture knowledge of oneself appeared as a consequence of taking care of yourself. In the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle' (Foucault 1988:22). In discussing the 'self' Foucault defines it as the 'soul' and it is this self that Rose (1999) draws on to discuss neoliberal individualism.

Concepts of 'self-discovery' or 'self-actualisation' in the participants' accounts reflect what Rose (1999) describes as the 'choosing self', which he defines as 'an individual in search of meaning, responsibility [and] a sense of personal achievement' (Ibid:102-3). Participants

frequently said that, now that they were older, they were more able to make more informed choices about their education and this differentiated them from younger students who might be more influenced by parents or teachers. Here there was a sense of the neo-liberal imperative where 'The self is not merely enabled to choose, but obliged to construe a life in terms of its choices, its powers, and its values' (Rose 1999:231).

#### **4.4 University as a place of resistance**

As previously suggested, going to university in itself, could be seen as a way of resisting a culture of 'age determinism' where particular features are attributed according to biological age. Two participants, Jack and Evelyn, took individualism (and non-conformity) to another level. They both maintained that they did not know why they were at university. Jack (white British, 50-54) said:

*'I haven't got a goal, I haven't got an ambition as such, I haven't got a particular level that I want to reach, I haven't got a particular job in mind. I think the best I can achieve in the short term just taking it as a one thing at a time'*

Jack refuses the idea that that he actively chose to go to university. He said that he had been *'living day to day for years'* and had suffered what he described as a *'catalogue of difficult events'*, including long term homelessness. Jack said that he came without preconceived ideas about university, apart from that it would involve sitting in classrooms and learning but he thought that it would give him some focus in his life. Somehow Jack found his way onto an undergraduate course. Yet Jack also described himself several times as *'an individualist'*. As Leathwood and Read (2009: 134) demonstrate, 'the academic is [ ...] often implicitly constructed as a lone individual– "man" is an island in academia' and it may have been this feature which attracted Jack to higher education.

Evelyn (white 50-54) also claimed that she did not know why she was at university, she had never planned to go to there and had no intentions of seeking related employment in the

future. As Evelyn described it, she sometimes thought that she was 'rail-roaded' into going to university and arrived there without any intentions on her part. She insisted that she was not benefiting from the experience in any way and the best she could hope to gain from it was a piece of paper. Evelyn had been attending an access course where the lecturers encouraged her to apply for university:

*The lecturer said "you eventually will go onto higher education won't you?" and I thought "Where is this leading? .....They're saying to me "Oh you've got to apply" and then I did. I only applied to one university, and I remember my lecturer at college going mad. "You should have applied to at least three or four". I mean I'm a scientist at mind, but I just thought I was in the lap of the gods. If I get chosen I'm supposed to go.*

Evelyn presents her decision to go to university as one instigated by the lecturer with the final decision in 'the lap of the gods'. Yet, although Evelyn frames her application to university as a fate beyond her control, she was not a docile character. For example, she was extremely agentic in tackling gaps in the provision for disabled students in the university.

Despite the passivity expressed by both Evelyn and Jack, their very presence as older students subverted the traditional concept of an undergraduate student. Furthermore, when Evelyn and Jack discussed their lives as young people, they both constructed themselves as politically active:

Evelyn: *I'm a child from the sixties and early seventies and that's revolution time.... There's nothing really that the kids do now that they didn't do then and it's the same with the clothes they wear. Ok different designer whatever but I don't think really that there isn't really anything they're doing that's new. The music may be new. Their attitude to politics may be new.*

Jack: *Is there an attitude to politics?*

Evelyn: *Perhaps that is missing and that's one of the things that I do find rather sad... I think that was important to us in the late sixties early seventies because the world was changing and they don't seem to have an idea about that.*

The image of the child, (here the 60s child), is discussed in Chapter 5. Evelyn did not appear to see the contradiction between constructing herself as a revolutionary who was fighting for her rights as a disabled student and allowing herself be cajoled into taking a course from which she could see no benefit. Her position clearly illustrates the tension between agentic subjectivity and regulating discourses.

The idea that there was more political activity a generation ago also arose with other participants. Some indicated disappointment that the twenty-first century university was not the one that they had missed out on in the 1960s and early 1970s:

Pam: *I'm quite surprised I suppose how people are so apathetic and not happy with what's on offer but don't do anything about it. That young people on the course are not as political.*

Angela: *I would say that about life in general. I think sometimes this is just the moanings of a grumpy old woman. They haven't got the get up and go to take on the system that existed 30 years ago.*

Angela's construction of herself as a moaning, 'grumpy old woman' suggests that she feels devalued. Nevertheless, the figure of the grumpy old woman can be strongly agentic, as an individual who refuses to be ignored. From a cultural anthropologist viewpoint Rubinstein (2002:34) says that 'a cohort raised on activism is likely to remain activist' and perhaps joining university as an older undergraduate student was a form of protest. As Rubinstein indicates, some may see older age as 'freedom from' previous responsibilities, or allegiances but those with a history of activism may take up 'new concerns' (Ibid:34).

Foucault argued that we cannot escape our own episteme and perhaps this study attracted a high proportion of those who believed in individual power to affect change and to resist societal norms. Participants in this study were young during the 1960s, an era when notions of individual rights, freedom and personal choice were important in many new social movements. Evelyn and Jack both stressed that they were not looking for employment and, as

such, could be seen to be resisting neoliberal trends while also describing themselves as individualists. The incongruity between the apparent docility and the possible agency shown by Evelyn and Jack might also be explained by Foucault's argument that individual choice is limited due to control by, largely unseen, 'technologies of power'. Foucault (1991:136) says that 'A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved'. Both Evelyn and Jack submitted to the concept that they could, and perhaps needed to be, *transformed and improved*. However, they both also resisted any suggestion that they were agentic in deciding to go to university, or continuing to attend.

Both Evelyn and Jack were very open about the troubles in their past. Some say that adult learners are more likely to enter education during a time of life crisis. For example, Dirkx (2008:28) claims that adult learners 'often have a questioning sense of who they are' and 'may have fragile financial support and equally fragile interpersonal supports' (Ibid:28). Foucault's work on power presents identity as *always* fragile; formed and re-formed through discourse. He postulated against the concept of a 'real' identity. According to Foucault, identity is subject to manipulation and control where:

'Different power apparatuses are called upon to take charge of "bodies", not simply so as to exact blood service from them or to levy dues but to help and if necessary constrain them to ensure their own good health' (Foucault 1991:94).

As such educational institutions, where the object is to influence bodies for their own good, can be seen as one of such 'power apparatuses'. Foucault argues that subtle, or unseen, 'power apparatuses' are applicable to the whole population for, 'it is not a matter of offering support to a particularly fragile, troubled and troublesome margin of the population but of how to raise the level of health of the social body as a whole' (Foucault 1991:94). However, Foucault puts less emphasis on external power and focuses on what he called 'governmentality', the 'contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of self' (Foucault 1988:19). Evelyn and Jack were keen to show how fragile and powerless they were against the forces that compelled them to university. Resisting all the usual reasons for going to

university, they claimed not to enjoy being there, and not to be particularly interested in, or have any use for, the programme of teaching. It was almost as if they wanted to be seen as passive observers of themselves.

#### **4.5 Admissions and the right to a place at university**

Most participants said, that prior to enrolment, they were unclear about what university would involve. Over a third said that they found it more difficult than they had expected; and this led to several participants changing their course. Even some of those who described their route to higher education as very deliberate, transmitted a sense of university as a mysterious place. For example, Valerie (white, British 50-54) said that, prior to enrolment, her concept of university was almost entirely based on television dramas. Even Cathy (white, British 50-54), who had some idea of what to expect because her children went to university, said: *'I actually don't know what I thought to be honest with you'*.

Doubts as to the right to a place on an undergraduate course were sometimes age-related. Some participants said that they had been refused admission to other courses because of their age. Irene (white, 55-59) was told by someone at work that she was too old to get funding, but then she found out differently through a chance meeting. She, like others, claimed that her admission to university was entirely unplanned, though there were indications that she was more purposeful than she admitted. Having left school without qualifications, Irene attended evening classes leading to an exam. She presented her route to university as propelled by a hidden force transporting her to the exam: *'I don't know how it happened to this day ..... I remember sitting and waiting to go in for the oral exam and making this vow that I would never again put myself through anything like that'*. Of course Irene did break this vow by enrolling at university.

After passing an 'A' Level, Irene looked, without success, for a course between 'A' Levels and university. Her search for other courses suggests that she doubted her ability, or the right, to go to university even though she had sufficient entry qualifications. Fears of not being good enough are found to be commonly held by working-class students (Bamber and Tett 2001; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). Irene's words, *'I don't know how it happened to this day'*, suggest anxiety that she might be blamed for pushing herself towards university. As a working-class woman born in the late 1940s, she was aware of contravening the norms for both her social class and her sex. Furthermore, Irene was also contravening the norms for her age-group. It would be safer not to admit her role in this.

Irene applied to three universities, was accepted for all three and chose the one with easiest travel. She said that she would never forget feeling *'trepidation'* when approaching the university for the first time: *'I walked in and we all had to wait and then we were taken to this room'*. The words 'taken to' [an unknown destination] appear in several other accounts. For example, Peter (black African 50-54) remembered being *'taken to a room with the rest of the new cohort where they were given information about the subject and about the rules and regulations'*. These presentations of helplessness and *fait accompli* concealed personal agency. For example, Irene was purposeful in studying 'A' levels at evening school and then applying to three universities.

Although I did not ask specifically about the actual admission to university, it was significant how often this was raised as a memorable event. Admission to university signified inclusion in a way that transcended enrolment on a mere course. It marked entry to a heterotopia which had been previously denied. Processes involved in this critical moment are seen in the following dialogue:

Irene: *I got taken on the basis of this very hard won A'level that I got at evening classes which I proudly brought along.*

May: *I have nothing, no paper qualifications, and I remember the guy asking me and I didn't know what an O'Level was.*

Sara: *Mine wasn't an entrance exam but you had to do this sort of talk thing and come and show that you were willing to do it. You had to be able to say who was going to fund you and if you were going to commit yourself to attending*

May: *Mine was just Maths not English, just maths.*

Sara: *And how seriously you were taking it*

Sara: *And one of the questions were "what book are you reading at the moment and I thought "Oh God make up something"*

Irene: *Mills and Boon (Lots of general laughing from the others in the group)*

Sara: *I'd been reading something to do with child psychology so I was able to mention some of the theories so that was that. But the girls had said to me beforehand "Say this and do that".*

The fast pace of the women's conversation above, regularly punctuated by laughter and wit, was not due to disinterest in their study because, at other points in the discussion, they spoke passionately about its importance. The women projected a sense of university as a surreal world where arbitrary tests could be given and glib promises extracted. The Mills and Boon comment was made in jest but raises questions as to what constitutes legitimate reading or knowledge. It also reflects the gendered and ageist way in which the women felt that they were viewed by the institution. The laughter signalled a process of group formation for it was significant that, when the group had finished, the women left together still talking, even though they had not met before.

Elements in the admissions stories, particularly that of Sara (white, British 55-59), suggests feelings of being an imposter, having to '*make up something*'. The term 'imposter phenomenon' was conceived by social psychologists Clance and Imes (1978) to describe how 'women who experience the imposter phenomenon maintain a strong belief that they are not intelligent; in fact, they are convinced that they have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise'

(Clance and Imes cited by McGregor et al. 2008:44). To discover if this still applied a generation later, McGregor et al. (2008:47) conducted research with college students (71 men and 115 women) to find that still 'women typically experience greater feelings of being an imposter than men'.

Several participants named the admissions tutor who made them an offer, often with expressions of deep gratitude, as if they were not entitled to a place. Sebastian (60-64, Black African), who had been refused by three universities, also felt that there had been personal bias in the admissions process. He thought that these refusals were age-related, although he was not actually told the reason. However, he had profound praise for the admissions tutor who did offer him a place. Years after he had graduated, Peter (50-54, Black African) still recalled in detail his meeting with the admissions tutor. Presenting the decision concerning his entrance to university as entirely at the discretion of this one person, Peter spoke of a '*tête-à-tête*' when the admissions tutor who offered him a coffee and then '*rushed through the paper work*' in his favour. As discussed in section 5.4, Peter was convinced of lecturer bias. He also suggested that the decision regarding his admission was made entirely by one individual and based on individual power and personal bias. Although personal decisions are likely to be part of any admissions process, it is essential that the process is open and transparent to all applicants.

Doubts as to their right to be at university were frequently suggested by participants, and underlined by issues of gender, race and social class. These doubts were made known in various ways including relegating their admission to good luck, to the generous nature of one person, to being able to bluff their way in, and shock when they were offered a place. However, such doubts were sometimes reduced by being older than traditional students. For example, Danny (white, British 50-54) explained:

*if I'd been a lot younger then I wouldn't have been on a course. I think also because I was.... bit shy with it, uncertain. And also thought it wasn't really for me, it wasn't my world, it was... I thought when I was younger than I was maybe not destined to be part of University life, it wasn't for me. I wasn't good enough or.. a very low opinion.*

He observed that a big part of being at university was finding one's way through the bureaucracy. Danny described the considerable responsibilities he took on in his years as a trade union representative. This, and the trade union courses he attended, probably helped give him the confidence and skills to keep questioning different people in order to understand and meet the requirements of university procedures.

### **Chapter summary**

This chapter looked at participants' expressed hopes, fears and expectations of university as undergraduate students. The participants' accounts problemise understandings of work, careers and education and raise issues of how value to society is measured. Economic-related reasons given for coming to university confirmed constructions of the academy as a preparation for employment. However, these reasons often concealed altruistic concerns and an expressed need to fulfil long held desires. Reasons overlapped and sometimes more ambitious reasons emerged when a more standard reason had been given initially. This indicates that respondents were not always confident to discuss, and perhaps to recognise, their aspirations for the future.

Although participants demonstrated individual agency by enrolling as undergraduate students, there were elements of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) described as 'precarious freedoms'. An older person choosing to enter a space designed for and populated by young people might be seen as an act of resistance. It certainly raised questions about their 'right' to be there; including by the participants themselves. Although considerably older than most undergraduate students, the participants in this study experienced similar difficulties to many other 'non-traditional' students, as described in the extant literature (such as: Modood 2006;

Tett 2000; Thomas and Quinn 2007), in addition to specific age-related concerns. For some it was the start of a journey where the destination was uncertain and their identity and sense of control felt in jeopardy, but which contained possibilities previously only dreamt of.

Some participants showed hesitation in owning their decision to go to university. Some emphasised 'career' reasons, perhaps in order to present their study as meaningful. With further discussion, such 'extrinsic' reasons were often seen to obscure more individualistic reasons. Foucauldian theory has been applied to the surveillance and restriction of elderly people (see, for example, Powell 2006). However, the focus on forms of self-regulation, seen in Foucault's 'technologies of the self' is also a feature of 'active ageing' where the older person is deemed to be individually responsible for their life choices including their ongoing health and welfare.

Purcell et al., (2007) suggest that older undergraduate students tend to study for intrinsic reasons and are less likely to take an instrumental approach. The participants in this study were just as likely to cite instrumental reasons for going to university. However, what has been seen as a conflict between university as preparation for employment and as the 'empowerment of the individual' (Green Lister 2003:127) was found to not be a straightforward choice.

Some accounts embrace what Miller and Rose (2008:18) describe as 'a new ethic of the active, choosing, responsible, autonomous individual obliged to be free, and to live life as if it were an outcome of choice', while others demonstrate resistance to being a choosing individual. The neoliberal subject of 'active aging' was evident, along with elements of a rebellious 'grey power', including consciousness of finishing, completing and personal temporality. Participants frequently said that coming to university allowed them to realise long held ambitions. In some accounts the 'old self' was situated in the 'young self' where

going to university enabled a revisiting, and making right, of unfinished business. Some participants were inspired to study by the developing identity of young members in their family. Yet, as explored in Chapter 6, it is often within family and close friendship circles that the individual is most constrained by a specific identity. The following chapter looks at relationships with staff and other students as older students attempted to be accommodated into the university.

## Chapter 5 Being there: university space, inclusion and exclusion

This chapter reports on how participants experienced university, a space which some participants said was not designed for older students. As discussed previously, even the post-1992 universities contain an air of mystery for many first-generation students. Participants sometimes discovered new aspects of themselves but were sometimes constrained by others' age-constructions; constructions that they sometimes refuted and sometimes performed as expected. Relevant to this are participants' expectations of the opportunity offered by university to enable them to effect what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002:38) identify as 'duty to oneself', which they argue is core to a new '*value system of individualization*'. They explain that this new value system focuses on 'self-enlightenment and self-liberation as an active process to be accomplished' and that this includes 'the search for new social ties in family, workplace, and politics' (Ibid:38). As such, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim refute suggestions that these new value orientations are simply 'an expression of egoism and narcissism' (Ibid:38). In Beck's and Beck-Gernsheim's concept of 'duty to oneself' there is the possibility of subject agency and, in this, it differs from Foucault's (1988) 'Technologies of the Self'. The word 'soul', used throughout Foucault (1988), implies that 'technologies of the self' involves influences which are both pervasive and omnipresent.

As Besley and Peters (2007:84) say, 'Foucault's opus depends crucially upon spatial concepts that he has developed in relation to institutional spaces of enclosure'. One of the spaces Foucault includes is 'school', which is how several participants frame university. I draw on Foucault's (1986) concept of a '*heterotopia*', which is part of his conceptual work on discourse, power and subjectivity, to explore older students' attempts to integrate with the norms of the university space. The '*heterotopia*', as a special space open only to certain people or to people at a certain stage in their life, defines who is included and on what terms;

presupposing 'a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable' (Ibid: 26), just as the academy operates systems of entry to its various levels.

Section 5.1 looks at how the imagery of the 'child' was used to describe being at university. I draw on the Bourdieu and Passeron's image of 'fish out of water' as used by Reay, et al (2010:117) to discuss how some participants experienced their initial time at university. For other participants, university was a place of shelter and some experienced HE as developmental. Although older students may have similar anxieties to other students, particularly other non-traditional students, some of their experiences and expressed feelings were age-related. Individual identity claims, in particular regarding ability and age, are discussed in 5.2. Section 5.3 deals with how participants began to cope in the space designed for much younger people and section 5.4 looks at the impact of relationships with others at university.

## **5.1 From 'fish out of water' to the student as 'child'**

For most participants, university was a very new culture and several commented on its large size and complex systems. Yet some participants experienced university as what Quinn (2003a:250) described as a 'protected space, a refuge from various forms of threat'. Analogies such as arriving in a new world, being a young child or starting at 'school' were frequent. The 'child' is particularly relevant to education, given that most education is aimed at children. Furthermore, as was discussed in Chapter 2, feelings of powerlessness and physical difference can arise for the elderly, as for young children.

Some participants used the child metaphor to denote their struggle at university. For example, Lavinia (black, African 49-54) described herself arriving at university as just like a child starting primary school when she recalled being full of panic at the '*difficult school*' of university. Lavinia also alluded to feeling infantilised by a lecturer telling her that university

was not a *'playground'* and that she needed to work harder. This reflects Leathwood's (2006:626) critique of the discourse of the 'independent learner' where 'Students who are "too" dependent are [ ] infantilised (as women so often are)'. Feelings of being positioned as a child in adult space were also highlighted by Evelyn (white British, 50-54) when she spoke of her life experience not being recognised by lecturers saying: *'I think you have to go into a child mode almost. You know, a teenage mode or something'*. Foucault's (1986:26) *'heterotopia'* is linked to 'slices in time' but, when undergraduate courses are seen as a preparation for adult life, this is 'a slice in time' which the older person would have passed. Evelyn indicates that she thought that the university viewed her as in the wrong slice of time to fit in there.

One of the most vivid accounts of the emotional turmoil of the early days at university was offered by Cynthia (Black Caribbean 70-75). She said she had always felt the lack of education because of having to leave school early. Having studied English at college in later life, Cynthia enrolled for English Literature at university which she remembers as: *'When I start the University I felt like I was in a big ocean and nothing to cling onto. I was new here, no-one to talk to, oh my God it was awful. It was awful, it was awful here for one year, at least one year'*. Cynthia said that younger students settled in more quickly whereas she *'was all alone'*. She described her lecturer as having much in common with the younger students and was *'a bit prejudiced'*. When asked if there was bias against her race or ethnicity, Cynthia seemed surprised and replied that the lecturer was biased against her because of her age and clarified firmly that she was not talking about race but about age. Although Cynthia said that the other students did not really accept her either, it was the lecturer's attitude that led to her transfer courses. Puwar (2004:32) writes that 'the normative bodies of a specific space can become disturbed by the arrival of Black and Asian bodies in occupations which are not conceptually marked out as their "natural" domain'. How much more are these normative

bodies, and the space they occupy, disturbed when a Black woman also challenges the age norms for that space?

Cynthia's initial experience of university reflects the findings of the Christie et al (2008:570) study of a group of non-traditional students entering university where there was a sense amongst respondents that 'coming to university involved the loss of a secure learning identity, built up during their time in a further education college'. They argue that more attention needs to be given to 'the emotional dimensions of learning' (Ibid: 568). Cynthia said she had blossomed at the FE college but that the transition to university left her in a '*big ocean and nothing to cling onto*'; unprepared for this relatively large institution of the university. It is perhaps significant that Cynthia referred several times to having to leave school early, indicating that this loss remained with her throughout her life. Cynthia's description of being alone in '*a big ocean*' resonates with Bourdieu and Passeron's notion of 'fish out of water' which Reay et al. (2009b) refer to in their study of working-class students. Reay et al. do attend to the emotional aspects of learning, arguing that habitus continues to reflect past and present external influences. This can be seen in Cynthia's account.

Despite her feelings of isolation, Cynthia had not given up on university. She transferred to another course where she felt welcomed and engaged:

*it was wonderful. I felt fresh and I felt I was five years old again. It's great and the teacher was great and the students in the class was great, and I felt like I was in a new world, a different world completely. I feel like when I was just started school, when I was five years old.*

The Caribbean school which Cynthia attended over 70 years ago would have been a very different place from a post-92 English university in the twenty-first century. Those happy, sunny days of school were no longer, even if they ever fully existed quite as remembered. In examining migrant identities, Ahmed (1999:343) problemises the concept of 'home':

it is impossible to return to a place that was lived as home, precisely because the home is not exterior to a self, but implicated in it. The movements of selves between places that come to be inhabited as home involve the discontinuities of personal biographies and wrinkles in the skin.

In her late 70s, Cynthia was clearly not a child, and was well aware of it, but her analogy can be seen as acquiescence of loss, of the years spent caring for others, and also denoted the time she had left to work on the self.

Before enrolling, most participants had only vague notions of what university would be like. However, most expected a privileged sanctuary holding new possibilities, as in Cynthia's description of her new course: as a wonderful 'new world, a different world completely'. Having found her ideal course, Cynthia portrayed university as what Quinn (2003a:250) described as a 'protected space, a refuge from various forms of threat'. This reflects Foucault's (1986) '*heterotopia*', which is part of his work on power and subjectivity, for Cynthia was very aware of when she was accepted into this 'different world completely'. The '*heterotopia*' is 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault 1986:25). The student continues to be at university even when they are physically elsewhere. For example, they are still a student and still at university when they are at 'home' being a wife or a grandparent. However, as seen in Chapter 6, the stark difference between life as a student and that of being an older person caused problems for Cynthia and other participants within their families.

Interestingly, it was Sirimavo and Cynthia, the two oldest participants and both in their 70's, who presented the strongest and most positive images of themselves as a child. Sirimavo (Asian 70+) said: '*I need to learn. I want to make a career out of it*' and she explained that she had '*an ambition like any other child*'. Sirimavo does not just liken herself to a child but actually constructs herself as the 'free child' (Berne 1968), open to new experience but also needing support and nourishment. Rubinstein (2002) suggests that the 'Third age' may be a

time of 'developmental ambiguity' (Ibid:32) when: 'active individualism becomes focused on the self in a fashion more passive and more narcissistic than was earlier permitted by goals and responsibilities' (Ibid:31). Older people have become what Rose (1999: 135) calls, in relation to children, 'objects of [...] programmes of individualization'. Rose traces the development of advice to parents to equip them with 'the insight, skills, and capacities to enable them to cope with the complexities of modern life and the tasks of rearing children' (Ibid: 177-178). There are similarities here with the proliferation of advice on staying active in old age.

Unlike those mentioned above, Harriot (white European, 45-49) found her course less rigorous than she had expected; more *'like going back to school than going back to higher education'*, particularly when *'they started the careers and professional development course'*. Harriot, who had held a successful career and already had a higher degree, was one of several who claimed not to benefit from 'employability' sessions. Even some participants who had chosen their course for employment-related reasons stated that they would have preferred to focus on the subject that they came to study. Several also described activities such as 'personal development planning' as intrusive. Perhaps this reflects Rose's (1999) observation that 'practical ways of formulating, understanding and responding to temptations and aspirations, to happiness and sorrow, to achievements and frustrations - all these and more have become thoroughly psychologized' (Ibid:xx).

May (Chinese 55-59) found that: *'We spent a lot of time on unimportant things like time management.... a lot of time talking about all the unnecessaries. Maybe it's necessary for the 18 year olds'*. May's view reflects that of two students (both over 40 years old) in the Little et al. (2005) study. However, May said that she did need much more help with academic skills such as *'how to do critical reading'*; thus illustrating that older students may have already

acquired advanced work proficiencies, but may have other more pressing needs which are not fully addressed in the undergraduate curriculum.

## 5.2 Students' identity claims regarding ability

This section explores a theme that was raised throughout the study: that of 'ability', though often expressed as 'inability'. Participants expressed anxiety about their ability to succeed at university, some discovered abilities they had not previously recognised, and others indicated that they felt that the university had dismissed them as of low ability. Throughout, participants drew upon discourses of older learner fragility but also resisted these through mobilising discourses of resilience and tenacity.

Performing the subjectivity of older people being slow, Lavinia (black, African 50-54) described herself as *'very slow in learning'*. She said that lecturers had no time for her and were only interested *'in people that knows'*. Lavinia said that she had only one friend at university who was also a mature student. She said that they were both *'not too brilliant'* and, since both were unsure of what was expected or how to get there, studying together was not very productive. As Read et al. (2001:387) found, many students are not given 'clear guidance in the "rules of the game" of academic writing'.

The subjectivity of the slow older person was also performed by Sara (white, 55-59), who said she was studying because her manager had persuaded her to gain qualifications reflecting the expectations for employees at her grade:

*'it takes time for the penny to drop sometimes.... the younger ones, they can snap back just like that whereas I have to sit back and think for a minute of what they're about. I don't grasp it. I think that's also to do with tiredness as well'.*

Here Sara compares herself unfavourably to young people and their ability to *'snap back just like that'*, denoting a flexibility and adaptability that she indicated she lacked. In contrast to

this, she also told how she rapidly learned to use a computer, never even having used a keyboard before university, doing a full time job with young children, caring for a disabled husband and then going to classes in the evening. She now laughed at when she went crying to her manager to allow her to leave the course and sending multiple copies of an email to a tutor, thinking that it had not been sent. Sara seemed to have seriously underestimated herself. Positioned by, and positioning herself, through a discourse of older learner slowness Sara disguised and downplayed her strength and perseverance.

As with Sara, Carlos (South American, 50-54) compared himself to younger students. Similarly, performing the subjectivity of 'older learner slowness' he said: *'how can I keep the study level because they are very young, they are very fast thinking and I cannot do the same way. I need to think a little bit more to understand'*. It was also clear that Carlos spoke English as a second language, though he did not mention this might be a potential barrier to studying a course which was delivered entirely in English. While elation and self-affirmation followed success in assignments, feelings of powerlessness and disillusionment came with failure. Carlos said that his feedback from lecturers *'put me in stress because I haven't been getting the results that I was expecting and in some way I am getting behind'*. Failure also caused some to leave university or to have a near mental breakdown as happened with Samuel, (Black African, 45-49) who described how he became upset when a friend on his course failed some assessments and *'just walked away' [without explanation] 'after putting in so much effort'*.

## **Disability**

Although I had not set out to specifically look at issues of disability, these emerged as important throughout the study, not least because of the high proportion of participants with disabilities. People with disabilities are infantilised, as are older people (Malacrida 2009) and

some participants indicated that going to university was an attempt to gain dignity and respect.

Sirimavo (Asian 70+), the oldest person who discussed her disability, though not the oldest participant, said that her needs assessment report stated that she should have a special chair, and receive some technical and other support. However, none of this had happened. Sirimavo was also dyslexic but the study courses either clashed with her main classes or were in the evening when she would have had to wait around and travel after dark. It is perhaps the very individuals for whom support classes are set up who are nervous about travelling home after dark. Prowse (2009) illustrates the complexity of supporting disabled students in an equitable way and, as Leathwood (2006) observes, in many institutions classes are organised to suit the independent individual who is unencumbered by domestic responsibilities.

Frank (white European, 50-54), who suffered from debilitating arthritis, did not want people to be 'patronising'. In elaborating this message he dramatized a situation where someone talked to his helper instead of him. He then said '*It's like you're some senile old...*' where he paused and we both acknowledged how 'old' was used as a term of abuse. Foucault (1998:123) describes the regulations concerning the body which led to 'a political ordering of life, not through an enslavement of others, but through an affirmation of self'. For Frank, higher education was the means by which he had the possibility of taking control or affirming the self. However, Frank observed, and was critical of, the regularity controls within the university with regard to disability. He recalled what he saw as the tokenistic way in which the university disability officer insisted on giving him additional time for exams even after he had explained that, if he had an attack, he would be unable to attend the exam and extra time would be pointless. Frank described this as '*tokenism*' because he was not being listened to. A further area where Frank, and other participants, felt that their control was slipping was concerning *time*. Not only is being slow (and needing more time) often related to being old,

but many participants felt they were running out of time and were impatient with anything or anyone that wasted what time they had left.

Derek (white, 50-54) also expressed determination not to be patronised but encountered many regularity controls where people with reduced mobility are unconsidered in an individualist society. Derek explained that: *'the reason I'm at university is because I've a got a brain, it's my legs .. whatever, doesn't work'*. He said that, before his illness, he had given disability issues little thought; that most people *'don't mean to be nasty'* but able-bodied people are often unaware that, for example, leaving bags in the corridor could be hazardous. Since he did not always use the wheelchair, people would invite him to the pub *'only around the corner'*, but would forget the flight of stairs which, for him, would be *'Mount Everest'*. Derek portrayed a seemingly robust attitude through phrases such as *'the world was not built to accommodate people in wheelchairs'*. When approached by the administration regarding fire evacuation he told them: *'I'll be up out of this chair and I'll be running, just make sure you've got some oxygen at the bottom, just call the ambulance. I'll get out the building if I have to throw myself out of the window'*.

Despite his severe physical disability, Derek had found a way for 'affirmation of self' through his study. Even though many of his statements were full of bravado and a need for independence, Derek was clearly concerned about what others thought of him. As Leathwood (2006:630) argues, 'In many ways, 'independence' is a masculinist myth; what suits (some) men is defined as the ideal that all should be striving for, whilst men's dependence on others remains hidden'. Coates (2004:116) draws on various studies from the 1970s showing that boys were more likely than girls to choose topics such as sports in conversations with each other. She also argues that 'sportstalk' is used by men to delineate self-reliance and strength and to marginalise 'personal experience' (Johnson and Finlay cited by Coates 2004:104). Derek made frequent references to watching football, being in the pub and, as with the

example in the previous paragraph, many of his analogies were of physical prowess. As argued by Coates, the use of 'sportstalk' delineates personal achievement and status. However, as seen in Chapter 6, Derek's friends outside of university did not always recognise his decision to embark on higher education as an achievement.

Joan (white, British 60-64) had developed arthritis in her 20s and was receiving disability allowance. Others in her focus group expressed surprise that she had not declared her disability to the university, particularly when she said that she had difficulty carrying heavy books. She initially said that she was not reporting it because she was much fitter than before and the pain was not as bad, but then explained that arthritis is normally considered an old person's disease and she was not declaring it *'in case they think it's age related'*. When this was questioned by other focus group members, Joan provided no reasons for not wanting to appear old, indicating perhaps that this desire is taken-for-granted among her peers, and thus reproducing the deficit status of 'being old'. Instead, Joan said *'I don't feel old. I actually feel quite respected for my age'*. Did *'respected for my age'* imply respected *despite* of her age or *because* of her age? If she did feel old, would that mean that she would anticipate disrespect from, for example, younger students? Paradoxically, despite not wanting to appear old, Joan was performing a pastoral / parental role; thereby claiming power through the discourse that associates older age with wisdom. This discourse is also discussed in section 5.4.

## **Memory**

A discourse of memory loss in older people, or old people 'losing it', was referenced throughout the study. Some participants said that they were studying to help preserve their memory, thus expressing the discourse of 'active ageing'. Others drew on discourses of fragility. For example, Lavinia said that her memory had deteriorated: *'something that happens to me as I get older. Even my husband always shout "How come you're so forgetful?" .. before when I was young, oh my God, (snaps fingers) quick, quick'*. Linked to

this discourse of memory loss was concern expressed by several participants, for example Pam (white British, 60-64), that being older might mean reduced ability to learn. Pam, who had completed a higher degree when she was in her 30s, said that she was '*really beginning to get memory problems*' which had reduced her confidence:

Pam: *sometimes I'll start a sentence and I won't know where I'm going by the time I get to the end*'.

[Others laughing]

Pam: *So I went to the student support services to see what kind of support might be available*'.

[Angela laughing and shaking head]

Pam: *And he said "well maybe you're dyslectic". So I said "well no I don't think I'm dyslectic because I haven't been dyslectic up till now*.

The other women in the group laughed, acknowledging the stereotype of 'senior citizen' behaviour. However, would they have laughed had a young person told the same story? Pam was not joking for, in a subsequent interview, she explained that she was worried about '*a whole cognitive change*'. She suspected early Alzheimer's and was considering seeing her GP. This surprised me as, since she had listed memory as a disability, I had assumed she had already done so. Pam said that she could now only study for '*just a couple of hours or so*', whereas '*before*' [*she could work for*] '*hours and hours and hours*'. Elements of self-regulation, discussed by Foucault and others, are evident here. Furthermore, older people's memory has become a particular focus of what Foucault (2003:244-245) describes as 'biopolitics'. This can be seen in the campaign that has been running since 2013 to recruit one million 'Dementia Friends' to be trained to spot Dementia (reported on by Gallagher 2015). Although Dementia is clearly a serious issue for some individuals, as discussed in Chapter 2 there is a danger of assuming memory loss where there is none.

### 5.3 From 'fish out of water' to Fish Getting into the Water

As with most participants, May (Chinese 55-59) said that she approached university nervously. As she settled into her course, she said that the best aspect of university was to have '*started out with something in mind*' and then realised '*that there may be other possibilities*'. Cathy (white, British 50-54), who had enrolled to develop employment-related skills, discovered that she particularly enjoyed the academic aspects of her course. Such changes in self-image are seen in the following dialogue:

Cathy:           *'if you come to the course green let us say, you know within a very short time you do become more open'*.

Angela:          *I suppose I was saying earlier on when I tore up my essay. I wish I hadn't now. I wish I had it to look at. It was probably all right for somebody who hadn't written an essay for 30 plus years.*

Joan:            *You know that you're as clever as the rest if not cleverer*

Angela:          *Not a total thicko*

The new confidence claimed by participants is an example of what Reay et al. (2009b:1105) described as habitus being 'continually modified by individuals' encounters with the outside world'. Reay et al argue that, although the habitus stems from early childhood socialization within the family, 'Schooling, in particular, can act to provide a general disposition, a turn towards what Bourdieu terms "a cultured habitus"'. Focusing on young working-class students who achieved excellent academic results, Reay et al found that this was predominantly due to 'work on and of the self' (Ibid:1105). Similarly, even though Cathy, Angela and Joan were much older, their dialogue quoted above shows a new sense of personal power validated by academic results which demonstrated that they were no longer '*a total thicko*'.

Angela (Irish 55-59) said that she had not planned to do the honours year as she thought she would never achieve it. She destroyed her first essay to prevent anyone discovering her low

pass mark. Now, regularly achieving high grades, she could laugh at her early struggles. Like Cathy, it was the academic aspect of her course that excited Angela more than anything else; her ability was now legitimised by the university. Angela described how she achieved success through sheer effort: *'it's not easy to do this to start it. But once you start it and once you get going it's like being in a race. You want to just keep going with it'*. This again reflects what Reay et al (2009b:1105) found with much younger students; that this success was predominantly due to 'work on and of the self'.

A celebration of individual achievement was evident in how students compared themselves to younger students. However, as seen in the following sequence, the continued testing sometimes reflected a neoliberal governmentality, particularly when participants compared their efforts to other students:

Joan: *I've also found I am very competitive because I want to get higher marks than the others.(General laughter) I was never like that at school and I've come here and I want to get higher marks than them.*

Cathy: *No I agree with you there*

Angela: *I've found that too.(lots of general laughter)*

Cathy: *I'm obsessed with what I'm going to get. The longer it's gone on the more it's got worse. Now waiting for these results it's just ..*

Joan: *Oh good I'm glad it's not just me...*

Cathy (white, 50-54) was one of those who used the word '*obsession*' to denote her determination to graduate. She explained that she had worked harder than many others and would be disappointed if she did not get high results. Cathy said that, when some young students told her that they had completed their assignment in one night, she had concluded that she was '*old and slow*'. In addition to her internalisation of the discourse of older people being slow, discussed earlier, Cathy also expected what the neoliberal discourse promises: a *reward for individual effort*. However, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 4) argue, 'One of the decisive features of individualization processes [ ] is that they not only permit but they also demand an active contribution by individuals'. Cathy's active contribution was in signing

herself onto a study skills course. She recalled being told on the study skills course to allow eighty hours to write an essay and then beginning to doubt that the younger students were as fast as they claimed. Cathy's account might also suggest that the young students were performing an individualised version of youth as *naturally talented but lacking responsibility*.

Although I did not enquire about grades, participants frequently referenced them as evidence of in/ability. Feelings of euphoria or transformation were associated with their successful assessments, but assessment was also a source of stress and anger. Nigel, (Black Caribbean 50-54) said that conquering an assignment was the highlight of being at university. As illustration, he referred to one assignment which:

*took me from here to the ends of the.. it took me there. I was in the jungle one minute, it casted me aside one minute, it treated me with, ... I don't know, it was a severe lover, yeah? And it treated me badly, and I worked at it, I worked on it, and I got 78% on it, and I was so happy. I was so happy. And I was happy because I put a lot of work into it.*

Like Cathy, Nigel evokes the enterprising 'subject of value' (Skeggs 2004:62) who is rewarded for his individual effort. Particularly striking is the passionate imagery used by Nigel signifying the level of self-governance that he employed to direct himself towards the final achievement. Nigel's story echoes that of the non-traditional students in the Christie et al. (2008:561) study who experienced entering an elite university as 'an emotional process that can incorporate feelings of alienation and exclusion, as well as of excitement and exhilaration'.

As Skeggs (2004: 75) maintains, middle-class professionals often 'consolidate their position through cultural practices, such as [ ] increasing their education'. However, most participants in this study, including Nigel and Cathy, did not come from a middle-class background. In addition to subverting norms for their age-group by enrolling on an undergraduate course, participants often succeeded in breaking through and utilising middle-class codes and modes

of expression. There was evidence that many of the participants were surprised by their success on, and enjoyment of, their course. As seen in Chapter 6, friends and family were also surprised by their involvement in their course.

#### **5.4 Relationships with others at university**

This section uses discourse analysis to focus on participants' relationships with other students and with staff in the university. It explores the comparative way in which views are expressed about other age-groups. Ageist views of young people, or of old people, are found to be part of performing a particular age but are entangled with other issues of control and identity whereby the subject is constituted as part of a discursive matrix. Participants' presentations of themselves sometimes suggested the archetypal neoliberal self-regulating subject. This is particularly seen when they compare themselves to young students.

Most participants positioned younger students as very different from themselves. Cynthia (Black Caribbean 75-79) said: *'I think it's "respect" with some of the younger generation, some of them don't even take education seriously because they know they have so much time on their hands'*. As with Cynthia, Frank (white European, 50-54) mobilises the 'older and wiser' discourse, perhaps to resist a position of inferiority but also to show empathy with young peers, saying of young students that *'They're a lot brighter than they seem, they're academically very clever but .... like we all were stupid at that age'*. Frank also referred to time, saying that he did not need the degree for employment but *'they got their whole future in front of them'*. Nigel (Black Caribbean 50-54) said that young students sometimes behaved in distracting ways during lectures which he found *'very, very, very difficult'*. He said that he fantasized about an old style school master taking control of the class but then had to try to remember that it did not really concern him and that: *'a lot of the kids, a lot of the students are very young. They've just come straight from school. They've had very little life experience.'*

*And some of them are just beginning to start experiments on what their life is all about'. The performance of the 'mature adult' was clearly visible in each of these accounts where tolerance was shown towards those who had much to learn but also time to do it.*

Participants' claims to a superior level of motivation and understanding of the 'rules', sometimes masked anxieties about their own ability to succeed. For example, Nigel, who had worked in manual trades for most of his adult life, was initially nervous about how he would be received at university:

*after spending my years.. my last 10 years, in a male dominated society, very testosterone feel, macho kind of.. not that it was my world anyway, but that's what I was coming from, so that's got to have an after.. and just like being able to fit in.*

Here, Nigel constructs the academy as designed and populated by an elite and presents the rightful occupiers of university space as the traditional student. By implying that it was his responsibility to fit in, Nigel exemplifies a defining feature of the neoliberal subject. Despite such claimed differences, Nigel was also among those who commented that he was encouraged by the diversity of the student population: *'I think that there is a very, very nice mix. Whether it's designed? If it wasn't designed then its sheer luck because it's got a very nice cross section of age group, background, whatever'*. Similarly, Carlo (South American, 50-54) said: *'One of the good things that this university, or the England universities have, is the diversified peoples and all of them have different needs.* Jack (white British, 50-54) referred to: *'the melting pot of people from so many ethnic backgrounds that seems to gel so very nicely'*. However, Jack said that: *'someone who isn't managing to blend in socially is probably going to feel more and more out on a limb'*. He did not say whether this applied to him.

Most respondents did not report any negative responses received from younger students, though there were exceptions. The most negative reactions were received in business-related

courses where older students were less frequently found. Lavinia (black, African 50-54) said that some students refused to sit with her because she was old. As discussed in Chapter 4, Lavinia (black, African 50-54) also expressed concern that she felt excluded from her husband's social network. Read et al's (2003) study, where the participants were predominantly aged over 21, found that family and friends had a significant influence on a student's sense of 'belonging' at university. The experience of Lavinia, and other participants who said that they did not feel accepted by other students, would support these findings.

Carlos (South American, 50-54) said that one young man asked him "*Why are you doing this? You are very old*". Carlos dismissed it as *'everywhere you find rude people [ ... ] if I can do what he is doing then I am not old'*. Frank (white European, 50-54) on a Humanities course, said that his experience was *'precisely the reverse'* with younger students deferring to him. Frank said that he could hardly believe how Carlos had been spoken to, as young students had actually commended him on returning to study. Irene (white British, 55-59), studying languages, said that the young students on her course seemed oblivious to her age. When a 20-year-old student said something derogatory about older people, she asked if he was trying to make a point. He replied that he was not, and that he classed her in the same age group as himself. Irene seemed happy to accept the criticism of older people in general, if it was not personally directed. Possibly the young student did not notice that Irene was three times older than him. More likely, it was an inappropriate comment covered by a compliment commonly given to an older person, especially if they are female.

### **Competition with lecturers**

Various participants discussed the *parental role* they had adopted in relation to younger students and some explained how this created tensions in their relations with academic staff. For example, Joan (white, British 60-64) spoke at length about how she looked after young international students; telling them about London, taking them carol singing, helping them buy

winter clothes and even taking them home to meet her children. Joan said that several of the young students called her 'mum' and would ask her rather than 'face' the lecturer: '*Anything that they're not too sure about they'll come and check it with me*'. Sara (white, 55-59) found that she was usually '*the eldest one*' in lectures, including older than the lecturer and sometimes felt '*very much out of it*'. However, she found that some younger students would '*latch on*' to her and ask her about her experience of childcare. Sometimes the lectures addressed historical issues within Sara's lifetime and Sara would provide examples of her personal experience and also on the practicalities. Once, when the lecturer had indicated that they had heard enough, some of the students wanted her to continue (implying that Sara's information was more interesting than what the lecturer had prepared). Sara said that she worried that she had upset the lecturer and after this she kept quieter so as not to embarrass anyone. It is impossible to tell if Sara's contribution was relevant to the lecture, but the incident demonstrates the importance of realising that 'using experience for learning is not straightforward, but requires a two-way process of change and development on the part of both students and institutions' (Bamber and Tett 2000).

Sometimes participants were mistaken as lecturers, women and men, but this was only reported by white participants, perhaps signifying the racialized norms that govern conceptions of 'the academic' and 'intellectual' (see analysis of the experience of the black female academic; Maylor 2010). For example, Frank (white European, 50-54), a well-built man who wore a business suit, said he was mistaken as a lecturer '*on a daily basis*':

*In halls or on your way to a room or whatever, they ask you are you a lecturer do you know the way etc. or are you the lecturer for so and so and I think maybe I should wear my student card around my neck. That is rather normal I would think. That is just the way it is.*

Angela (Irish, 55-59) also said that younger students frequently thought she was a lecturer and once someone in her 40s made the mistake, whilst Cathy (white, 50-54) said that it only happened before everyone knew her. Puwar (2004:116) speaks about 'the sedimented

centuries-old natural order' and the 'naturalised relationship between authority, seniority and the associated competences with white bodies'. It would seem that the 'natural order' was continued in the construction of lecturers as older, middle-class and invariably White. Irene (white, 55-59) reported that when a student mistook her for a lecturer, and she replied that she was not, the student became deeply apologetic. There was no explanation for this apology. Perhaps he apologised because he thought Irene might be much younger than she looked, and therefore he had insulted her by assuming she was old enough to be a lecturer. Maybe the 'natural order', of the student being younger, had been called into question.

Two participants commented on working relationships and internal politics involving academic staff. Pam (white British, 60-64) described her relationship with academic staff as '*sort of collegial*'. She had represented her cohort during a formal complaint and thought that an older student could more easily '*agitate*' without it becoming personal. However, she also observed that she could still feel very unconfident and tongue-tied with some lecturers, even though she knew this was '*ridiculous*'. In contrast, May (Chinese 55-59), an experienced businesswoman, cautioned the others in her focus group against becoming involved in lecturer politics. She suggested that older students were particularly vulnerable to being enticed into a '*management struggle*' and lowered her voice, perhaps to delineate an area of intrigue. Read, et al. (2003:271) explain that the 'differences in the ability to speak and write the "language" of academia explicitly marks out the difference in status between student and lecturer'. Certainly, this difference existed for May who expressed concern that she needed more help with academic writing. On the other hand Pam, who already held a higher degree, was able to see lecturers as colleagues but also identified some indefinable barrier between herself and the lecturers. Read, et al. (2003:269) cite Grant's (1997) Foucauldian analysis showing that undergraduate students experience:

*institutional 'controls' through, for example, the 'regulated communications' of the lecture, the essay and the examination, and the rewards and punishments of the*

*grading system. Secondly, the student is constrained by her or his own 'knowledge' of what it is to be a 'good' student, a knowledge which has been constructed through socially dominant discourses, including those produced and maintained by the university itself. Such 'knowledges' and practices are legitimated by their 'naturalisation': they come to be seen as the only or 'natural' way of thinking or acting.*

A few participants were convinced of lecturer bias. For example, Peter (black African 50-54) said: *'If a lecturer doesn't like you here, he doesn't even.. he or she doesn't even pretend... You don't have anyone, so you have to close your mouth and then manage yourself to get what you want and get out'*. Read et al. (2001:387) found that a significant number of students hold back from presenting their opinions, through lack of confidence, or believing that their view will be rejected. They usefully highlight the importance of encouraging students to express themselves in written work without fear of being penalised if their views differ from their assessors. Although, Peter did not confirm if he had tried to express his views, he said that his policy was not to speak out because, if a student complains, *'the next weapon the lecturers are going to use'* is to fail that student. On one hand, Peter constructs himself as entirely subject to the lecturer. As such, he sets himself apart from the lecturing staff, performing what might be viewed as childlike role where the student is unable to communicate needs or to have any influence on the lecturer. At the same time, Peter produces himself as the individualised and enterprising subject with a clear strategy to get what he wants.

Most participants were very happy to be taught by people who were much younger than themselves. For example, Irene said that *'a lot of the lecturers are younger than me but it doesn't matter to them, it doesn't matter at all to them. And again, because of that, I don't even think about it'*. Similarly, May who said that she had come to university because she did not feel knowledgeable enough, replied that: *'They can be a lot younger and can be so brilliant. Like people in advertising and all that. They are specialist subjects. So even if he's*

20, *if he's qualified to teach me, I don't have a problem'*. Attitudes towards other students sometimes overlapped with attitudes towards lecturers. Although Nigel (Black Caribbean 50-54) was taken aback when he noticed that a lecturer was *'just the next stage on from those young adults from school'*, he added that this was not a problem.

Evelyn (white 50-54) did object to being taught by someone younger. She was particularly upset when she was contradicted during a class discussion. Although the lecturer returned the following week to acknowledge that Evelyn had been correct, Evelyn was still angry saying:

*I don't like being talked to as if I'm an idiot. I've a lot to learn. That's why I'm doing here. I accept that but I don't accept that a 25 year old, or whatever she is, is going to not know her stuff and then expect me to eat that. Yes I get a bit hot under the collar.*

Evelyn said that her experience was disregarded, that lecturers talked down to her, sometimes pretending to know more than they actually did. She repeated several times: *'They forget that we've had thirty years on them'*. Evelyn was profoundly deaf and was critical of lecturers' indifference to disability issues saying: *'When a university has accepted a deaf person, and a mature deaf person, they have to get their act together'*. She said:

*I have to fight tooth and nail to get handouts from lecturers..... Here it's "oh we're really sorry but I've typed up a couple of bits of notes for you". I expect my lecturer, which all my lecturers did at college, to have my notes ready. That's cool that she come in this morning big smile on her face and I appreciate it. But it's a week late.*

Evelyn said that she felt isolated and unsupported at university and was angry that, even though she worked harder than younger students, they understood the system better and would probably get a higher degree than her even though they were *'thick as two planks'* and knew nothing outside of their narrow subject discipline, *'sod all basically'*. Evelyn said she was not bitter but was concerned that *'these people'* would get good jobs *'that might interfere with my children or my grandchildren's lives'*. Here Evelyn others the younger students, as

'these people' and performs the superior 'mature' adult who is concerned with protecting her children and grandchildren.

Crossman (2007) argued that the relationships of earlier learning situations can influence how any new learning is approached and Evelyn may have been revisiting a very unhappy school experience where, she said, '*everyone was nasty including the teachers*'. Evelyn's experience bears great similarity to one of Prowse's (2009:93) respondents who 'identified as a Deaf woman, [and] recalled the harsh way she was written off as a learner at school'. As Diez (2010:164) says, 'school-related exclusion can spawn social exclusion in the mid to long term'. Evelyn's exclusion from her 1950s-60s school community went even beyond that discussed by Diez (2010), who observed teachers not intervening effectively in playground exclusions but showing understanding in the classroom. For Evelyn, the exclusion extended into the classroom leaving her with what she describes as '*a deep hatred*' for teachers.

Despite this, Evelyn was at university and robustly critical of the administration and the teaching:

*University is not geared for older people.... The atmosphere is not even geared for us. You know, the rooms, the chairs, everything, are not geared for us. Toilets, despicable. Obviously they're saying "We're geared for older people" or they wouldn't be inviting us in, right? Then why aren't they? ..... I'm going through my change, .... I'm really hot and tired and sweaty and I get migraines.. you know, the whole thing that us women go through, right? But I'm also expected to keep up with a 20 year old and yet everything is laid on for her. I'm getting bugger all. That's how I see it.*

The other two students in Evelyn's focus group, both men, appeared taken aback by Evelyn's outspoken mention of her bodily functions. Evelyn's expressions reflect Ussher's (2006: 160) view that 'the menopausal body may be positioned as abject, but most women do not experience it as such, despite their fears as they anticipate this period of life'. Evelyn contravened social norms of the passivity expected from people with disabilities and went

even further by speaking about (female) bodily functions and a step further still by referring to the *older* female body. Puwar (2004:132) demonstrates that the 'space invaders' of public institutions must conform to a series of unwritten rules in order to be accepted. For example, for women to 'draw attention to their own bodies is almost to undermine their claims to professionalism'. Foucault's (1998:140) concept of 'biopower', the numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies, is relevant here. Foucault describes the 'hysterization of women's bodies' as a significant way in which women can be controlled through medical practices (Ibid 104). Evelyn was resisting the very taboos which help to control women's bodies, keep them subjected, and which are even more taboo with regard to *older* women.

The men's discomfort may have been a response to not only the content of what Evelyn said, but also by the manner in which it was said and how she tended to dominate the discussion. At various points they tried to make conciliatory remarks, which Evelyn sometimes ignored and sometimes contradicted. Nigel said that everybody should make time and that, although he was frustrated by some of the behaviour of young students, he realised that it was difficult for lecturers to keep a '*balance of what's going on*'; that he was at university '*to listen*' but that he was clearly not as disadvantaged as Evelyn. Jack also tried to calm Evelyn saying that it sounded like her needs were ignored. Lacan (1994:12) states that 'in order to cure the hysteric of all her symptoms, the best way is to satisfy her hysteric desire' and there were elements of a patronising tolerance in how Jack and Nigel responded to Evelyn's contravention of the social norms for her gender and age. Like Evelyn, Nigel said that he was unhappy with the disruptions during lectures by young people. Unlike Evelyn, he expected university to be '*young people centred. Definitely, and why not*' implying that, as an intruder, his preferences were less important than theirs. Jack and Nigel can be seen to be performing an elder role of '*balanced understanding and tolerance* for those who are positioned as inferior.

Evelyn was expressing what Shields (2005:8) described as '*The Wrong Kind of Emotion*' in thwarting gendered norms for women in contemporary British society, as well as the social norms both for older people and for people with disabilities. By stating '*deep hatred*' for teachers, even though her daughter was a teacher, she showed that she was not what Shields describes as 'appropriately nurturant' (Ibid:11). The apparent inactivity on the part of university staff could have been in response to Evelyn's counter-stereotypic way of expressing herself, for Evelyn was not only contravening norms for a student but also for an older person. As Rudman and Fairchild (2004:157) found, 'violating stereotypes can result in social and economic reprisals'. Despite institutional policy, individual staff can exercise power of, for example, inactivity. As Torres (2006) noted, there can be a discrepancy between the active life thought to contribute to 'successful' old age and the unspoken rules equating passivity and inactivity with a respectable image.

Students aged 50 and over grew up in an era which is now history and going to university may revive memories of youth and of early education, whether pleasant or not. Lingering memories can re-surface to allow reflection and re-ordering, as powerfully illustrated in Brah's (2000) '*The Scent of Memory: Strangers, Our Own, and Others*'. Brah meditates on life in Southall, where she grew up and which remains in the 'intimacy' of her memory (Ibid: 287). She contemplates this space which the White and the South Asian communities inhabited but did not share. Although Brah speaks of a particular time and place, with its evocative quality of scent, traditions and belonging, she also presents an analogy of group dynamics. Brah's description of life in Southall could be seen as a template for situations where new groups enter the sphere of an established group; such as older people taking up courses which were once exclusively populated by traditional students. As older people become assimilated into undergraduate study how do they *perform* studentship? If it becomes more usual to see older undergraduate students, perhaps the standard age for entering higher education would increase. However there are indications that this is not imminent, for many

UK universities are offering preferential fees to students who arrive having achieved AAA at A level in one sitting and, in this way, discriminate in favour of the traditional student. Such policies would indicate that the construction of student will see minimal change, at most.

## Chapter summary

Butler (1999:177) asks us to 'Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an "act", as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "*performative*" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning'. So too is *age* contingent on a wide range of factors, one of which is gender. For example, the gendered performance of age can be seen in the maternal role which Joan adopted towards some of the younger students. When the normalised gendered performance of age was disrupted, as with Evelyn, this resulted in confusion. There were also indications that being a student suggested the need to perform age as a younger person.

In considering *age* as performative, a range of constructions of *being older* can be seen in the various subject positions which participants occupied. For example, both Evelyn and Nigel adopted an 'adult' role in relation to the younger students. Evelyn performed the subjectivity of the critical adult, whereas others such as Nigel sometimes also fulfilled that of a more benevolent adult who understood that '*they have very little life experience*'. However, this performance of wisdom and experience sometimes paralleled expressions concerned with not fitting in or being competent enough. Butler (1999: 57) says of the masculine subject that 'His seemingly self-grounded autonomy attempts to conceal the repression which is both its ground and the perpetual possibility of its own ungrounding'. The performance of a slow older subjectivity was seen in accounts such as that of Lavinia who was concerned that her mental prowess was slower now that she was 'elderly', even though she was one of the youngest participants. At the same time the subjectivity of the 'child' (a much younger person)

was performed by several participants, sometimes as one who felt lost and sometimes as one who was free and open to new experience. Here it can be seen that the construction of the student as being younger than the teacher is problemised by the existence of older students.

This chapter has reported on participants' experience of university space, revealing gendered and aged differences in how they construed their place in this space. Some of the paradoxes of age have been observed; exposing intergenerational competition and also alliances. The next chapter considers the wider environment; that is how student life interacts with 'home'.

## **6 Life outside of university**

This chapter focuses on the relationships that older students had before entering the university space and how their friends and families reacted to their studying; some relationships changed, or survived on new terms, and some terminated. There was evidence in some accounts of what Beck (2000:53) observed as 'people [breaking] away from the certainties of their original milieu [making] them authors of their own lives - with all the turbulent consequences'. As with Foucault's (1986:25) '*heterotopia*', being at university spans several actual spaces. Hence, older students will still be at university, most likely in classes with much younger peers, even when they are at home being 'granny' or carrying out other responsibilities associated with older people.

The chapter begins by looking at participants' accounts of how their friends and family from early childhood viewed education in general and also their decision to return to education. This is followed by a section looking at decisions as to telling, or concealing, their study. Intimate partner relationships are discussed in 6.3 and the participants' accounts of how young people and children reacted to their studying are discussed in 6.4. The chapter concludes with thoughts concerning bravery in education.

### **6.1 Views of education and the 'university world'**

Participants were asked about the reactions of 'family' and 'friends', though the specific relationships were not defined in this enquiry. This allowed participants to talk about their partner (if they had one) and friends, or to focus on blood relations. Several men chose to discuss their parents and siblings, whereas none of the women spoke at length about these early relationships. All of the white men emphasized that no one in their family had ever thought of going to University. For example, Danny (50-54 White British), having worked in

a skilled manual occupation since leaving school, felt that university 'was never part of [his] life'. He said:

*my mum and dad are ... very odd, they don't really understand what I'm doing. [They] don't have any association with ... the University world or anything. They don't care. Going to sixth form wasn't really part of my world, it was never really part of my world.... I used to wonder what it was all about.*

Interestingly Danny refers to the 'university world', thereby separating it from all other aspects of life. He places himself outside of this world, lacking the wherewithal to access it. Danny's assessment of his parents, '*my mum and dad left all the responsibility up to my secondary school*', reflects what Gillies (2005) describes as a dominant discourse which constructs working-class families as lacking in moral responsibility. Danny said it was '*a unique experience to see other parents assisting their children with their homework and stuff*', reflecting the literature showing the educational advantages enjoyed by many middle class children (for example: Ball 2003; Gillborn 2010; Gillies 2006; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). However, as illustrated by Reay (2002b: 415), the working-class is not a homogenous group and this 'generates different priorities, attitudes and actions in relation to higher education access and choice'. Danny's description of his parents might place them in what Reay identifies as a 'solidarist' fraction, conforming to the norms and traditions of their group. In contrast, Danny constructs himself within what Reay identifies as an 'individualist' fraction: '*whatever I did educationally I did it on my own*'. However, Reay's two working-class 'factions' are by no means absolute or exclusive. For example, Danny's activity as a trade's union representative would also presuppose a more solidarity outlook. Yet one of his most definite statements was very individualistic: '*I'm moving.. moving away, yeah.. I'm kind of just making my own decision, what I want to do, who I want to be with at any particular time, but I don't,.. I feel that I don't have to just stay with the same people all the time*'.

Resisting class background was also central in Frank's account. Frank (50-54, White European) described his family as subsistence farmers in mainland Europe. As the only one of

his siblings to have studied beyond compulsory school, they had considered him '*seriously weird*'; that further education '*was great but was something that other people did*'. Frank said that his family's resistance to further education diminished when he became a high-earning engineer. Now doing a second undergraduate degree, he said that his family remained positive about his studying. Nevertheless, he found it '*amazing*' that his brother and sister still considered themselves not clever enough to study. Lucey (2010) addresses this question of why some individuals take up higher education, while others in the same family do not. She compares two sisters who live on a council estate; one of whom had focused on her social life while the other on educational goals. Lucey says that, while the differences between the sisters could be understood in terms such as 'conformity' and 'resistance', this would not fully explain their choices. In this thesis, a resistance to '*age*' is added to what Lucey termed as a '*suffusion of the social, cultural and political with the affective and the personal*' (Ibid: 460). Both Danny and Frank explained that their gradual separation from their working-class routes was made easier by their age-maturity. In this way, older age was performed as a state of greater independence and individuality which could enable a transition across social-class barriers.

The experience of the Black African men in the study contrasted with that of men from the other ethnic groups. Rather than him being unusual for studying, Peter (50-54, Black African) said that he was unusual in his family for *not* studying. He said that he had avoided his family's questions about his education but they waited for him to '*go back to school*', knowing that he would eventually. This would reflect the research by Connor, et al. (2004) which found that Black African families are more influential than the families of most other ethnic groups in making decisions about higher education. It also shows Peter performing age differently from Danny and Frank. Instead of demonstrating maturity through separation from his family's values, Peter performed his older age by showing that he had eventually grown up enough to take care of his education.

Most of the women did not talk much about their early life and, as such, social class did not figure in most of their accounts either. Yet there were indications that class was present, to use Skeggs' (1997:74) words, as 'the omnipresent underpinning which informed and circumscribed their ability *to be*' (original emphasis). Skeggs discovered women in her research making 'enormous efforts to distance themselves from the label of working-class, their class position' by constructing themselves as 'a caring / respectable / responsible personality' (Ibid: 74). Building on Tett's (2000) study of working-class entrants to higher education, the women participants tended to prioritise gender, and the men class to explain the constraints in their life. The next section looks at some examples of when participants told people about their university study.

## **6.2 Telling friends or compartmentalising university and 'external' life**

As previously discussed, the participants' enrolment at university had often challenged normative behaviours for their social class as well as for their age group. The disruption of these norms put pressure on relationships with friends. For example, Frank, who had lived for many years in the UK, noticed that the first response of nearly everyone in his current circle was: '*Why do you want to study at your age?*'. Frank observed that it was reasonable to be asked why he was studying, but the word '*age*' was underlined in their questions. Frank said that people with less education were more critical of him studying. He speculated that friends might fear that they would lose him to his course, though Frank was sure that this would not happen. Frank summarised his friends' expectation for him was to behave '*shy or retired*'. The two senses of the word 'retired' equated here display normative constructs of the older person as distanced from locations of activity. This 'role' of the older person is identified by Hazan (1994:4) who says that: 'The aged's task in life is to fill vacant time with hobbies and other activities that others deem fit for them'. Just as Frank thought that he was considered '*seriously weird*', others also indicated that friends doubted their sanity. For example, Jack

said that his going to university was viewed as: '*Jack's doing something crazy again*'. As such, Jack's 'crazy' idea of going to university was tolerated, but trivialised.

Derek (50-54, White British) had led a physically active life before a degenerative disease had taken hold and, perhaps, the option of concealing what he did from his friends was less available to him. Derek found that his friends could not understand why he was studying. He said that the more negative attitudes were expressed by '*less educated*' people who thought education was just a '*way of getting a job*' and, as such, he positions them with limited vision and of a lower class. Derek had noticed that, if he started talking, people in his pub sometimes walked away saying '*he's getting on his high horse again*'. The actions of Derek's friends may reflect what Keane (2011:453) describes as 'distancing to self-protect' or 'subservient distancing', involving withdrawal from a perceived threat to one's self-concept. Keane explored the social class-differentiated behaviours of access and traditional-entry students with undergraduate students in an Irish university. She noted that the access students, most of whom were working-class, tended to separate their university and external lives, while the traditional students did not perceive any need to so compartmentalise.

Derek said that friends thought that, because he was at university, he was suddenly '*the fountain of all knowledge*' and they kept asking him questions outside of his subject area including on general knowledge and medicine. Derek expressed amusement that his friends appeared unaware of the boundaries of specific disciplines but also indicated that their getting up and walking away had disturbed him. Although Derek's friends seemed to have positioned him as 'the fountain of all knowledge', they then asserted their masculine physiology by walking away, something that Derek physically could not do.

The men in this study would have been of a similar age on leaving school to Willis' (1977) 'lads' who, certain in their working-class heritage, united in rejecting the middle-class culture

represented by school. Danny (white, British 50-54) said that his friend from childhood was *'sort of a bit... bemused'* by him studying *'at his age'* and just listened to him *'rabble on'*. By joining middle-class culture, amplified by higher-education, Derek and Danny had contested the norms for British white working-class men. Savage (2000) argues that: 'The strength of working-class culture in Britain lay in large part in the way it appropriated a particular understanding of the autonomous, male, individual'. Savage disputes what he sees as the view of both Beck and Giddens: that the 'rise of individualization' corresponds to a decline in class cultures, arguing that it is better understood 'as the shift from working class to middle-class modes of individualization' (Savage 2000:xi). Derek's separation from his companions was not only due to his physical condition but also because of perceived changes to his social class. Gilroy (2002: xxx) also disputes the idea that individualism is purely middle-class: 'Hostility towards complexity, education, patience and the life of the mind are fundamental but often overlooked parts of the appeal of hyper-individualistic neo-liberal thinking'.

Some participants did not tell people that they were students. For example, Nigel (50-54, Black Caribbean) did not make his student status *'publicly known'*. Nigel claimed to have *'not really been in a situation where anybody [could] comment'* but that *'if someone were to ask what he did'*, he would confidently tell them: *"I'm a student mate. I'm poor. I don't work"*. Nigel said that it would be easier to tell somebody if they had been to university but offering this information to *his* friends without being asked would sound: *'as if you perhaps know more than your peer group'*. Nigel's perspective is reminiscent of 'Shaun', in the Reay (2002:230) study who needed 'to get away from the other boys for a little while, all of us are dragging each other down'. Nigel said that it was perhaps because he was *'going down a new path'* that some of his relationships may have suffered. Not only was going to university atypical for his age, but Nigel was also disrupting the working-class and masculinist norms for his peer group.

In contrast, several women participants spoke of friends expressing positive reactions. For example, Cathy's friends were *'in awe of it'*. Joan (white, British 60-64) said that: *'the myth has been dispelled that learning is for the young'* and some of her friends were now considering going to university. Yet, despite such indications of support, the main message from the women students, as well as the men, was that at least some of their associates considered them strange. Some women perceived that their friends' disapproval was concealed in expressions of concern. For example, Sharon remembered friends saying things such as: *'Oh no, why? It's going to be difficult,..... oh are you sure?'* However, Sharon said that she resisted being influenced by *'those who were quite negative'*, and was determined to finish her course. There seemed to be hints of a mocking tone in the way Evelyn's friends told her that she was *'the clever one'*. Evelyn had not expected their reaction, although agreed with them that she was *'well read'* and *'despite having a disability'* could communicate well.

Some accounts suggested discourses of what Schuetze (2008:377) refers to as the 'mixed state-market model' of Lifelong Learning which is available to 'all who wish, and are able, to participate'. For example, Angela (55-59, Irish) remembered *'certain people'* of her age were jealous but were unable to learn *'the habit of studying'*. As Angela continued with her course, she received comments such as *'oh you're still at it. You're going to be a professor soon'*. Angela accepted such comments as jovial, but they also annoyed her. She distanced herself from those who moaned: *'what am I going to do? My children have left'* but who suggested that she should retire. Angela argued: *'What else would I do if I wasn't doing this?.....Loads of people that I know are retiring for god's sake. Why would I retire?'*. Here Angela clearly demonstrates her resistance to performing old age as her associates would have her do. At the same time, she reiterates the discourse of Active Ageing, where retirement is not inevitable. As such, Angela and other participants are caught between two powerful discourses as to how *age* should be performed. As Rose (1999:104) describes it, the individual 'is not to be emancipated *from* work, perceived as merely a task or a means to an end, but to be fulfilled in

work'. Rose (1999:103) speaks of the worker as 'an individual in search of meaning, a sense of personal achievement'. Just as Rose presents work as 'an activity through which we produce, discover, and experience our selves' (Ibid: 104), so too is education sometimes thus presented.

Separation from old friends was not a one way process. Sometimes the participants moved away from their friends and sometimes their friends gradually rejected them. Elizabeth (60-64 Black Caribbean) said that initially her old friends accepted her studying, but became intolerant of her failing to meet them regularly. She had noticed that *'they think that you think that you are better than them'* but found it impossible to explain that her course was *'a lot more important than anything else in your life'*. Such dilemmas experienced by Elizabeth and others echo what Lucey, et al (2003:286) identify as *'the difficulties of negotiating the emotions, negative as well as positive, that are aroused when aspiration and success mean becoming and being profoundly different to your family and peer group'*. Since the participants in this study were considerably older than most undergraduate students, they did not always find peers in their new life at university.

Cynthia (Black Caribbean 70-75) also curtailed her social activities, but for different reasons to those of Elizabeth. Cynthia said that she had decided not tell anyone that she was at university, but that her husband told everyone. This resulted in Cynthia receiving more than veiled sarcasm from some people and others who proclaimed that she was *'too old to go to university'*. Cynthia decided not to bother with *'those type'* anymore or, if obliged to meet them, she would carefully avoid conversations about education. Although she did continue to see most other friends occasionally, she estimated that her social activities had reduced by *'about 75%'* due to lack of time. Cynthia's reluctance to make her university identity public is consistent with the responses of some of the students in O'Shea's (2011:70) study, for whom concealment relates to *'feeling like an imposter, an illegal entrant in a prohibited space'*.

Interestingly Nigel, who was from the same Caribbean island, was the only other participant who had concealed his university study. This may be a coincidence but indicates a need for more research with older students from this background. The next section looks at participants' attempts to break away from roles that their partners had come to expect. Often expressed as rejection of gendered roles, there were also indications of a rejection of class-based roles.

### 6.3 Partners

Over half the participants spoke about the effect their studying had on intimate partner relationships. Valerie (white British, 50-54) and Harriot (white European 45-49) both claimed to have amicable arrangements with partners although, as seen below in Section 6.4, Valerie's 'amicable' relationship was at considerable cost to herself. Harriot, who studied along with her (female) partner, was the only participant who said that studying together had actually strengthened a partnership. Two other women (Sara, white British 55-59 and Cynthia, black Caribbean 70-75) were carers for their respective partners and, although they expressed no resentment, they each said that it depleted their energy for study. Peter (black African 50-54) said that he and his partner had agreed largely amicable arrangements concerning work and childcare. The reactions of participants' partners varied but, apart from those mentioned above, university was a source of conflict in all the other partnerships discussed.

Several women related their experience of male partners to the lack of older men on their courses. May (Chinese 55-59) thought that fewer men went to university because '*women are adaptable to changes*' but men:

*they're so set, resent that you make them change in any way. That they actually don't accept that the world is changing in any way. As men grow older they become more stubborn. I'm just very interested to see how many of them take it on as a serious study and not as a leisure interest.*

Irene (white, 55-59), in the same focus group, agreed adding that *'men are so convinced they know it all anyway'*. Irene talked about male partners who had decided that they had finished learning, including someone she had separated from for this very reason. May said that her husband had tried to persuade her to sell the business, downsize and enjoy retirement. She said that she had supported her husband most of her adult life and he expected her to continue this on retirement, but she refused to do so at the expense of her own interests. Such power shifts in couple relationships was identified by Barnes and Parry (2004:230) who argue that problems can occur following retirement 'particularly if couples adopted conflicting gendered identities or if men adhered to traditionally gendered expectations about employment'.

May's and Irene's accounts display normative views about older peoples' inability to change, but only in relation to men. May speculated that it seemed to be a *'female thing to come back to college'*, and articulated the discourse of the 'flexible' older female. However, as indicated by Leathwood and Read (2009: 11), 'assertions of gender differences in types of brain is [ ] indicative of, and fuelling, a new gender essentialism'. Caution is needed in reiterating an essentialised version of women as flexible and more willing to learn, for this discourse also places them as more likely than men to gain success through hard work rather than natural ability. As shown by Ainsworth (2002), public policy initially viewed older women in low paid, insecure employment as worthy of attention but, when they became portrayed as 'flexible', public policy framed them as more advantaged and all attention turned towards unemployed older men. Yet, these women accepted low wages and poor employment conditions from necessity, rather than any innate 'flexibility'.

Rather than aiming for independence, as with May, Lavinia (50-54, black African) said that she wanted to feel more part of the social circle where her husband and most of their friends were graduates. However, she said that her husband found the idea of her going university very strange and, realising that he might try to stop her, she secured her place at university

before discussing it with him further. Lavinia reported that, when her husband found out, he asked if she was trying to compete with him and she had tried to reassure him; saying that he was so intelligent that she could not compete and, as a graduate, her increased earnings would benefit them both. Lavinia said that her husband conceded telling her that going to university was her choice, but that she had *'signed for'* certain household chores when she married.

As with Foucault's (1986) definition of a *'heterotopia'*, university space is both open and closed; it may be generally accessible but entry is dependent on specific circumstances or requiring specific rites and permission. Not only was permission needed from the university, but Lavinia also needed agreement from her employer, who even asked if her family would support her. Lavinia gained entrance to university but the price was that she was doing a full-time job, studying at university, and then returning home late to perform the role she had *'signed for'*. So Lavinia was not in that heterotrophic space that she had imagined. She became exhausted and had difficulty keeping up with her coursework: *'every moment it's being accounted for in terms of work, in terms of housework, in terms of going to visit my son. So I would say I'm not experiencing any student life at all.'*

Lavinia described regular quarrels at home when she would remind her husband that she had supported him throughout his career. Lavinia, who described herself as *'strong headed'*, recalled asking him if he wanted her to leave university, and then openly defying him in refusing to do so. She explained that her husband then tried a more subtle approach; by asking his friend, an important businessman, to have a word with her. The *'family friend'* advised her that her husband loved her as she was and there was no need to go to university. However, Lavinia said that she recognised the source of this advice, so she just listened and thanked him for his help. Inwardly she was furious, hardly believing that this *'highly educated'* man was suggesting that she forget her education. She was also angry that her husband had given the impression that he brought in the entire household income; *'In England it is not like that.'*

Lavinia dramatised what she told her husband:

*'In your dream. (pointing finger) In your dream. I am contributing to this house, everything. (slowly drumming fist on table) You treating my equally? So how dare you?' 'If you are the one looking after the whole house, clothing me, everything, then you have this say, but this you don't have a say'.*

In an effort to establish herself as an independent agent, Lavinia referenced norms within her Nigerian Hausa community where marriages are often primarily financial arrangements. The husband has 'a say' in return for financial support. Adamu (2004:86) found that 'Despite the pressures on wives to be subservient to their husbands, Hausa women, in their capacity as agents, have devised strategies to negotiate, challenge and resist their subordination'. Lavinia explained that arguments between herself and her husband almost led to their separation but that she was determined not to be fazed by her husband's threats to leave her telling him:

*"'Right if you are ready to leave, you can leave me I don't bloody care"... Literally:- "tell people that you left me because I went to University, don't say I am bad because I'm not bad. We've been married now for 19 years now, don't tell me I am bad"'.*

Here again Lavinia resists her husband, using his tactics against him and drawing on community norms to support her case. However, Lavinia felt obliged to make some concessions to avoid being blamed for not performing her gender-based duties. Since her husband: *'gets so grumpy that his food is not on the table anymore'*, she prepared the food in advance, so he just had to heat it. She also said that, when she was at home, she continued to do whatever he wanted because: *'A wife is a wife, you still have to do all these little things'*. Lavinia's account reflects Adamu's (2004:86) discussion of marital relationships where 'power relationships between wife and husband in Hausa society is the recognition that the sources and exercise of power and resistance are located and played within the context of the "rules of the game" that define the marital contract'. Even with Lavinia doing what she saw as her wifely duties, there were still interruptions when she tried to study at home which Lavinia described as follows:

*"'Oh, I'm hungry" (Lavinia imitated a sad, worried expression). You know sometimes*

*when you are in the middle of something, the things are beginning to sink in, and he says "Oh, I'm.. I'm hungry, can you just come and make this food for me". I can't believe what I'm doing. You know so many distractions'.*

According to Lavinia, her husband also questioned why she needed to study at the university library and could not understand that she needed to read without interruption. Although Lavinia says determinately *'I still don't care. I will still go ahead and do it'*, she also acknowledged that she constantly looks for what he is *'going to say now'*. She comforts herself with *'Anything good, you don't get it easily'* to enable her to ignore the distractions and decide to *'grow a very extra thick skin on [her] body'*.

Some of the men also reported relationship tensions. Samuel (45-49, Black African) said that his wife was initially supportive but: *'as the course went by ..... maybe she will see somebody who was changing, in terms of my views and when we had discussions and I challenge things more than I used to, and it brought out.. sort of certain arguments'*. He also admitted that he probably did less in the house. Samuel said that his wife felt that he was moving on without her: *'she's.. I mean we're Christians, and I think she was feeling maybe I was losing sight of my Christianity'*. He explained this as follows:

*'the Church, was propagating this issue of 'prosperity', all the preaching was all about prosperity, and then in this prosperity you know we are all told to come across as if we are prospering.....then people were putting themselves under extreme pressure financially, they've got a big house, and even when I was buying one, I argued this process.'*

Samuel said that he told his wife: *'I'm not comfortable with this, can we really afford this? but she insisted "'Oh no! We must buy it. It must be this big four bedroom house"'*. He said that going to university had changed his priorities, particularly regarding material possessions and what other people thought of him; that his *'spirit was freed'* from these bonds. Samuel expresses his ability to develop as an individual but positions his wife as unable to change due to her material attachments. This reflects Walkerdine's (2003) study showing women being

criticized as a conservative force due to their need for material goods. Like Lavinia, Samuel was prepared to risk his marriage for his new self. He also challenged the gendered role whereby he was judged by the level of material wealth which he could provide. Unlike Lavinia, he was ready to sacrifice his place in his community.

Going to university implies a high level of commitment to personal study but women, in particular, are not expected to have the focus on their own interests that this entails. For some participants, going to university meant ceasing to carry out a role that they had performed for years. This sometimes resulted in partnership break-ups and nearly all participants indicated some level of withdrawal from friends or family. Lucey, et al (2003:297) found that, for young working-class women in higher education, there were 'no structural reasons why they should succeed and therefore they have to rely on their own inner resources'. However, their success in higher education became 'intertwined with the pain of separation and therefore loss and shift of identity' as they moved away from their roots (Ibid: 297). Despite being much older, participants in this study also had to rely on their own inner resources because, for most, there was no one else there to support them. In this way, being an older student was very similar to the experience of much younger non-traditional students. In addition some, such as Lavinia, told of having to contend with opposition from intimate partners who wanted them to remain in their 'adult' caring role and to continue to perform what were considered age-appropriate activities. Separation also featured strongly in participants' accounts. Sometimes there was a clear point of physical separation. More often, there was no particular point in time marking the shift away from previous associates. It tended to be expressed more as a gradual disillusion with previous situations as new possibilities began to appear when participants adopted the identity of a university student and realised a greater confidence in their ability. The next section looks at participants' reports of some surprising developments in their relationships with children and young people.

## 6.4 Children

Participants were not asked if they had children but seventeen of them chose to refer to their children, frequently as the most supportive and accepting family members. While nearly all of the participants' parents had not been to university, some had followed their *children* into higher education. Several participants emphasised how their relationships with children had developed in ways they had not previously imagined possible. Rather than damaging relationships with children, there was evidence that being a student had created new bonds and understandings between themselves and young adults. Three women and one man actually attended university during the same time as their children and all reported having received encouragement and support from their children. Joan (white, British 60-64) said that her children, who were in their 20s, had become more independent and some participants even received positive reactions from their children's friends. For example, Angela said: *'My children's friends think it's great. And they ask about what's the essay about. All sorts of things really that kids would probably talk to each other about'*. She explained that, because these young people were having a similar experience to her, it gave common ground for discussion.

There was a kind of role reversal in some relationships with the children becoming instructors. Pam (60-64, White British) showed her coursework to her (adult) son and received feedback from him, though it did not happen the other way around. Pam said:

*'it's hard to separate out how the relationship has changed in that it would have changed anyway with them growing up and becoming more independent and so on..... I think they can see as well that I'm just much more relaxed because I'm not doing work that ... I'd sort of grown out of I think, or that became very stressful'*.

Role reversal also sometimes happened with younger children. For example, Evelyn described her seven year old granddaughter helping her to use computers. Nigel said that going to university had strengthened the bond he had with his 8 year old daughter because

they were: *'both at school and both learning'*. His daughter would say to him *'How's school?'*, as a parent might say to a child. Nigel describes it as follows:

*'going to school ... it's put me on a really nice level with her, because she laughs when I say "I'm going to go to school today" when I do see her, because we now call university 'School' and even now she has a little grin on her face when she says "How's school today?"'*

Peter (black African 50-54) said that he sometimes had to leave his lectures early in order to rush home to collect his children from school. He worked at night and, when his wife came home, Peter would go to work returning in the morning to dress the children for school. Sebastian (black African 60-55), who told a similar story, hoped that he was setting a good example to his children. He said: *'they would look up to those with education, because we all know that people's education is respected'*. These experiences reflect other studies of women students with young children (see, for example, Reay 2003). However, there was indication that fathers at university can be viewed differently from mothers. For example, Sebastian said that the lecturer knew that he sometimes brought his child to university when he was attending lectures, even though this was against university policy. Du Plessis (2010) suggests that men with children receive preferential treatment. Discussing his personal experience of working in academia, trying to augment his career while raising children, Du Plessis suggests that the level of understanding offered to him related to the male dominance of the university administration. His view is that *'a middle-age single dad with two young children tends to elicit more sympathy than single mothers'* (Ibid:145).

Most participants with children said that an investment in their own education would benefit their children. This builds on the Reay, et al (2002) study where mature further education students perceived their own education as providing their children with a good role model. In contrast to the other participants in this study and also in the Reay, et al (2002) study, Valerie (50-54 White British) had perceived it unfair for her to go to university when her children

were young. Valerie argued that, since her husband who earned most of the household income regularly came home late, she would have had to *'be very selfish to complete a degree'*. Yet, Valerie had left school without qualifications and had always felt that she had *'missed out'* on developing a career. However, she even waited until after her children had graduated:

*'I didn't want to steal my children's' thunder, because they were about to go to University so I wanted to sort of get that out of the way before.. I didn't want to be.....competing with them, because I just didn't want to do that. And as it turned out, unfortunately, because I got a first..... none of them got firsts so I felt that I did sort of steal.. I didn't mean to, but I sort of did steal their thunder'.*

Here is an example of Foucault's (1998) description of the figure commonly known as a 'housewife': one who 'inhabited the outer edge of the "world," in which she always had to appear as a value, and of the family, where she was assigned a new destiny charged with conjugal and parental obligations' (Ibid: 121). As in Foucault's description, Valerie was isolated from public life through childcare and she presented her life as made of value through her obligations to her children. Highlighting how value placed on individuals corresponds to their gender, Butler (2004:17) asks 'who counts as the human' and 'whose lives count as lives'? Butler (2004:2) argues that 'sometimes the very norms that confer "humanness" on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of achieving that status'. Just as Butler asks 'If I am of a certain gender, will I still be regarded as part of the human?', so too can it be asked: If I am of a certain age, will this affect my rights, my inclusion in society or the likelihood of being taken seriously? Controversially, Butler suggests that individuals can be complicit in their devalued status. Valerie's quarter century of self-sacrifice, rewarded through the triumph of perfect motherhood, is spoiled by her achieving better results than her children. Valerie says she *'didn't mean to'* do it, seemingly denying her achievement, but how can one not *mean* to achieve a first class degree? The weak (feminine)

could never be so successful but the feminine can still be *performed* through doing something one did not mean to do.

Wainwright and Marandet (2010: 449), whose study concerned parents in higher education, say that 'higher education is perceived to reverberate within the home, promoting a culture of learning among, and encouraging the educational aspirations of, children'. They conclude that the Widening Participation agenda has given little attention to how parents' learning impacts on their children. The several examples of children supporting their parents at university show higher education to *reverberate* within the home, and that it could reverberate from child to adult, as well as the other way round. Although older friends and family members sometimes challenged the participants' decision to study, this was not reported in relation to children and young people known to the participants outside of university.

This study supports Gouthro's (2005) view that the 'homeplace' is a domain of particular importance to women, and is a key element influencing women's learning experiences. The home space was also found in this study to be significant in participants' identity. 'Home' is an important learning place and can be particularly significant for older people as they are more likely to have established their own space. As such, university space extends beyond physical boundaries into the 'home', contributing to or distracting from a student identity. The high level of responsibility undertaken by many older people could distract from their student identity. For example, Sirimavo (70-75, Asian) describes her responsibilities as follows:

*'Oh my friends they say "what amazing energy"[] .. I do carry on with the other things, looking after families, my husband, my son. Then I also go out for other activities in the community ..... So they kind of know that you are a busy person and not sit in one place. But my back hurts so'.*

Sirimovo's description of her life showed her performing various gendered roles expected of older women. As Ingrisch (1995) shows, women over the age of 60 are expected by society to still perform, on a voluntary basis, many of the 'feminine' roles expected of much younger

women. Drawing on classical feminist literature, Ingrisch (1995) lists such roles as typically including the 'good mother' and the 'good grandmother' as well as the 'good daughter' (caring for sick or frail elderly people such as parents and parents-in-law). Additionally, the older woman may perform the role of the 'good wife' and may also be expected to care for her (often older) husband. Outside the home, she may be the 'hard worker' and 'especially, the "wise older woman"' who undertakes voluntary work (Ibid: 55). To persevere with a full time degree course in such circumstances could be seen as a courageous act as discussed in the following section.

## 6.5 'Bravery' and Changing Identity

The concept of 'being brave' was referenced in various ways throughout the field study. For example, Lavinia said she had to *'put a brave face at home'*. Several participants mentioned that friends had described them as *'brave'*. References to 'bravery' also had negative connotations, such as being foolhardy enough to risk reputation. For example, Pam's friends said that she was *'very courageous'* to leave her area of expertise for one where failure was possible, that it was brave to: *'just kind of stop doing something where you have expertise, you've got a reputation, you know you've got a certain identity and stuff'*. This use of 'brave' was very pronounced in Derek's description of how his friends reacted to his study, such as commenting that he must be very *'brave'* to go to university as he could *'hardly walk'*.

In discussing mature student bravery, Tubbs (2005:239) draws on the philosophers Rousseau and Kant to argue that the teacher's role is to nurture the student to become 'brave enough to take responsibility'. He says that:

Many mature students, who have left school years before with no qualifications, return bravely to higher education years, finally trying to overcome the fear that has been instilled into them regarding learning and its ever-present shadow—failure (Tubbs 2005:247).

However, not all participants in this study were school failures; most of them had held considerable responsibility in their lives, including successful careers, and two already held a higher degree.

Dizard (2010:407) argues that it is the teacher who must be 'brave enough [ ..] to learn anew', in order to relate to their students' struggles. Furthermore, Wright, et al. (2007:145) found that Black women academics may have to be particularly brave as they were more likely to have a tenuous position, which emphasised their sense of not belonging and feelings of being excessively scrutinized and marginalized in British universities. Mirza (2003) uses the phrase 'Some of Us are Brave' in her chapter title to argue that Black women are relegated to a 'third space' where the subject is male in racial discourse, white in gendered discourse and race has no place at all in class discourse. The accounts of the Black women students indicate a high level of sacrifice; including separations, financial costs and lack of time.

Bravery implies risk and a particular risk for participants in this study related to identity. The time which participants invested in their courses meant that friendships and life partnerships were sometimes threatened. A particular risk for older people would be to have to admit defeat to everyone who suggested that they were too old. Drawing on Beck's thesis of individualisation, Reay (2003) highlights the risks taken by mature, working-class women attending a further education course. While the participants in this research were older than those in Reay's (2003) study, such risks are also evident in accounts such as that of Lavinia. Some of the men in the study were able to compartmentalise their life by not telling people that they were at university, and thus reduce the risk of public embarrassment if their venture into higher education failed. Others, such as Cynthia, tried to compartmentalise but their family ensured a public acknowledgement of their activity. The men frequently referred to their early life relationships whereas the women tended to discuss more recent or current relationships. Reay, et al. (2009b) reported that their participants retained 'a commitment and

sense of loyalty to family and home background' (Ibid:1116). However, perhaps because they were much older than those in the Reay, et al. study, participants in this study tended to indicate a desire to separate themselves from, at least some of, their background.

## **Chapter summary**

Whereas most of the participants were able to find their space within the post-92 university, their friends/family did not always associate with this experience and sometimes viewed university life as remote, and unrelated to the needs of older people. There was a sense from some participants that those on the 'outside' of university held views that were in conflict with their own experience and feelings of belonging within the university. This sometimes led participants to review their early life, or their family's attitudes towards education.

Some participants made the decision themselves not to take people with them to this new space. Some were confronted with signs of jealousy or fear from their friends or partners and tried to reassure them. Others were themselves rejected by their associates. The older students' challenge to their social group norms provoked difficult emotions and, in some cases, they moved away from the site of such conflict. Subtle gender differences existed in participants' reports of how they communicated their going to university to their friends. The women generally constructed themselves as having moved to a higher stage, while most of the men either ignored the reactions of their friends, or alternatively chose not to consult them at all, thereby avoiding any negative criticism. Apart from one exception, the men tended to play down their student status and were mostly keen to avoid envy or appearing to know more than their peer group. This can be seen in Nigel's prepared response to someone who might ask him what he did: *'I'm a student mate. I'm poor. I don't work'*; by presenting himself of lower status than an employee, he could avoid confrontation.

Some of the strongest feelings expressed by participants concerned their interactions with those outside of the 'privileged space' of the university. Despite their differences from each other, all the participants had been challenged as to why they were at university. Such challenges tended to be greater for those whose friends had not been to university. Even so, being married to someone who was a graduate did not relieve Lavinia from constantly having to justify why she was studying. In challenging the role that their family and peers were accustomed to seeing them perform, participants found that family and friends reminded them of obligations. Some managed to re-negotiate their role and obligations. Frequently, these priori roles were gendered and held implications for others' roles. More often women participants, in particular, found themselves having to choose between using their scarce time and energy to reassure friends / family or to cut off specific associations entirely. Gendered roles were sometimes challenged, as were friendships and intimate partnerships. Relationships with young adults and children were often re-evaluated and developed. University as a 'protected space' (Quinn 2003a:250), was more often experienced as an escape from a restrictive identity, rather than from tangible threat. It was also an escape from the gaze of those who were critical of their new direction. As such, university was a place where students over 50 years could focus on themselves in a way that was not always possible with the demands of everyday life.

It emerged that relationships with family and friends, past and present, impinged deeply on the student experience. Participants were seen to be taking huge risks with, for example, their close relationships, their professional and social reputations as well as their own sense of self. Performing a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory roles, they were found to be resisting adversity, including criticism from their associates. Some were also challenging a personal history where higher education was regarded as being for 'other' people.

In the next, final, chapter I draw together the findings to look at the implications for teaching undergraduate students and teaching older students in particular, for universities and for government policy. I also consider some possibilities for future research to look at other aspects of older people engaged in undergraduate study.

## Chapter 7 Summary and Conclusions

This thesis has investigated the experiences of higher education reported by a particular group of mature students who, due to their age, were situated very differently from much younger mature students. As highlighted in Chapter 1, even though older students can be two generations older than younger mature students, the extant academic literature tends not to differentiate between the age groups of mature students and this work is an endeavour to address this gap. The thesis arose from my professional practice as a lecturer of, mainly, mature students. My intention was to draw attention to a largely overlooked group of undergraduate students; those over the age of 50. The study aimed to consider how social constructions of older people, and of undergraduate students, influenced the participants' subjective experience of higher education. Particularly, I sought to explore how older people constructed age and differentiated themselves from those younger - attending to the interactions between older age and gender. In pursuing these aims, I hope to contribute to the emerging theorising on age as it intersects with other identities such as gender, ethnicity and social class.

Conducted with the backdrop of discourses of 'successful' or 'active' ageing, the study looked at participants' age-associations and identity-conceptions. A methodological and analytical focus on gender enabled the exploration of the structurally different positioning of older women and men in the context of undergraduate study. Open-ended interview - based research was conducted with twenty-one students and six recent graduates to explore their subjective experiences of higher education. All of these participants were aged over forty and twenty of the twenty-seven were aged over fifty. There were eighteen women, nine men and nearly two thirds were from a minority ethnic group.

The overarching contribution which this study makes is to uncover how older students respond to ageist processes in higher education with both resistance and complicity. In doing this I hope to bring new insights concerning undergraduate study and make a contribution to the literature on mature students in higher education. In the rest of this chapter I reflect on the methodology and the findings. The empirical findings are summarised under the key themes of meeting challenges, experience, identity and power (7.1-7.4). This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical implications in Section 7.5. Implications for practice and further research are suggested in Section 7.6.

## **7.1 Meeting the Challenges of being an Older Undergraduate Student**

The study found that the participants' apprehension when first enrolling at university was augmented by internalised ageism; they were concerned that being older would mean that they would be slower and unable to keep up with other students. Added to this there were overt challenges from friends and family as to an older person's place as a student. Yet, participants illustrated their resourcefulness in adapting to the university norms and resilience in tolerating situations with which they were uncomfortable. They described various tactics they had used to fit in, including acting younger when with young students or adopting the role of mentor.

Although all participants emphasized how seriously they took their study, several women, for example Pam, reported that lecturers assumed that they were at university as a kind of hobby or to fill time. Understandably, such ageist and gendered assumptions were strongly resisted by the women concerned. Significantly, the assumption that older people are simply interested in leisure (Hazan 1994:4) was not reported to have been applied to any of the men in the study even though some participants resisted any idea of having a particular purpose for

study, (for example Danny) and some said that they had not chosen their course. Here is an indication that the bias against women's academic work still exists. Yet, like most of the women, all but one of the men reported that they had been challenged by friends or family about studying so late in life.

The large proportion of people with disabilities in this study questions previous findings (Riddell et al. 2005) that people with disabilities are less likely to enter higher education after the age of 25, although of course the numbers here are small. Several participants attributed their sense of acceptance by the university to the diversity of the student population in their institution, (a post-92 university with a very diverse student population) where 'being different' seemed to be admissible. However, the participants may have had a very different experience had they attended a Russell group university, where the majority conform to the 'traditional' student model, embodied as young, white and middle class.

## **7.2 Experience and knowledge**

Concerns about which, and whose, knowledge is recognised and valued were highlighted in the associations participants made between maturity, experience and knowledge. The 'experience' of the older students was closely linked to aspects of 'knowledge'. Different perceptions as to the basis of legitimate knowledge were problematic, not just for older students, but also for others with whom they were in contact. As discussed further in Chapter 6 and in Section 7.3, several participants faced challenges from friends and family as to their newly acquired knowledge. Within the university itself, some women also reported what they perceived as a kind of censorships of their views. Other women said that they refrained from sharing their experience in lectures, thinking that the lecturer would not welcome them doing

so. None of the men reported this, perhaps because they felt that their contributions in class were welcome.

Perceptions of older age did advantage some older students. For example, some participants were mistaken as a lecturer by students of all ethnicities, but it was very telling that this only happened to White participants. This illustrates the construction, and often reality, of the lecturer, being White, as well as being older. Feminist, and also Foucauldian, theory maintains that knowledge is socially situated; that elements of history and geography are drawn together to construct a hierarchy of knowledge. The hierarchy of knowledge is intrinsic to curriculum development and teaching of undergraduate courses. As Code (1991:68) says, 'authoritative epistemic status' is withheld for knowledge which 'grows out of experiences, out of the continual contact with the particularities of material, sensory objects - and is shaped by the subjectivity of its knowers: *women*'. Drawing on the work of Code and other feminist methodologists, the study suggests that the life experience of older people is a largely ignored resource and appears low on the hierarchies of knowledge which persist in the academy.

Most participants indicated that the university was unaware of their experience, let alone valued or used it. Some participants found that younger students expected them to be more knowledgeable; setting them up as experts in areas where they had no knowledge. The, perhaps too comfortable, role of mentor to younger students seemed to legitimise their place in the university for some older students. The mentors clearly felt that they performed a unique and central role in their cohort, that the younger students trusted them more than they did the lecturers, that they understood some of the social needs of younger students and were able to explain things more clearly than the lecturers. Connected with this mentoring role were two participant reports showing that younger students became involved in debating the conflicting sources of knowledge and who is seen as the intelligent academic subject. However, the mentoring of younger students was carried out unofficially, without the

approval or acknowledgment of the university. This reflects the way in which mentoring is more generally under-valued within academic institutions (see, for example, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee 2014:22) and, as Maguire (2008:475) notes, 'discourses of "nurture" and "care" tend to place women in teaching and pastoral roles'.

In earlier chapters I have discussed how education tends to be framed under very instrumental terms of employment and/or accreditation outcomes. This study notes how the experiences of older students challenge instrumentality in higher education. The study also highlights assumptions in the undergraduate curriculum concerning students' personal experience. Several expressed irritation at having to participate in 'employability skills' training and participants questioned why course time was allocated to skills they had acquired during years of employment. The obligation to participate in such classes was read by participants as an (inadvertent) negation of their ability and experience and some suggested that they knew more about employers' needs than did the university. Yet, despite their age and their criticism of the employability activities, a majority of participants expressed employment-related aims for their continued study. I am not able to ascertain if these aims were realised. It may also be that I was being provided with what participants thought was a legitimate and standard reason for doing a course.

Implicit beliefs about who the student is, and the 'ideal' student, can be seen in assumptions by the university about why participants were studying and also about the knowledge and capabilities that they possessed. Some participants said that, although they had considerable employment experience, they did need help with academic writing and that insufficient time was spent on this. This supports what Leathwood (2006:611) describes as 'the assumption that students are independent learners'. Perhaps, it is even easier to assume that older students will need less help, especially if they appear self-assured and competent in other aspects of the curriculum. At the same time, assumptions of memory failure and other frailties may

result in lower expectations from this group of students. Older students are seen in this thesis to comply with, and also to resist, neo-liberal ideals of the independent 'choice-making subject who is required to continually “invest” in their own up-skilling to compete in the flexible labour market' (Leathwood and Read 2009:97).

### **7.3 Identity conflicts for older people taking up undergraduate study**

The self-assurance that an older person may have within familiar groups can be disrupted when, perhaps for the first time in many years, they are faced with their experience being of little value. This was seen, for example, in Sara's account when her lifetime experience of working with young children was disregarded in favour of academic knowledge. The status of a mature person was also sometimes destabilised by participants referring to themselves as a child. Constructions of age, and of mature students, were sometimes found to be constraining mechanisms. As with gender performativity (Butler 1999), age as an identity categorisation is not fixed but was found to be a process enacted through culture. The dialogical construction of what it means to be older, was seen to exist through diametrically opposed discourses; the discourse of active and successful ageing contrasting with that of incapacity and dependency. Neoliberal influences contained in the figure of the independent, self-motivating and enterprising student, conflicted with assumptions that study for older people was a casual leisure pursuit, or otherwise futile as they were too old to learn or to find employment.

An array of factors influenced how university was experienced by older students, which combined to fix subjects in place and contribute to the reproduction of educational inequality. These included gender, race, social background, previous study, the course being studied, mode of study and so on. Participants existed in what Lather (1991:21) refers to as 'a world of multiple causes and effects interacting in complex and non-linear ways, all of which are rooted in a limitless array of historical and cultural specificities'. The potentially fragile

existence of the student experience depended on specific interactions with particular lecturers and students.

Subjects were dialogically constituted by their age through encounters with staff and other students as well as in their relationships with friends and family outside of the university. The way in which one incident could have huge implications was evident in Samuel's description of the devastating effect it had on him when his friend left the course suddenly, nearly causing Samuel to leave too. Having stepped outside of the norm for their age-group, participants were particularly exposed at what Foucault (1980:39) argues is the 'capillary' existence of power: 'the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (Foucault 1980:39).

For Foucault, power exists in everyday relations between people and, drawing on discourses current in their society, individuals shape each other's behaviour. What Foucault called the 'capillaries of power' was evident in the effect that individual staff and other students had on how participants experienced university. For example, reflecting discourses of being too old to learn, one young student said to Carlos: 'You're very old. What are you doing here?', which he found discouraging. On the other hand, Irene was encouraged when a young student told her that he regarded her as the same age as him, thereby reflecting discourses which minimise the process of ageing, such as seen in the saying 'age is just a number'.

Key to the participants' identity positions was how they perceived that they were read by friends and family. A continued source of concern for some was the attempts of their friends and family to contain them in particular roles that they wished to break away from. When the experience of going to university could not be shared with friends and family, this sometimes led to separation from former alliances. Participants indicated that conflict between

themselves and others was the result of subtle changes in their behaviour and attitudes. Sometimes conflict was also the result of the older student being perceived, or perceiving themselves to have become more middle-class.

All but one of the participants were the first in their family to go to university, though several had followed their children to university. Due to the significant impact of Widening Participation policy in the early years of this century, some young working-class people became the first in their family to go to university. This study found several examples of older students having been inspired by their children going to university, rather than the more expected other way round. Even though the academy is now frequented by many outside of the White middle-class groups, certain identities are more easily accommodated into its still privileged space. This study adds to the existing literature on non-traditional students and on working-class identity. Some of the students identified as working-class and experienced the ambivalence, discussed by writers such as Reay (2003) and Leathwood (2006), of entering the space of higher education. The way in which participants 'chose' their university was often reminiscent of the Jackson and Marsden (1986:154) 1960s study of working-class pupils and their parents; they often started their course with only the vaguest information about what it contained, had not compared it to other courses and were unclear about fees and grants.

The existence of older undergraduate students problemizes the association of student with 'young' and lecturer with 'old'. It also sometimes proved problematic for the individuals concerned. Particularly significant was participants' references to being a child or like a child. This image challenges concepts of a linear progression where knowledge is cumulative. The ambivalence of age was highlighted when some of the youngest participants described themselves as 'elderly' and the oldest referred to themselves as a child. Movement of young to

old is a normative expectation but it seemed that older students were sometimes moving from old to young identities in presenting themselves as a child ready to learn anew.

## **7.4 Power**

The existence of older undergraduate students draws attention to ways in which knowledge is contested and formed, including how individuals influence each other in complex ways. In this study I illuminate ways in which the naturalised ideal of the 'traditional' student is reproduced, thus perpetuating the normality of the White, middle-class, young male student. Foucault's 'Technologies of the Self' has provided a way of observing how bodies attempt to self-regulate within particular discourses, for example, older students' engagement in conforming to an undergraduate curriculum. Age is an organising principle of education and the state. Yet, older (or younger) age can be either advantageous or disadvantageous depending on cultural and social contexts.

Looking at education and age through the lens of undergraduate study has shown that the ideal neoliberal learner is actually a compliant subject devoid of experience. The naturalisation of inexperience has been seen to be the norm into which all students must participate. Despite increased numbers of older students, the university can be seen to operate an under-recognised form of ageism, in that the young White, middle class, male student acts as the ideal, universal, normative subject, against which the Other must try to (but can never fully) measure up. The invisibility of age within discourses surrounding mature students is both classed and gendered, where the older student is assumed to be middle class and studying for leisure. The mature undergraduate student is also equated with lack (for example, of a traditional education, of the wherewithal to go to university following school or the knowledge of modern technology). Older students do not embody what Skeggs (2004:62) refers to as the 'subject of value'. Despite their enterprising efforts to improve their education, older undergraduate students will never fit with the traditional model where university

education is sequential to secondary school. Yet, the presence of older undergraduate students serves to disrupt the neoliberal value of investment in the future and is more about the present. When education is presented as 'the future', then older people's education is of lesser importance.

## 7.5 Theoretical Implications

This study provides an empirical application of Butler's (1999) theoretical ideas of gender *performativity*. Butler's theory has been used to review how older age is performed in the context of being a student, thereby contributing to understanding what it means to be older and also what it means to be a student. Butler suggested that *performativity* could be applied to attributes other than gender, though did not explore this in any depth. Just as 'gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constructed identities' (Butler 1999:6), so too is it impossible to separate 'age' from its many intersections. I argue that the performativity of age is exposed in the practice of undergraduate study; that the concept of the performative power of language has enabled the exploration of older undergraduate subjectivity. Discourse was seen to constitute age *performativity* within the undergraduate student forum, thus reflecting the power structures and norms of seniority in the academy.

The body as a site of resistance has been seen through the act of becoming a student in older age. Drawing on Foucault's (1986) concept of '*heterotopia*' I have shown how university is a phantasmal space for those outside of its boundaries. It promises fulfilment and recognition but certain aged, classed and gendered bodies are more likely to be regarded as fitting this space. As discussed earlier, being of a specific age-group can facilitate admission to, or exclusion from, particular groups. It can, for example, be advantageous to be seen as more 'mature' but young people are seen as the 'creators of fashion, style, commodities and cultural

practices' (France 2007:115). However, such discourses of the differences between age-groups are exploited in what France (2007:115) describes as the 'marketisation and commodification of youth'. Subtle reinforcements of age-differentiation encourage individuals to perform a particular age, though not necessarily their chronological age. As seen in the fashion industry, images of youth are used to sell commodities to those who are much older. Becoming an undergraduate student might be seen as a way of performing youth.

Foucault's concept of power has aided in exploring how gendered discourses of age are performed. Foucault's notion of the 'capillaries of power', where an individual could be both victim and agent within a system of domination was particularly relevant to discussion around ageing where the older person can represent authority and maturity but also insignificance. In exploring how age is performed in the context of the university it was seen that there were significant differences between subjects. The construction of women as nourishers was displayed by older women becoming mentors to younger students. This construction of women's role is also seen in Maguire's (2008) study where older women academics are positioned/position themselves in pastoral roles. This confirms Maguire's findings that age attaches to different bodies with unequal effects. It has been seen that age is classed, raced and gendered, and also that performances of age (re)produce student categories, such as that of the 'mature learner', or the 'slow' and 'needy' student.

## **7.6 Implications for policy and practice**

This study of older people in undergraduate study raises questions about which and whose knowledge is important. It has shown that 'the student experience' does not begin and end inside the university buildings. As was seen in Chapter 4, the student's 'choice' of course arises from a mesh of socio-economic factors which can date back years before the course was even conceived.

### Implications for lecturers

The context of the undergraduate course has provided insights into how the differences between generations are fuelled by ageist discourses. Some of the respondents' reports suggest that possible differences between age groups can be reconciled through shared activities, in this case, attendance on a similar course or at a similar institution. However, it was clear from participant accounts that students' prior experience is a largely ignored resource within undergraduate courses. This could also apply to all students, not just to older students. This study has problemised the purpose of undergraduate study, particularly where it is assumed to be a stepping stone to a career. For some students, their study is more about the present than the future or even about putting right the past.

### Implications for universities

This thesis finds that older students offer the academy particular opportunity in review and development of the curriculum which is currently not being realised. Although the subjects of this study did not conform to a regular pattern, something of the complex relationship the academy has with its students has been uncovered, physically realised in different ways by different students. It was found that the publicity and facilities of the university did not acknowledge older undergraduate students, including older disabled students. Such omissions may not just fail to meet the university's obligations, but are also a missed opportunity in terms of enhancing and promoting the success of its students.

### Implications for government policy

When I started this research there was a gap in policy with regards to the older undergraduate learner. This gap remains, added to which the numbers of older students enrolling has decreased following the increase of fees for undergraduate courses in England. There has also been a dramatic reduction in the numbers of part-time students who, as highlighted by

Maguire (2013), 'are significantly older on average' and this is likely to 'have a disproportionate effect on certain groups of students, with non-traditional learners likely to be most affected' (HEFCE 2013:21). However the participants' accounts demonstrate the value of higher education to older people and to their families and, consequently, the importance of continued financial support to this group of students.

## **7.7 Further research**

There is clearly room for further research to address concerns of age and gender in the academy, particularly as the demographic changes raise questions about preparation for later life and recent pension changes may be the beginning for further 'welfare reforms'. The influence that undergraduate students have on their family and friends is an under-explored effect of undergraduate study. This might involve studies with family and friends of those on higher education courses. Participant research where students diarise their experience / relationships at university and interactions regarding age would be a possible approach. As such, another area of potential study would concern what younger students think of those older than them. My thesis is ultimately about power relations and it is important to look more at the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, power relations between groups of students which impact upon the student experience.



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# Appendices

**Pre-interview form**

It would be helpful if you complete the following background details. This information will be only used for the purposes of the research and all data will be anonymised.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age** \_\_\_\_\_ 39-44; 45-49; 50-54; 55-59; 60-64; 65-69; 70+  
(please circle)

**Ethnicity:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Languages:** Mother Tongue: \_\_\_\_\_

Other Languages

**Do you have a disability?** Yes / No

If yes, please indicate the nature of this disability \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Degree / Qualification currently being studied**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Previous Education / Training:** (Post Secondary School)

Place/Country	From	To	Qualification (if relevant)	Subject

## **Consent Form**

**Title of study:** Experiences of Older Undergraduate Students in Higher Education

### **Background**

Many facilities for students are planned with younger people in mind. This research aims to highlight the particular needs and interests of older undergraduate students. National policy tends to contain very little regarding older undergraduates. The aim is to draw attention to the achievements of older undergraduates and to identify specific resources that would benefit those studying in middle or later life.

### **Procedures**

- The study will be conducted by Anne Massey under the supervision of Dr Uvanney Maylor and Prof. Carole Leathwood at London Metropolitan University.
- In this study you will be asked to discuss your experiences of Higher Education. This will take about one hour of your time. The discussion will be tape recorded to facilitate an accurate record of the interview / group discussion being made. You may ask for the tape recorder to be switched off at any time.
- The recorded data will be transcribed (by Anne Massey) and anonymised using pseudonyms.

### **Confidentiality**

- The information provided by you will remain confidential. Nobody except the researcher (Anne Massey) will have any access to it. Your name and the background details you provide will also not be disclosed at any time. Nobody except the researcher (Anne Massey) will have any access to it. However the (anonymous) data may be seen by examiners and may be published in a journal and elsewhere without giving your name or disclosing your identity.

### **Right of refusal to participate and withdrawal**

- You are free to choose to participate in the study. You may also withdraw any time from the study without giving a reason. You may also refuse to answer some or all the questions if you don't feel comfortable with those questions.

### **Authorisation**

I have read and understand this consent form, and I volunteer to participate in this research study. I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time and that the information provided by me will be held confidentially and securely, such that only the interviewer (Anne Massey) can trace this information back to me individually.

I, \_\_\_\_\_(NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Anne Massey with the supervision of Dr Uvanney Maylor and Prof Carole Leathwood, London Metropolitan University.

Signed:

Date:

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Male/ Female</b>	<b>Ethnicity / Place of Birth</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>Previous Education</b>	<b>Student or Recent Graduate</b>
Angela	55-59	Female	white other than uk	None referred to	/	Student
Cathy	50-54	Female	white British	None referred to	Nursing	Student
Cynthia	70+	Female	Caribbean	None referred to	/	Student
Ethel	40-44	Female	African	None referred to	Diploma	Student
Irene	55-59	Female	white British	None referred to	A' Level (1)	Student
Janet	40-44	Female	African	None referred to	Bus Admin	Student
Lavinia	50-54	Female	African	None referred to	Diploma	Student
Sara	55-59	Female	white British	None referred to	NNEB	Student
Sharon	40-44	Female	African	None referred to	Diploma	Student
May	55-59	Female	Chinese	None referred to	O' Levels	Student
Evelyn	50-54	Female	White	Deaf		Student
Joan	60-64	Female	British	Arthritis	OU Level 1	Student
Pam	55-59	Female	white British	Memory	PhD	Student
Sirimavo	70+	Female	Asian	Arthritis, Dyspraxia	Nursing	Student
Samuel	45-49	Male	Black African	None referred to	NVQ 3	Student
Danny	50-54	Male	white British	None referred to	/	Student
Jack	50-54	Male	White	None referred to	HEFC	Student
Carlos	50-54	Male	South American	None referred to	Diploma	Student
Nigel	50-54	Male	Caribbean	None referred to	Access	Student
Frank	50-54	Male	white other than uk	severe back & leg injury	BSc	Student
Derek	50-54	Male	white	severe lung disease	HND	Student
Elizabeth	60-64	Female	Black Caribbean	Dyslexia	Access	Graduate
Sebastian	60-64	Male	Black African	None referred to	A' Level (2)	Graduate
Peter	50-54	Male	Black African	None referred to	BA Business	Graduate
Valerie	50-54	Female	white British	None referred to	A' Level (2)	Graduate
Cassie	39-44	Female	Black African	None referred to	Access Course	Graduate
Harriot	45-49	Female	white other than uk	None referred to	MA	Graduate

**1. What was your image of 'a student' before you came to university?**

- had you previously imagined yourself as a student?
- Did you find it was actually different from what you imagined?

**2. How would you describe a typical student? How do you fit in with that?**

**3. How do your family and friends react to you becoming a student?**

**4. Do you feel that older students have a better or worse time at university than those who are say in their early twenties?**

- Probe on specifics –ask others to comment on individual views
- (ask for examples and discuss if there is difference of opinions)

do you think that it has made any difference being an older student?

**4. Which University facilities and resources did you find useful?**

- is there anything that your university could do better?

**5. (If not arising in previous discussions)**

**Do you think that a student's gender has any effect on their experience**

**Do you think that a student's ethnicity has any effect on their experience**

**6. Are there communities of older students?**

- advantages/disadvantages of such groups?

**7. Would you recommend to friends and/or family of a similar age to go to uni?**

**8. What would you say are the pleasures/benefits of being an older student?**

**-What would you say are the challenges/downsides of being an older student?**



## Are you an older mature undergraduate student?

would you welcome the opportunity to

- talk about your experience as an older undergraduate student?
- meet others in similar situations?
- contribute to research?

The research aims to identify what has either helped or hindered the progress of older students at university.

For more information please contact Anne Massey  
[a.massey@londonmet.ac.uk](mailto:a.massey@londonmet.ac.uk)

The following table provides some basic information about the participants in the research. The information includes age bracket, ethnicity and qualifications on entry to university as described by the participants. Year of study is also included and the subject/disciplinary area is stated for all but one of the participants. Participants were not asked to supply specific details of their background or living situation. However, in order to provide a fuller picture of the participants, also included is social class, family or marital status where participants volunteered this information as a significant part of their input.

### Profiles of Participants

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Angela, an Irish woman in her late 50s, was in her third year of a Design course. She did not mention any previous qualifications. Angela described herself as working class. She attended one of the all-woman focus groups</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carlos, who described himself as South American was in his early 50s. He was in the second year of a Business course. Carlos had a diploma when he entered university. He talked about being married with grown up children when he attended a focus group.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cassie, a Black African woman in her early 40s, was a recent graduate of a Social Science course. She entered the university on the basis of an access course. She attended an individual interview.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cathy, a white British woman in her early 50s, was in the third year of a Business Administration degree. She entered university on the basis of a professional level 3 qualification. Cathy talked about her grown-up children when she attended an all-woman focus group.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cynthia, a Black Caribbean woman in her 70s did not give details of her subject discipline. She entered university on the basis of an access course. She talked about being a carer for her husband when she was interviewed in her third year at university.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Danny, a white British man in his early 50s, was in his first year of a trade union related degree. He had no formal qualifications on entering university but had considerable experience as a trade union steward. He described himself as working class when attending an individual interview.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Derek, a white British man in his early 50s, was studying for a Humanities degree. Derek joined the university with a higher diploma in engineering. Derek described a very active life which he had to retire from due to his physical condition.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elizabeth, a Black African Caribbean woman in her early 60s, was interviewed as a recent graduate of a Social Science course. She had entered university after completing an access course.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethel, a Black African woman in her early 40s, was in the third year of a Social Work course. She entered the university on the basis of a vocational diploma. Ethel discussed being the mother of young children when she attended the first focus group.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evelyn a white woman in her early 50s was in the second year of a Social Science course. She had entered university on the basis of an access course. Evelyn discussed being deaf and also her grown-up children when she attended a focus group and an individual interview.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frank a white man in his early 50s who had originated in mainland Europe, was in his first year of a Humanities degree. Frank already had a degree and was self-funding. He described growing up in a very poor family. Frank had retired from a well-paid career after becoming involved in an accident. He attended a focus group and an interview.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harriot, a white woman in her late 40s had originated in mainland Europe. She had recently completed a Social Science degree when interviewed. Harriot had previously completed a post graduate qualification.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irene, a white British woman in her late 50s was in her second year of a Language degree. She joined the university with an A' Level. Irene described herself as working class when she attended one of the all-women focus groups.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jack, a white man in his early 50s, attended a focus group in his first year of a Social Sciences degree. He joined the university with a higher diploma in engineering. He attended an interview and a focus group.</li> </ul>

- Janet, a Black African woman in her early 40s, was in her third year of a Business degree. She entered the university on the basis of a level 3 course. She discussed her young children when she attended a focus group.

- Joan, a white British woman in her early 60s, was in the second year of a Law degree. She entered university on the basis of a distance learning course. Joan discussed being registered disabled and living with her grown-up children when she attended one of the all-women focus groups.

- Lavinia, a Black African woman in her early 50s, was in her fourth year as a part-time student on a Business course. She entered university on the basis of a vocational diploma. Lavinia discussed being married and also her grown-up family when she was interviewed.

- May, a Chinese woman in her late 50s, was in the second year of a Business Administration course. She gained entrance to university on the basis of her extensive commercial experience. May discussed being married with grown-up children when she attended one of the all-woman focus groups.

- Nigel, a Black Caribbean man in his early 50s, was in his first year of a Social Science course. He entered university on the basis of an access course. Nigel discussed his young child and his background in manual trades when he attended a focus group and an interview.

- Pam, a white British woman in her early 60s, was in the second year of an Arts degree. She already held a higher degree in another subject area. She discussed her retirement and her grown-up children when she attended a focus group.

- Peter, a Black African man in his early 50s, was a recent graduate of a Business course. He entered university with a level 3 qualification. Peter discussed being the parent of young children when he was interviewed.

- Samuel, a Black African man in his late 40s, was in his third year of a Social Work course. He entered university with a vocationally relevant level 3 qualification and extensive relevant work experience. He discussed being married when he attended a focus group and an interview

- Sara, a white British woman in her late 50s, entered university with a vocationally relevant level 3 qualification and extensive relevant work experience. Sara attended a focus group while studying Childhood on a part-time basis. She was also working full-time and caring for a disabled husband.

- Sebastian, a Black African man in his early 60s, was a recent graduate of a Social Science course. He entered university with A Levels which he had studied for in evening classes. Sebastian discussed his children when he attended a focus group.

- Sharon, a Black African woman in her early 40s, was in the third year of a Social Work degree. She entered university on the basis of a vocational level 3 diploma. Sharon discussed her young children when she attended a focus group.

- Sirimavo, an Asian woman in her 70s, was in the fourth year of an Arts-based course. Sirimavo had entered university with a professional qualification. When she attended one of the all-woman focus groups, she discussed being the primary carer for her husband.

- Valerie, a white British woman in her early 50s was a recent graduate of a Social Science. She entered university with A levels. She discussed her adult children when she was interviewed.

## Research Limitations

There are inevitably some limitations of this study. For example, although there were suggestions of gender differences in participants' relations with those outside of the university, time and logistical constraints did not allow for further exploration of the students' 'home' life through the participation of the participants' family and friends. As such, I was not able to explore the students' life outside the university from the perspectives of family and friends

The method selected has its limitations in that the participants were self-selecting. This meant that there was also no way of knowing why other the other older students who were contacted did not elect to participate in the study. More social science students answered the invitation to participate. However, it was not clear whether there was a higher proportion of social science older students or just that these students were more likely to be interested in the subject matter and therefore more likely to participate. In any case, the sample sizes of participants from each subject discipline were very small and there was insufficient space for discussion of possible differences between students from different subject disciplines. Similarly, although the data suggested differences in attitudes to higher education between ethnic groups (see page 63 and page 110), there was insufficient data to confirm this.

The research only draws from a post-92 university and it is possible that the experience of older students in the more established institutions would be very different, not least because they would be even more outnumbered by much younger students. The older students were less likely to feel different than in a university where most other students were 18-21 year olds, white and middle class.

What could be seen as another limitation of this research is that younger students were not consulted on their views of much older students in their lectures. However, to have also interviewed younger students would have changed the focus of this study somewhat and may have distracted from the subject group. Furthermore this would have required a completely new recruitment of participants and research instrument. This would not have been practical in the time.

Probably the biggest constraint that this research shares with many other qualitative studies is that it limited by what the participants choose to divulge and how this is interpreted by the researcher and the reader.