Working-Class and Mature-Age Students Negotiating University Culture in Australia

Submitted by
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Contents

Summary

‘Widened access’ to university in countries like Australia has shifted student demographics, with higher numbers of ‘non-traditional’ students continuing to rise. Although this presents new opportunities for people such as those with working-class backgrounds, or who are ‘mature-age’, negotiating the more ‘traditional’ culture of university can pose challenges for ‘non-traditional’ students. This thesis presents a series of critical studies of the interactions these two particular groups have within university cultures. Employing sociological approaches, the research examines questions of the challenges many of these students encounter in identity formation, identity disruption, and strategies they employ for negotiating learning and social environments. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social action, as well as Diane Reay’s notion of the psychosocial dynamics of class, inform the analysis of two different data sets. The first are in-depth interviews with university graduates from working-class family backgrounds. The second are reflective essays, written by mature-age, first-year university students, about their experiences negotiating university culture. While Australian universities are presumably more open than ever to students from these backgrounds, there is still much to learn about the difficulties they face in becoming and being ‘legitimate’ students and negotiating the culture of university. This thesis argues that Australian working-class and mature-age students are disadvantaged in cultural, social, and economic capital, as inherited resources, and that this shapes their university experience. The findings and arguments amount to a critique of a higher education culture that strives to be more equitable but operates under assumptions that can undermine the ability for non-traditional students to participate successfully. The findings offer insights into the emotional and practical challenges working-class and mature-age students encounter, with the aim that this knowledge will inform approaches to supporting their successful participation.

Statement of authorship

This thesis includes work by the author that has been published or accepted for publication as described in the text. Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no other material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Mark Mallman

June 2016

Co-author, Professor Lee, publication statement

To whom it may concern,

Mark Mallman has co-authored two papers with me:

'Revise and resubmit' Mallman, M. and H. Lee 'Isolated learners: young mature age students, university culture, and desire for academic sociality' [Submitted to *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 23 October, 2015]

2014 Mallman, M. and H. Lee 'Stigmatized learners: mature-age students negotiating university culture' *British Journal of Sociology of Education* Early Release online 24 November; in press for 2016.

Both papers are based on data collected from students in 2009, in my first year anthropology subject ANT1FET Our Global Village: Introduction to Anthropology. Ethics permission was granted by La Trobe University's Human Ethics Committee to use student's assignments, with their consent, for an assessment task entitled 'University Culture'.

In 2009 I collected the data through my subject's online Learning Management System, and stored it on my computer, however I did not have time to do much work with it due to other commitments. It was at Mark Mallman's suggestion that we revisited the data as it was relevant to his thesis, and throughout 2012-2015 he worked on the two journal articles while also doing other work for his thesis and casual academic roles.

Mark Mallman took primary responsibility for collating and analysing all of the data, using NVivo software, and for conducting a thorough literature review. He proposed outlines for each paper which we workshopped then he wrote drafts, revising them with my feedback. I added some material on the methodology, but overall I estimate that Mark undertook 80% of the responsibility for the production of each paper.

Regards,

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Anthony Moran is a very good supervisor. Insightful, attentive, generous, and encouraging are some of the ways I can describe his ongoing efforts to participate in my research 'journey'. I think words may let me down here, though, because how can they represent these past several years and his influence on my thinking and my work? Anthony is a very good supervisor, he's a good research partner, and he's a good friend. Thank you, Anthony.

I thank Peter Beilharz, my co-supervisor, for his influence on my thinking and particularly on my attitude toward research. He advised there is virtue in 'slowness' – do not rush research, do not rush the moment. Invaluable advice for research, and for life. Thank you also to Ramón Spaaij and Ray Madden, who served at various times as research panel members and, importantly, inspiring interlocutors.

I am very grateful to Helen Lee. Her invitation to collaborate in writing grew into an integral part of this thesis. I learned much from Helen, and she is a pleasure to work with. Many thanks, Helen.

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And Senem. I will hold back on all I would like to say about you, Senem. You are so much a part of this thesis and so much a part of me that I am not sure where to start or where to stop in thanking you. I dedicate this work to you.

Preface: The development of the PhD project as a 'thesis by publication'

Structurally, this is non-traditional thesis. It constitutes a 'thesis by publication'. It necessarily has some noticeable differences to the structural rhythms of a traditional thesis. However, this work aims to meet the essential rigour of a PhD project, as well as the expectation of the reader, by providing a synthesis of original empirical research, an engagement with the relevant research literature, and a set of interrelated arguments. The six body chapters were first written as articles for publication in academic journals, with the intention that they then be used as thesis chapters. This preface briefly explains the development of the thesis project, including the incorporation of two different types of empirical data. The six article/chapters, in combination with the framing chapters (preface, introduction and conclusion), constitute what La Trobe University refers to as a 'Volume of work where publications form the majority of the thesis' (formally called a 'thesis by publication').

The thesis project began as an examination of the life-stories of Australians who experienced upward socio-economic mobility. I interviewed 29 Melbournians working in different professional and managerial careers. The original intention of the project was to trace various life-trajectories of the upwardly mobile in order to gain some better understanding of the nuances of class processes in Australia. I interviewed 16 women and 13 men, all of whom were university graduates, had professional careers, and came from working-class backgrounds. I interviewed many of the research participants two or three times, at different location types, including at their home, workplace, and/or the campus where they attended university. The rationale was to evoke embodied memories of the experiences associated with those social spaces.

Once I conducted most of the interviews, as well as reviewed relevant literature, I became particularly interested in the parts of the interviewees' stories recounting their time at university. Their experiences in higher education were some of the most emotional and poignant parts of their life-stories. I began to narrow the scope of the project and focus on the remembered, embodied experiences of working-class students negotiating university culture. Around this time I began working on a journal article for publication based on my research,

writing about how early family-life experiences affected the later life-trajectories of the interviewees, including their time at university.

Within the same period of time I was narrowing the scope of the thesis, I began doing research assistant work with Professor Helen Lee at La Trobe University, which would come to have a large impact on my own thinking about higher education research. I assisted Professor Lee in coding and analysing data she collected within her first-year introduction to anthropology subject, and to then write up our findings and ideas for publication. This included the written reflections of a diverse group of 344 first-year students. The students each wrote at least 500 words on their experiences of university culture and on their identities as students. Professor Lee then gave me a great deal of autonomy in choosing the particular topics that the two of us would write about for publication. Some of the most compelling, and to my mind important, accounts these students offered were to do with the experiences of mature-age students. Meanwhile, I was working on my PhD research and had already noticed a pattern amongst adults with working-class backgrounds that some of them felt they were, in one interviewee's words, 'ten years behind'. Having come from backgrounds with disadvantages in inherited cultural, social, and economic capital, these people tended to feel they were behind in what they otherwise could have achieved had they had the resources. A number of them, as a result, were mature-age students, usually returning to formal study after a period of work. The interest in working-class students and mature-age students began to converge. There were noticeable parallels between the experiences of these two demographics of non-traditional university students. The research I was conducting for my PhD and the research I was conducting as a research assistant were informing and building on each other.

Within a year of beginning the research assistant work with Professor Lee, she and I co-wrote two articles and sent them out for publication in journals. In addition to these, I began to make plans to sole-author a third article about mature-age student experiences. By this time I had an article accepted for publication based on my interviews with working-class graduates. Through discussion with my supervisor, it became clear that the research I was doing about working-class students and mature-age students had coalesced into an integrated, intellectual project about two distinct groups of non-traditional students negotiating university culture. There are three articles for each data set (three about working-class graduates and three about mature-age students). The result, in combination with the framing chapters (preface,

introduction and conclusion), is this thesis about the lived experiences and perceptions of working-class and mature-age students negotiating university culture in Australia.

Regarding formatting, the chapters are presented here in the thesis as they are in the accepted manuscripts and submitted manuscripts. There are some differences in referencing styles, though most follow the Harvard Referencing Style (different journals have variations on this style, so the reader may notice these vary by chapter). Each chapter includes its own reference list, according to how the manuscript was accepted or as submitted to each journal. The preface, introduction, and conclusion chapters are referenced according to the Harvard referencing guide accessible on La Trobe University's website (as of June 2016). There is a reference list at the end of the thesis that includes references cited in the introduction and conclusion chapters.

The following is a list of the articles that constitute the chapters, along with short descriptions of their status in the publication process:

Chapter 1: 'Not entirely at home: upward social mobility and early family-life' (Published).

Journal of Sociology, Published online before print August 3, 2015, doi: 10.1177/1440783315601294.

Chapter 2: 'The 'inherent vice' of working-class university students: cultural capital, emotion, and individual versus institutional responsibility' (Published).

The Sociological Review, manuscript accepted and in press, to be published online first.

Chapter 3: 'Working-class university students and the trouble with "independent learning": the mediating role of cultural capital and the work of "concerted self-cultivation"' (Under review).

British Journal of Sociology of Education, the manuscript submitted and under review.

Chapter 4: 'Stigmatized learners: mature-age students negotiating university culture' (Published).

British Journal of Sociology of Education, Published online before print November 24, 2014, doi: 10.1080/01425692.2014.973017. Co-authored with Professor Lee. Mallman contribution to article is 80%.

Chapter 5: 'Isolated learners: Young mature-age students, university culture, and desire for academic sociality' (Revise and resubmit).

International Journal of Lifelong Education, decision of revise and resubmit given, with a note from the editor encouragingly stating they 'strongly advise' resubmission upon minor revisions. Co-authored with Professor Helen Lee. Mallman contribution to article is 80%.

Chapter 6: 'Study-work-life *im*balance for mature-age students in higher education' (Under review).

Journal of Further and Higher Education, the manuscript submitted and under review.

Appendix I: 'Book Review: The Plural Actor, by Bernard Lahire' (Published)

Thesis Eleven, April 2015; vol. 127, 1: pp. 155-158.

Note: The reader will notice that in discussing work written about mature-age students, the personal pronoun 'we' is used, rather than 'I', indicating that such work was co-authored with Professor Lee.

Introduction

Higher education entails a paradox. While it is a vehicle for social change and individual socio-economic mobility, it simultaneously legitimises and reproduces the culture and power of the dominant classes (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). With this interplay at work, university may be viewed as one of the most dynamic and complex social spaces in contemporary societies like Australia. Students with a family history of university participation have advantages of familiarity and confidence that position them for success in this social space. Students without a family history of university may have quite a different encounter with higher education. This thesis is about those students and their experiences of negotiating university, specifically from the perspective of working-class students as well as mature-age students. It draws on findings from two different sets of qualitative research data: one includes in-depth interviews with working-class university graduates; the other includes reflective essays written by first-year mature-age students. (These two groups are analytically considered separately in this thesis, although there are doubtless many mature-age students from working-class backgrounds [Reay 2002; 2003]; this analytical approach is discussed further in the preface). Using these empirical findings, the thesis examines questions of how 'non-traditional' students negotiate their identities within the culture of university. The primary concern is with describing and analysing the ways that less advantaged students face the challenges of university without the level of symbolic and economic resources of their more privileged peers (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Lareau & Weininger 2003). Though there are separate, discrete arguments in each chapter, the central current of these arguments is this: because working-class and mature-age students participate in university with lower levels of inherited symbolic and economic resources, they face greater and specific difficulties with adopting an identity as a student, deciphering the implicit and explicit expectations for learning, and adapting to an institutional culture that seems, to many of them, like a foreign environment. The aim of this research project was to gain further understanding of the challenges working-class and mature-age students in Australia face and how they attempt to negotiate them. This thesis contributes to the research literature by detailing personal educational trajectories of working-class and mature-age students within university cultures.

This introductory chapter explains the central theoretical frameworks used throughout the thesis, discusses the contextual background on higher education in Australia and research

literature on working-class students and mature-age students, and explains the methods and data samples used in the research. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social practice, including his understanding of the interaction between habitus, cultural capital, and field, is the underlying framework for analysing the experiences of university students with working-class backgrounds. Diane Reay's (especially 2005; 2015) work on the emotional dynamics of class forms a foundation for the consideration in this thesis of working-class students' psycho-social experiences of university. The thesis also draws on Lave and Wenger's (1991) understanding of the interpersonal, socially situated nature of learning within university cultures to examine the accounts of mature-age students. These cultural and identity-based approaches to learning are useful for understanding the ways working-class and mature-age students may experience dissonance between their backgrounds and circumstances and the cultural context they study in.

Traditional / non-traditional students

Australian university expansion since the 1970s has mirrored that of other industrialised countries like the UK and the US (David 2011). The recent history of higher education funding and growth tells a story of widened access to numbers and demographics of students who previously did not have access to university. Prior to 1974, Australian higher education was funded through a combination of merit-based Commonwealth, government funded scholarships and private tuition fees. With a view toward improving access to higher education for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the Whitlam Labor government abolished university fees, establishing a fully Commonwealth funded system. 'Free' higher education remained in place until the late-1980s, when both major political parties thought it was fiscally untenable, adopting a commonwealth funded scheme. Fees were then gradually reintroduced under the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). This amounted to government funded loans for tuition fees, which meant students would not have to begin repaying fees until after graduating and until they were gainfully employed at or above a minimum income threshold. Concurrent with these developments, from the mid-1970s to 2010, the number of students participating in higher education more than tripled, from approximately 200,000 to 605,000 (DEEWR 2011). This growth into a mass higher education system meant a diversification of students, including increases in women, ethnic minorities, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Gale & Tranter 2011). The expansion

of the numbers and sizes of higher education institutions, and the various funding schemes, have helped make Australian university more accessible.

Despite this accessibility, and despite the growth since 1974, low socio-economic student participation has remained the same since then, at around 15% (DEEWR 2011). A 2008 commissioned report to the Australian Government, the Bradley review (Bradley et al. 2008), made a series of recommendations to address areas in which Australia's higher education sector was 'losing ground'. Among these were recommendations that efforts be made to better recruit, support, and retain students from non-traditional backgrounds, especially lower socio-economic, mature age, and Aboriginal students. In response to the Bradley report, the Australian Government issued what have become known as the 20/40 targets. These include the aims of increasing low socioeconomic status enrolments to 20% by 2020 (from 15%), and increasing the percentage of Australians between 25-34 years of age with a Bachelor's degree to 40% by 2025 (from 32%) (Australian Government 2009, pp. 12-13). The targets, and the proposed measures to meet those targets, are viewed by the Australian Government as important to its 'vision' of a 'stronger' and 'fairer' Australia. Meeting the higher education targets would result in a stronger Australia through 'boosting Australia's share of high skilled jobs and productivity growth' through a 'highly skilled workforce that can rapidly adapt to meet future challenges'; and a fairer Australia through 'widespread equitable access to a diverse tertiary education sector that allows each individual to develop and reach their potential' (Australian Government 2009, p. 7).

Widened access to higher education in Australia, as in numerous countries internationally, has meant a change to a 'more heterogeneous, composition of students in terms of previous education, social and family background, gender, age, life-situation, motivation to study, current and future occupational profiles' (Schuetze & Slowey 2002, p. 311). Internationally, numerous governments recognise the necessity for recruiting and retaining more 'non-traditional' students to maintain institutional viability, and have similarly set specific targets to increase the percentage of their populations with higher education degrees (for a review see Gale & Parker, 2014). Since this shift in the composition of university demographics, the term 'non-traditional student' can be seen in wide use in research literature as well as governmental and university policy and rhetoric. There is no singular definition of the term, though it may be thought of in regards to at least two different frameworks, as Schuetze and Slowey (2002, p. 312-313) write:

> Thus within the framework of the equality of opportunity discourse the term tends to refer to socially or educationally disadvantaged sections of the population, for example, those from working class backgrounds, particular ethnic minority groups, immigrants, and, in the past, frequently women. While in the framework of the life-cycle discourse, it tends to relate to older or adult students with a vocational training and work experience background, or other students with unconventional educational biographies.

This thesis utilises both of these frames of reference, with a consideration of the *equality of opportunity* for working-class students, and the framework of *life-cycle* to discuss mature-age students' experiences. It is important to note that, at least in the case of this thesis, the life-cycle framework is also a matter of equality of opportunity, since the challenges mature-age students negotiate as a result of their age and circumstances are also a matter of their ability to successfully negotiate university culture.

Many non-traditional students may also be 'first-generation students', those who are either the first, or within the first generation of their families, to attend university. Internationally, first-generation students are more likely to be from low socio-economic backgrounds, and/or from ethnic minorities, and/or to be older, mature-age students (Spiegler & Bednarek 2013). Chesters and Watson (2012) found that having a university educated parent is still the greatest predictor of higher education participation, and that people with a parent who attended university are three to four times more likely to attend university. In their study, Chesters and Watson (2012) found that parental education level is a statistically reliable proxy for a person's prospects for income, wealth, and cultural capital. Non-traditional students are likely to work more due to higher financial demands, which can result in lower retention and scholastic performance (Bozick 2007). Non-traditional students may feel their belonging at university is provisional on the basis of their academic performance alone, as opposed to their social status as indicative of their authentic belonging at university (Christie et al. 2008). Mature-age students, ethnic minority students, and female students are more prone to a sense of alienation from the ethos of higher education institutions, resulting in feelings of isolation (Bowl 2001). Working-class, ethnic minority, and students from regional areas are prone to feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and intimidation due to differences, including spoken language and accent (Aries & Seider 2005). First-generation students internationally, in general, are more likely to be enrolled in 'less prestigious subjects at less

prestigious universities with a lower orientation towards advanced degrees' (Spiegler & Bednarek 2013, p. 324).

Though the Australian government recognises the need to address equality in access for non-traditional students, there are challenges to contend with. Gale (2011, p. 670) argues that the 20/40 targets set a new precedent for growth, that past growth reforms relied on 'demand exceeding the supply of places', but that demographic projections suggest supply will outpace demand from low socio-economic groups. Supporting growth and increasing spaces for more students does not necessarily mean that more low-socioeconomic students will take up these spaces. There are numerous reasons why people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to participate in higher education. They are less likely to inherit the cultural, social, and economic capital that make higher education more manageable (Bourdieu 1970). They are more likely to feel that pursuing higher education is a risky prospect, compared to participating in the labour market (Ball 2003). People from working-class backgrounds are, due to structural constraints, less likely to imagine a place for themselves in university (Walkerdine 2011). These barriers to participation mean that: 'aspiration' will challenge the importance of 'achievement' as the most significant determiner of university entry; and, similarly, that for equity groups to reach critical mass, universities will need to engage more fully with their different knowledges and ways of knowing (Gale 2011, p. 670).

Understanding the barriers to participation faced by low-socioeconomic and other non-traditional students means not only broadening opportunities for individual students but also institutional adaptation, where universities adjust their approaches to appropriately support those who are unlikely to have a history of higher education in their families or close networks, and who have fewer resources to negotiate it. This is discussed further in each article/chapter as well as the thesis conclusion.

Universities reasonably want to enrol the students with the most promise in regards to high entrance scores, and many of these students will come from backgrounds with higher levels of cultural, social, and economic capital. But a more equitable university system may need to shift perspective about the role universities play in equipping students. The logics of the contemporary university in Australia are those of neoliberalism, where the commodification of and competition for students, institutional prestige, and funding sources all influence the

interactions between the institution and its individual students, and potential students (Ball 2012; Connell 2013; Davies & Bansel 2007; Olssen & Peters 2005). Students come to be thought of, and think of themselves as, consumers (Baldwin & James 2000), with consequences such as students potentially focused on *having* a degree versus *being* a student (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion 2009). Managerial agendas are more likely than ever to take precedent, which, at first glance appears contradictory to the aim of increasing non-traditional student enrolments (Archer 2007). However, this paradox makes sense when considering the dual agendas for growth in student numbers and institutional viability combined with social justice (Gale & Tranter 2011). The concern with fiscal viability is not new, but the economically driven university is (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber 2007). Moves toward deregulation of higher education in Australia suggest, if anything, that the marketization of higher education is well entrenched. The Howard Government (1996-2007) moved through deregulation reforms in 2005 and 2006 that allowed universities to increase fees by up to 25%. 2014-2015 brought repeated efforts by the Abbott Government (2013-2015) to institute full higher education sector deregulation, an effort based on principles of 'free market, autonomy and education as a private commodity' (Halbert 2015). These efforts were unsuccessful and, though the Turnbull Government (2015-) has shelved the measures for now (ABC 2016), there remains much uncertainty about the direction Australian higher education will take and the impact it will have on non-traditional students, like mature-age and working-class students.

An economically driven university is more likely to place the onus for learning entirely on students. 'Market-driven outcomes' contradict the otherwise equity-based intentions of widened access to university (Archer 2007). The basic model of university education entails learning independence, that is, that students have the ability to be flexible and adaptable to a new learning environment (Christie, Barron & D'Annunzio-Green 2013) and take initiative and responsibility in regards to their learning outcomes. These otherwise commendable characteristics of an 'independent learner' are problematic when they become expectations of all students, from the outset of their studies, and without the support required to attain them. These capacities in higher education contexts are associated with cultural capital of the dominant classes, which is a resource unequally distributed. Students with higher levels of the relevant social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1977/1990) will be more likely to appear to be independent learners when they arrive at university. While they are dependent on this inheritance of capital, their possession of it as symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984) has

the appearance of ‘natural’ capability. Students from non-traditional backgrounds, particularly in their first year of studies, are likely to experience the expectation for independent learning as extraordinarily difficult (Haggis 2006; McInnis, James & Hartley 2000); in fact, for some it comes as a shock (Read, Archer & Leathwood 2003). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in Australia have more difficulty with adjusting to expectations and teaching styles than other students during the first year (James, Krause & Jenkins 2010). Mature-age students are prone to feelings of alienation from what they experience as an isolating and unresponsive institution (Bowl 2001). These ‘frustrated participants’ may face financial difficulties, lack of time, tutor/lecturer indifference, and overall institutional marginalisation (Bowl 2001). The trouble with the expectation for independent learning is the ease with which a fiscally driven institution can place the entire onus for learning on the student (even if unwittingly), and the implication for students who have disadvantages coming into university.

‘Independence’, far from being a neutral term, as Leathwood (2006) writes, carries connotations of gendered and classed domains of power and valuation; namely, that independence is seen to be the domain of white, dominant-class men: ‘What suits (some) men is defined as the ideal that all should be striving for, whilst men’s dependence on others remains hidden (Leathwood 2006, p. 630). If the independence (or largely hands-off) approach to students’ learning is not appropriate for many first-year students, it is because of unequal resources rather than unequal capacity for learning. Non-traditional students have fewer of the symbolic resources (social and cultural capital) and economic resources necessary for successful negotiation of the higher education field. The contemporary neoliberal independent subject, writes Leathwood (2006, pp. 614-615), is ‘economic man… unburdened by social or material considerations…unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self-doubt’. Time constraints for these non-traditional students are seen as a personal problem (Bowl 2001), and the need for additional assistance is seen as a weakness or implication of lower intelligence (Leathwood 2006). ‘Independence’ is undoubtedly something universities should cultivate in students. It is not, however, something all students can be expected to either arrive with or to very quickly adapt to unaided. The celebration, and reification, of independence serves management agendas more than the students in question (Goode 2007). ‘Dependence’ is conversely pathologised and viewed as a weakness, or as an indication of deficient capacity (Goode 2007). Independence becomes a matter of ‘who can succeed in the shortest possible time with few demands on institutional

resources' (Leathwood 2001, cited in Read, Archer & Leathwood 2003, p. 272). Some non-traditional students (like the working-class graduates discussed in this thesis) learn to play the game and eventually become relatively confident independent learners, but the culture of university goes unchallenged (Read, Archer & Leathwood 2003, p. 272). This can exacerbate the challenges already faced by working-class, mature-age, and other non-traditional students.

The research subjects: Working-class and mature-age students

Given the fiscal contexts of higher education described above, it is as important as ever to continue developing understanding of non-traditional student experiences. While there is discussion in some chapters on gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, the majority of the analysis in this thesis focuses on questions of class as well as mature age in university students. Miriam David (2012) argues that, though women's participation in higher education is a central feature of its global transformation, women's perspectives are still largely absent from dominant research agendas. Other demographics of non-traditional students may be said to be absent from dominant research agendas as well. Choosing which of these groups to focus on, and which to exclude, in a small, PhD-sized research project is a fraught decision. I found in the interviews and written reflections that all aspects of a person's identity intersect to influence their experience of university, and this is an important point to be made through this work. However, the original research design for the interviews was aimed at studying working-class experiences, and this was what became most prominent in the stories they told. Additionally, with the written reflections, the mature-age student experiences stood out as the most compelling for their descriptions of challenge with adopting a student identity and negotiating the student culture. The emphasis in this thesis is then partly a matter of research design and partly a matter of the emphasis the research participants placed on particular parts of their encounters with university. The in-depth interviews and the written reflections sparked my interest in these other areas of identity and inquiry, and further research may provide opportunities to design questions that evoke more reflection on them.

Working-class students

This first demographic of non-traditional students under examination in this thesis is working-class. Though university participation in Australia has tripled since 1974, participation of low-socioeconomic students has remained at about 15%, one indicator of the

persistence of inequality in Australian higher education (Chesters & Watson 2012, p. 198). Coming from a working-class background into higher education is an experience of anticipation of both positive experiences and risk. The class-mobility that many working-class students anticipate, through their education, entails the positive emotions of anticipation, but also anxiety at the risks involved. The risks are higher for working-class students, including those to their identity, sense of belonging/disenfranchisement, and possibilities for failure. Working-class students are more likely to carry a sense of being unimportant and marginalised in educational contexts (Reay 2003). They are prone to experiencing their educational achievements as a 'painful dislocation' from their family and community roots (Baxter & Britton 2001). Reay (2002, p. 403) writes that working-class students in this situation struggle to maintain a sense of identity continuity and authenticity in the attempt to balance between realising potential and maintaining a sense of an authentic self, where becoming middle-class can feel like losing oneself. While working-class students have fewer resources, they are more likely to describe these structural realities with a combination of personal responsibility and personal inadequacy (Reay 2003, p. 313). Many fear they never have been or will be good enough, and carry a fear of overreaching and failure (Reay 2005, p. 923).

As a study of working-class university students, this thesis makes use of key ideas developed by Pierre Bourdieu, particularly habitus and cultural capital, and field. Bourdieu (1984; 1990) described **habitus** as complex schema of psychic and embodied social dispositions, derived from material circumstances and socialising influences, and shaping relational ways of being in the world. A way of understanding the relationship between the individual and society, habitus allows that practice is neither fully determined nor fully autonomous, rather this it is 'the product of a dialectical relationship between a situation and a habitus, understood as a system of durable and transposable dispositions, which integrating all past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions…' (Bourdieu 1972, p. 261). The habitus, largely established by early socialisation, informs social action through the production of thought and feeling that appear to a person as common sense, and dispose one to act in ways that affirm their understanding of their world. The habitus operates largely (or entirely, depending on how one reads Bourdieu) on the pre-reflexive level, consisting of predispositions adaptable to various social situations; as Bourdieu (1990, p. 227) writes, habitus consists of 'principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without

presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them'. Bourdieu (1996; 1999) acknowledged that the habitus is open to small changes, given the right conditions, but argued that the social reproduction of inequalities is statistically likely because in most cases the habitus remains unchanged in substance, plastic as it may be in adjusting to new circumstances. Bourdieu writes (1990, p. 284):
Early experiences have particular weight because habitus tends to ensure its own constancy and its defence against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information, if exposed to it accidentally or by force, and especially by avoiding exposure to such information'.
However, when a working-class university student is 'exposed' to the environment of higher education there is much potential for change. Reay (2004, p. 434) describes the continual restructuring of the habitus as a 'complex interplay between past and present', and that 'current circumstances are not just there to be acted upon, but are internalized and become yet another layer to add to those from earlier socializations'. One of the aims of this thesis project is to examine the role that the habitus plays in working-class university students' experiences, and whether the habitus undergoes alterations as a result of experience.

Cultural capital plays a central role in the transition to university and, as Bourdieu (1984) argued, the symbolic legitimation of class differences. It can be described as sets of inheritable resources, consisting of knowledge and competencies that, when wielded 'naturally' by their possessor, demonstrate legitimate membership of a class or community. Lareau and Weininger (2003, p. 579) describe the function of cultural capital, writing that 'any given "competence" functions as cultural capital if it enables appropriation "of the cultural heritage" of a society, but is unequally distributed among its members, thereby engendering the possibility of "exclusive advantages"'. Such competencies include learned and shared knowledge and articulated viewpoints; tastes, from food and clothing to art and other aesthetics; as well as embodied ways of being such as speech and physical deportment. Cultural capital can be 'embodied (internalized and intangible), objectified (cultural products), and institutionalized (officially accredited)' (Edgerton & Roberts 2014, p. 195). When one's 'competencies' are in alignment with those prominent in the particular social space one inhabits (amongst people and places), this person is likely to feel they are in their 'natural' environment (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Contrarily, one feels uncomfortable, suddenly 'aware' of themselves, or displaced, when amongst people and places incongruent with their own competencies. Working-class students find that their own cultural capital often

does not align with the higher status, legitimised cultural capital of university. This thesis discusses some of the challenges they face with this incongruity, as well as strategies they use to cope with it.

The habitus and cultural capital operate according to the logics of **fields**, or social spaces that form the contexts for practices. These spaces are symbolic as well as physical, and they are recognised by people (both the insiders and outsiders within the field, and the people remote to the field) as having a social reality, including a history, avant-garde and rear-garde, insiders and outsiders, established rules both implicit and consecrated, and hierarchies of proficiency in practice (Bourdieu 1992). A field is a 'configuration of relations between positions objectively defined in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon the occupants, agents or institutions' (Bourdieu 1992, pp. 72-73). Positions in a field can be measured (and can be plotted) according to the symbolic, cultural, social, and economic capitals (in type and volume) that individuals possess (Thompson 2008, p. 72). A social field is bounded, insofar as some things, people, positions are measured either within the configurations of relations or outside of them. The boundaries are measurable, but they are fluid, and the boundaries vary according to what is being measured. The habitus, or individual set of social dispositions, operates within a field of possible actions. Elements of the habitus may be said to be engaged by way of encounters particular to the field, and the habitus orients and initiates action within and according to (or in conflict with) a field. Habitus, writes Wacquant (2004b, p. 318) 'operates like a spring that needs an external trigger and thus it cannot be considered in isolation from the particular social worlds or "fields" within which it evolves'. Fields are constituted by the symbolic and the material. The emphasis in Bourdieu's work is on the competition within fields for positions and possessions of power, both symbolic and material.

Much of what Bourdieu wrote concerned the **symbolic legitimacy** wielded by those with the most power in a society. Those with power determine the most legitimate cultural practices (Bourdieu 1984), and this is maintained, in part, through a process of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) in which the dominated are complicit, mostly unknowingly, in their own domination. Formal education is a central social space for the reproduction of social inequality through such a process of legitimation (Bourdieu 1990). University, as a social field, poses a challenge to students from working-class backgrounds when its culture seems to clash with elements of their language, manners, appearance, knowledge, ways of

learning, and other aspects of their social dispositions (cf. Aries & Seider 2005; Baxter & Britton 2001; Loveday 2014; Reay 2001; Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2009, 2010). University can make working-class students feel like outsiders who have little to offer. However, the dominant, those with a heritage of legitimated cultural, social, and economic capital, are the 'inheritors', or legitimate participants, for whom higher education would appear to be designed (Bourdieu 1979). The symbolic legitimation at work in this process also involves **symbolic violence**, 'the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 167). The resources necessary for obtaining and maintaining positions of power within fields are unequally distributed. However, this is not generally how individuals perceive themselves. People are disposed to viewing their status and position in a field largely as a result of a natural order, and therefore a natural product of their capabilities and inherent value (or lack thereof). Bourdieu (1984, p. 471) writes that the habitus involves an embodied sense of one's rightful place, 'which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded'. Working-class, first-generation university students operate within a field, that of higher education, that they are generally unfamiliar with. The challenges go beyond the academic. They are questions of self-perception and identity:

> The *sense* of limits implies *forgetting* the limits…Dominated agents, who assess the value of their position and their characteristics by applying a system of schemes of perception and appreciation which is the embodiment of the objective laws whereby their value is objectively constituted, tend to attribute to themselves what the distribution attributes to them, refusing what they are refused ('That's not for the likes of us'), adjusting their expectations to their chances, defining themselves as the established order defines them, reproducing in their verdict on themselves the verdict the economy pronounces on them, in a word, condemning themselves to what is in any case their lot, *ta heautou*, as Plato put it, consenting to be what they have to be, 'modest', 'humble' and 'obscure' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 471).

Symbolic violence, then, is coercion of self-concept and action misrecognised as choice. Bourdieu did not deny the existence of what is otherwise problematically called autonomy, he only elaborated on how autonomy is truncated in all instances by the opportunities and constraints, and the logics of fields of power, that operate in all social circumstances.

Bourdieu's work has inspired and provoked much of the contemporary research on social class. Pre and contemporary to Bourdieu, there is a rich tradition of research and theory that

position cultural dynamics as central to understanding class, including the work of Thompson (1966), Sennett and Cobb (1972), Willis (1977), and Bourdieu (1984), among others. This work involved understandings of class as constituted as much in meaning-making practices as in economic structures of a society. The individualisation of late-modern societies, as discussed by Beck (1992), Giddens (1991) and others, suggested to some social thinkers (Pakulski & Waters 1996) the dissolution of the relevance of class as an analytical tool. However, it also encouraged a further development of a turn toward cultural understandings of class, or what Devine and Savage (2000, p. 193) refer to as 'class culturalist' analysis, with its emphasis on 'how cultural processes are embedded within specific kinds of socio-economic practices'. They further explain that the relationship between class and culture 'is to be found in the way in which cultural outlooks are implicated in modes of exclusion and/or domination' (Devine & Savage 2000, p. 196).

One of the key emphases in the 'new class research' is the way class entails the social, interpersonal struggle for recognition (Skeggs 1997). The value, or moral worth, of people becomes bound up with the socio-economic valuation of their material circumstances (cf. Lamont 1992, 2000; Sayer 2005; Skeggs 1997, 2004). Sayer (2005) writes that the 'moral significance of class' lies in the meaning and impact of cultural patterns of recognition and legitimation of people's dignity. The working-class students must grapple with their sense of value and legitimacy in higher education contexts, as opposed to the disinterest of middle and upper-class students who take their status for granted (Reay 2002). Bourgeois conceptions of the working-class present them as having default individual moral lack (Skeggs 2004). The working class become a repository for off-cast characteristics, or those that do not adhere with the expectations and values of a neoliberalised society (Allen 2013).

This is related to the emotional dynamics of class relations, or the 'psychic economy of class that has been largely invisible in academic accounts and commonsense' (Reay 2005, p. 912). Emotions have been found to play an integral part in university students' learning and adoption of a student identity (Christie et al. 2008; Christie 2009). The accounts of the participants in this thesis are demonstrably emotional ones, with evidence that their experiences of university cannot be analysed without taking the 'psychosocial' dynamics into account, or what Reay (2015, p. 10) refers to as the 'mutual constitution of the individual and the social relations within which they are enmeshed'. As Reay (2005, p. 912) argues, 'emotions and psychic responses to class and class inequalities contribute powerfully to the

makings of class', constituting a 'psychic economy of class that has been largely invisible in academic accounts and common sense understandings'. The 'psychic economy of social class' (Reay 2015) is a vital way of approaching and understanding how class is remade, as well as challenged, through the emotional dynamics of personal lives. Christie, Reay, and others inform the analyses in this thesis of working-class university student experiences, with the intention of emphasising the emotional dynamics of learning for non-traditional students.

Mature-age students

The second demographic of non-traditional students examined in this thesis are mature-age, and are an increasingly important and growing demographic. Approximately 40% of Australian university students are between 25 and 64 years old, another 59% being between 15 and 24 years old (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Many mature-age students have had little recent involvement in formal learning structures, and have additional responsibilities and pressures outside of university (O'Donnell & Tobbell 2007). Some accounts oversimplify mature-age students, who are a demographic from very diverse backgrounds (Waller 2005, 2006). The 'epistemological underpinnings' of many attempts at researching mature-age students, writes James (1995), result in 'species approaches' to understanding their experiences. There is growing, though still limited, knowledge about the ways mature-age students experience and negotiate the learning environment at university (Kasworm 2010), particularly in regards to academic and social practices. This thesis offers empirical accounts that further understanding of mature-age students, understandings which can help expand institutional capacities to support this diverse demographic.

School leavers (those who are 18-21 years old) largely determine the normative student practices in universities, and the culture of university generally bends to their interests, priorities, and learning modes (Kasworm 2010). Christie et al. (2008, pp. 576-577) found that mature-age students did not consider themselves 'full members of the university community' and that they negotiated 'conflicting feelings about their membership of the university'. Mature-age students experience risks both to their identities and relationships by re-engaging with formal education (Baxter & Britton 2001; O'Shea 2013). Mature-age students are sometimes viewed as being 'deficient: in ability, in not having a "proper" educational background, or in lacking the appropriate aspirations and attitudes' (Leathwood & O'Connell 2003, p. 599). Anything that competes with higher education for time and attention is

considered ‘baggage’ (Edwards 1993), particularly family, rather than these commitments being viewed as integral to students’ identities. There is little recognition of the way heavy workloads and life responsibilities make it more difficult for many older students to integrate into university academically and socially, and this consequently ‘delay[s] the sense of belonging’ (Chapman, 2015, p. 1).

This thesis (article/chapters four, five, and six) considers these and other challenges that mature-age students are up against as they seek to re-engage with formal education and with the culture of university. The analysis focused on mature-age student experiences makes use primarily of identity-based theories of learning as well as ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger 1991). Learning-identity is constructed through participation in practice, and evidence suggests mature-age students, in general, face obstacles to becoming full participants precisely because of differing practices. University transition is about the ‘capability to navigate change’ (Gale & Parker 2014), which includes the acquisition of a new role as university student. Collier & Morgan (2008) write that this is a matter of mastery of explicit learning modes as well as implicit knowledge and understanding. Part of the challenge for non-traditional learners is the implicit nature of many of the skills and processes for becoming a successful student (Collier & Morgan 2008; Haggis 2006). Adoption of a student identity and acquisition of the requisite skills is an active, self-conscious effort. The ability, or inability, of mature-age students to participate in university culture and to adopt a student identity, also partially depends on students’ deciphering the implicit codes of student practice.

The ‘learning culture’ of higher education, write Hodkinson, Biesta and James (2008, p. 34), is ‘constituted by the actions, dispositions and interpretations of the participants’. Education research and policy often privilege individual, rational components of learning (Christie et al. 2008, p. 568). However, learning is a socially situated process, which takes place in communities with distinct cultures and practices (Lave & Wenger 1991). To participate in university is to negotiate the rituals and practices enacted by the people involved, and the meanings entailed in those practices. The complex networks of interpersonal and institutional relations that constitute ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) make up the social fabric of universities. Wider social and historical factors influence the development and maintenance of valued practices in such communities (O’Donnell & Tobbell 2007). ‘Dispositions to learning’ are influenced by the culture of the educational

institution (Hodkinson & Bloomer 2000), and becoming a part of a learning community is a process of engaging in pre-established roles and practices. New students begin as 'legitimate *peripheral* participants' (Lave & Wenger 1991) within university culture, and move toward full participation as they adopt and skilfully participate in the valued practices of the community. To become a learner is to engage in a process of *becoming* over time (Lave & Wenger 1991), where the identity undergoes changes as the learner adapts to cultural norms and practices of the learning community (Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2000). The empirical work used in this thesis has the advantage of gaining insights into the students' own experiences, from their perspectives, as they undergo these processes of adaptation and change.

Methodology

This thesis project employs methods aimed at gathering differing subjective accounts of university experience, the 'voices' of students and former students. The benefits of understanding things from the perspective of the people who live them far outweigh the shortcomings inherent in research that relies heavily on subjective accounts of experience (discussed below). There are two different sets of empirical data under consideration in the following chapters, and both come from research designed to allow the students' voices to be the empirical ground on which the analysis was built. One data set consists of in-depth, life-story interviews with university graduates from working-class backgrounds, reflecting on their experiences of higher education. The other data set consists of written reflections of mature-age university students, tasked with describing their observations and experiences of university culture. These personal experiences contain a vibrancy of life – with their struggles, triumphs, and mundanity – that allow for a richer understanding of the sociological questions under consideration.

In-depth interviews with working-class university graduates

The origins of this first part of the empirical work for the thesis were an effort to research socio-economic mobility by way of studying individual life-courses of upwardly-mobile Australians. Qualitative research on socio-economic mobility is a marginal field of study, but it holds the potential to uncover much about the inner-workings of class-based societies. The 'renewal' (Devine & Savage 2000) of class analysis since the late 1990s has relied increasingly on qualitative methods such as ethnography and in-depth interview. The interviews conducted for this thesis resulted in rich, often profound, accounts of lives of

upward mobility, from some of the interviewees' earliest memories through to their current circumstances and projections of their imagined futures. I intend to work further with these life-story accounts in ongoing research on social mobility. However, for the purposes of this thesis I was struck most by the accounts of the years spent at university. Upward mobility involves a series of shifts in circumstances and very personal transformations in ideas and identity. These changes began earlier in life than is often presumed (Mallman 2015), and then continued on well into later adulthood, but university was clearly a time of distinct turmoil to the habitus, insofar as it challenged the interviewees as well as opened up new avenues of possibility for them. The parts of their life-stories that focused on higher education, and its relation to the rest of their lives, became the focus of the thesis.

I conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 29 adults living and working in Melbourne, Australia. They include 16 women and 13 men. Their ages ranged from mid-30s to mid-60s, and all were university graduates and were either engaged in fulltime professional or managerial careers, or had just recently retired (in the case of three interviewees). In selecting interviewees, I required that each person 1) had completed at least a bachelor's degree at university and was of the first generation in their family to participate in higher education 2) had experience in a professional or managerial career, and 3) came from a working-class background. For this third requirement, it was primarily important that they consider themselves to have working-class roots. Additionally, all of the interviewees' parents were employed in manual labour requiring varying skill and training levels, for example factory work, mechanic, or farm labour. There were three exceptions, two in which fathers were employed as low level clerical workers, and one father who became a low level manager later in his working life. Within these criteria, the interviewees represented a wide range of life experiences, career interests, and other significant elements of difference and identity such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

The interview participants were recruited using purposive sampling (Tranter 2010, pp. 137-141), in that they were chosen intentionally based on the characteristics described above. Many of the interviewees, having higher education degrees and professional careers, had developed vocabularies, literally and figuratively, for reflecting on and narrating their experiences of university and social mobility. (In general, it seems upwardly-mobile people are particularly reflective on their own lives, likely because they experience a higher degree of dissonance between differing habitus that they must contend with). I recruited people

through colleagues and acquaintances, using the opportunistic or emergent sampling technique (Liamputtong 2012, pp. 18-19). I also found additional referrals through these initial interviewees, employing a snowball sampling technique (Tranter 2010, pp. 137-141; Liamputtong 2012, p. 17). Rather than set out to interview a specific number of people, instead I selected participants to get a variety of experiences and stopped interviewing when a type of saturation occurred, such that, while new stories continued to come from new interviews, new or further developments of the data were not being generated (Liamputtong 2012, pp. 18-19).

Ethics approval was attained for the interviews from La Trobe University's Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee. Each participant was given a research information sheet and consent form to read before the interview, and a brief discussion about the research took place before each interview to ensure understanding of the research and their role in it. I described my own investment in the research as someone who comes from a working-class background, which may partially account for a degree of the participants' openness regarding their personal life stories. The research information sheet and consent form provided details of the ethical standards of the research (Christians 2011, p. 65; Liamputtong 2012, pp. 39-40). Participants were informed that they would be audio recorded if they agreed to it, and that the recordings would be transcribed. They were told that their identities would be completely anonymised (via pseudonyms and the removal of all identifying information or elements of their stories) and that the recordings and transcriptions would be kept confidential and stored away securely (Christians 2011, p. 66; Henn, Weinstein & Foard 2009, p. 94; Liamputtong 2012, p. 41). Participants were informed that their interviews would be used for the PhD thesis as well as in further academic publication and conference presentation. Importantly, the participants were made aware of their right to set restrictions if there were parts of the interview they did not want used, and that they could withdraw from the study and have their interview files destroyed if they changed their mind about participation within six weeks of the interview. None of the interviewees withdrew their participation, however a number of them took up my offer to send them the audio recording and/or transcript of the interviews.

Most of the participants were interviewed two or three times, in different locations. They were interviewed at their homes, and/or workplace, and/or the campus where they attended university. This was done in order to employ an ethnographic and emotionally situated

approach to interviewing. The original intention was to interview each participant three times in three different spaces, but time constraints (both theirs and mine) limited the number of people who were interviewed more than once. In some cases, one or two interviews proved sufficient after a type of saturation was reached for information from that particular interviewee. It was ethnographic insofar as time was spent observing and discussing the physical spaces with the interviewee. It was emotionally situated insofar as the interviewees were in the place that represented the focus of the questions for that interview, and they were asked questions about their thoughts and emotions in association with home, university, and work. For example, during home interviews, I asked interviewees to walk me around a bit and choose an object or possession (e.g. a painting, travel memento, old clothing item, child's toy) that was particularly meaningful to them. I asked them to describe it to me, tell me its story, and then I asked further questions to explore the meanings, memories, and emotions associated with the object. Another example includes interviews taking place while walking with the interviewee around their alma mater. This was commonly accompanied by pointing and exclamations of, 'Oh, I remember when…' Both of these methods proved to be rich sources of memory instigation and emotional exploration for the interviewees.

The interviews took place in different locations and at different times in order to gain what might be called life snapshots over time of the habitus as manifested (more discussion on challenges in researching habitus to follow). The different places allowed me to ask questions about meaningful objects in the spaces, as well as about the spaces (homes, offices, campuses). This also offered a more direct access to the emotions that people embody, as they inhabit spaces of meaning to them. These emotional connections to places invoked particular memories and stories as well as emotional descriptions about the places and the interviewees' connections to them. Repeat interviews allowed for this place-specific situated interview process, as well as allowing for an added element of time lapse and reflection. Subsequent interview sessions were partly devoted to giving the interviewees time to discuss reflections they had since the previous interview. There were instances with each interviewee where they had significant thoughts, memories, and conversations in the time interims between interviews, relevant to the research. The time gaps were a reflection incubation period where their ideas developed, memories resurfaced, and conversations with family, friends, and acquaintances sparked further interview discussion. Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical work, Bernard Lahire (2011) writes about a 'sociology at the level of the individual', which he describes as a method involving the examination of individual lives in

different contexts and across different times. Bourdieu (1996, p. 258) himself wrote that a greater depth of study would result from examining 'a series of positions successively occupied by the same agent or the same group of agents in successive spaces'. Such methods allow for a sense of the variability or the multiplicity of the habitus in differing contexts. Lahire argues that the habitus is more heterogeneous than Bourdieu often seemed to allow, and that its multiple aspects are variously employed or triggered in some contexts and remain dormant in others. I employed these methods to attain some degree of this type of complexity of habitus manifestation, depending on context and across time.

The interview questions were designed to be open and accessible, initiating conversation (Liamputtong 2012, pp. 56-57) about being from a working-class background and negotiating university and professional life. Broadly speaking, I encouraged them to tell me their stories, focusing on early family, community life, and school experiences, university, work, and current life circumstances. I also asked questions that encouraged associative and emotional reflections. Examples of such questions include: *'What memories come to mind from your early family life that are particularly prominent or important to you?'; 'Can you tell me about any memories that flash into your mind from university that are connected with strong emotions?'; 'How much have you felt that you are in control of how your life turns out, of how things unfold?'; 'Can you think of some significant turning points in your life?'*. On the face of it, these questions may appear difficult to answer – the mind may 'go blank' when addressed with this type of query. However, these and other questions all received answers from every interviewee (if at first they were occasionally met with, 'Hmm, that's a difficult question', or 'I have to think about that…'). In asking the interviewees to discuss their personal life stories, it often felt that I was asking them for a lot. But it was the personal, emotional nature of the questions, and the request for thoughtful reflection, that people appeared to respond best to. The openness of the questions may be said to have encouraged an open willingness to share life stories. It was not uncommon for a participant to say 'thank you' at the end of the interview, with the contemplative and pleasantly fatigued look of one who has engaged in meaningful 'identity work'. The debt of gratitude, of course, was mine.

There is a potential problem with using interviews for sociological research: the fallibility of memory and the subjectivity of experience. How do I know the people I spoke to remembered the events of their life correctly? How do I know they did not make things up? In fact, I do not know. However, there is no such distinction as what is perceived to have

happened and what truly did happen. What truly happened *is* what is perceived to have happened, and the account of reality depends on who you ask. The aim of this type of qualitative research is not to capture the otherwise impossibility of perfect memory, but rather to understand the interviewees' experiences of phenomena that occur in their lives. The implicit research question from this position is: 'What are the individual, subjective experiences people have in the social world we all inhabit and remake?' The aim is to get the individual, subjective accounts of university experiences from people who come from working-class backgrounds. Shaw describes it succinctly like this:

> …the validity and value of the personal document are not dependent upon objectivity or veracity…On the contrary, it is desired that [their] story will reflect [their] own personal attitudes and interpretations. Thus, rationalisations, fabrications, prejudices, exaggerations are quite as valuable as objective descriptions… (Shaw 1966, pp. 2-3, cited in Minichiello 1995, p. 94).

Life-story interviews allow people the time and space for reflection and expression of their views, in their own words, yielding nuanced accounts (Liamputtong 2012, p. 52). These nuances include significant, life-changing moments, as well as myriad mundane details that cohere to make a fuller picture of a life. Dispensing with the illusion of objectivity, or the need for objectivity in order to understand social life, the life-story interview offers an opportunity to gain understanding of life the way it is perceived by the research subject (Elliott 2005). The interaction between the interviewer and interviewee is a context in which meaning is made through the telling of stories and anecdotes, impressions and half-thoughts. This inter-subjective process is active meaning-making (Holstein & Gubrium 1995). It is both constructed from the raw material of reality and memory, as well as constructive of memory and reality. The interview context, the specific questions, and the interpersonal dynamics between interviewer and subject, are all part of the narrative construction of the interviewee's life. 'Narratives change', writes Bruner (1986, p. 153), and 'all stories are partial, all meanings incomplete', but the retelling of narratives are 'instances of never-ceasing reflexivity' (1986, p. 149). While this narrative is a fabrication of the interview moment, it is indicative of the thoughts and emotions that constitute the person's life, and they are arranged in a way unique to that person, at that time.

The use of narrative for understanding and situating lives sociologically has a now well-established place in the discipline (Richardson 1990), and continues to become increasingly

important to studies of social class. Narrative constructions of *personal* reality (Bruner 1991) are useful for investigating social issues, insofar as 'sociological problems' are investigated at the intersections of *biography*, history, and society (Mills 1959). Narrative and time are central to the social human experience, argues Richardson (1990, p. 118), defining narrative as the 'primary way through which humans organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes'. Bridging the personal and the social, this thesis makes use of an interpretive interactionism, what Denzin (1989) describes as the relationship between social processes and personal lives. The interpretations of the interviewees' narratives are situated within the contexts of the culture of higher education and that of their class cultural backgrounds in Australia. Narrative, biographical methods (Denzin, Lincoln & Giardina 2006) emphasise the relation of the subject to the context being studied, or as Bourdieu might have it, the relation of the individual habitus to the field.

I chose these methods specifically because they offer one effective approach to the challenge of researching habitus. The habitus can be a difficult thing to research or 'see' since, as theory, it directly refers to unobservable psychological processes linked to socialisation and continued social action. Barrett (2015) offers a useful review of Bourdieu's own scepticism about the reliability of life history approaches to studying habitus, given that, by definition, the habitus is preconscious and so peoples' narratives of self cannot be taken as indicative of the operation of the habitus. People do not know exactly what drives them. However, Barrett further explains that, throughout his career, Bourdieu incorporated numerous methodological approaches related to life history and subjective accounts, including, among others, ethnographic fieldwork, citing Bourdieu's work in Bearn and Algeria and later interview-based accounts in *The Weight of the World* (1999). In fact, Bourdieu's development of the concept of habitus, as Wacquant (2004a) points out, was initially employed as an analytical tool to answer specific empirical questions in his ethnographic fieldwork. The habitus can only be 'seen' in the context of specific research endeavours. Life history methods are one way of researching habitus, a concept that can be understood intellectually, but it is perhaps only observable in its manifestations. Habitus has its wellsprings in the visceral, but its presence is detectable in the material. The answer to research questions about habitus must be answered anew in each research moment (Lahire 2011) through observation of the things people say, do, and of the spaces where they make their life. Habitus is an embodied phenomenon, constituted physically and audibly in peoples' words and deeds. There are limitations to life history and narrative methods, as already discussed in this chapter, but they

allow for at least a partial understanding of the operation or social process of habitus, in peoples' life outcomes, in their attitudes, values, and opinions, their possessions and daily practices, and in the narratives they construct in the research moment.

The approach to analysis was aimed at allowing meaningful patterns to emerge from what the participants described as important to them, though informed by an interest in the specific topic of this thesis and by the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu and Diane Reay, as described above. The interview schedule encouraged the interviews in particular directions (especially regarding family life, education, and employment), but the content and emphases were distinct to each interviewee. When interpreting the interviews, an effort was made to allow the emerging themes to determine the shape of the final research outcomes. Coding involved careful repeat listening and reading of interview material to determine themes, a nuanced process involving the researcher's attentive recognition of details that may have meaning to the larger research project (Boyatzis 1998). An emergent theme is a 'pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon' (Boyatzis 1998, p. 161).

The interviews were all audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using NVivo analysis software. I used an open coding approach with the software, looking through the data for common themes (Henn, Weinstein & Foard 2009, p. 255). Far from determining themes for the researcher, the software allows for what might be called an organic emergence of codes. Themes and patterns emerged (Liamputtong 2012, p. 243), some of which I had already noticed through the course of conducting the interviews. These were linked with their descriptions of events, thoughts and opinions, relations with family, friends, and others, as well as with broader social events and social-structural issues that contextualised their lives (Liamputtong 2012, p. 243). The themes that emerged were confluences of similar experiences, struggles, strategies, and sentiments. While 29 interviews and the lives they represent are not representative of all experiences of working-class university graduates in the wider population (Mason 2002), they are indicative of social processes of class within the culture of higher education, and the ways individuals encounter and negotiate them, succumb to them, and surmount them. These interpretive methods (Denzin & Lincoln 2005) make use of one of the key strengths of life history approaches, which is their ability to capture the things that matter to the interviewees themselves. On the surface this may seem obvious, but it cannot be taken for granted that research participants' stories will be told. Experiences of

upward social mobility, and of successes at university for working-class undergraduates, can too easily be taken as an unqualified good, or a 'panacea for austere times' (Reay 2013). The reality for individuals is more complex, with challenges, sacrifices, and strain. Giving voice to those people and their experiences remains important as an effort toward recognition and social justice. This thesis employs methods aimed at allowing some of these voices to tell the narratives of the things that matter to them.

Written reflective essays – mature-age university students

The second part of the empirical work for the thesis comes from a qualitative research project about undergraduate students' experiences of university culture. The data includes the students' written personal reflections on their identities as students and of university culture. The research participants were first-year students enrolled in a first-year subject at La Trobe University in 2009. Students enrolled in the subject undertook an assessment task entitled 'University Culture' in which they undertook basic ethnographic observation of the university. The subject, 'Our Global Village: Introduction to Anthropology', was coordinated by Professor Helen Lee, co-author of article/chapters four and five. The 487 students enrolled in the subject were from various majors in the humanities, arts, and sciences. They were invited to participate in research based on their assessment tasks by giving permission for their written work to be used as data for the project. This project had approval from the University's Human Ethics Committee. The students were given a project description sheet that explained their participation was non-obligatory and their identities would remain anonymous. Students knew that their lecturer, Professor Lee, would not grade their assignments (that work was done by tutors), so there was no link between their participation and their mark in the subject. These details, along with explanations of the usefulness of such research and its outcomes, was also discussed in detail in the lecture theatre and on audio recordings accessible to all the students. 344 of the 487 students signed consent forms and participated in the research.

The students conducted basic participant observation fieldwork in different settings of the university. Their task was to reflect on and write about elements of 'university culture', in particular: interactions between students as well as students and staff, cultural rituals, social spaces and study-work-life balance. They were then required to write a 500 word reflective

essay, in which they were ask to discuss and 'reflect on what shapes your own perspectives and experiences of university'. They were also asked to write about how their experiences compared to those of the students described in an account of a U.S. college by Rebekah Nathan (2005, pp. 90-106). The student participants in the research were given the Nathan (2005) reading to inspire ideas for their own writing. The text supplied them some additional vocabulary that they employed to offer accounts (often impassioned accounts) of their own observations and embodied experiences of negotiating university culture. The assignment introduced the students to ethnographic research, and encouraged them to reflect on the university as a cultural institution and to think reflexively about their own experience of university. The students undertook the participant observation with enthusiasm and their written reflections demonstrate insightful, serious, and at times emotional reflection on university culture and their place within it.

The data in this thesis come from the written reflections of the 145 mature-age students within the group of 344 students who consented to their work being used for the project. Their ages ranged from 18 to 56, with 42.5% of the cohort aged 22 and over and therefore considered 'mature-age' by the university. Those students completed a questionnaire giving details of their age, gender, ethnic identity, study load (full or part time), whether they were local or international students, and the number of hours of paid work they undertook while studying. There was a predominance of females in the class (64.5%) [the other students reported 33.7% male and 1.8% gave no answer] and students were from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, although 55% self-identified simply as 'Australian'. The mature-age students quoted in the thesis range from 22 to 56 years of age, and there are important differences in the experiences, circumstances, needs, and interests of students within this broad range. The students discussed in this thesis cannot be spoken about as a homogenous 'mature-age student' cohort. There is discussion of some experiences they had in common but also the recognition their experiences need further complexification in future research.

This research method, involving students' ethnographic and personal reflections, allowed access to perspectives that students rarely have the opportunity to express. As with the rationale for choosing life history interviews, the ethnographic personal reflections were chosen for their ability to capture university culture from insiders, from the students themselves. This is a privileged view that challenges some assumptions that can otherwise easily be made by researchers and university staff. The students were asked to analyse

undergraduate university culture from the inside, and they offered insightful, emotive, and often compelling depictions of their lives in higher education. Ethnography, including auto-ethnography, allows for distinct insights into the culture of societies, institutions and groups (Liamputtong 2012). Using the students' written reflections, Professor Lee and I employed an interpretive approach (Denzin & Lincoln 2005), drawing on the meaning, practices, and reflections made by the student participants themselves. We aimed to view the culture of university as experienced and interpreted by the students, to interpret their world 'as things are' for them (Jackson 1996). NVivo software was used to employ inductive and deductive approaches to analysing the qualitative data of the written assignments. NVivo software offered the advantage of an organised means for allowing patterns in the issues of importance to the students to emerge from the data.

The students were taught ethnographic methods in their subject, then asked to employ those methods. It was the students themselves who offered the ethnographic and personal reflective insights, which Professor Helen Lee and I then used to offer analysis of student experiences and university culture. Ethnography is the examination of a culture, and groups within that culture, and is ideal for studying the culture of university, as well as the particular experiences of mature-age students within that culture. To understand university culture, we took a three part theoretical and analytical perspective, including: 1. Understanding learning as participation in the practices of the learning community (practice), 2. University transition as a process of 'becoming' (belonging), and 3. Narrative understanding of self (self-perception). Ethnographic methods are particularly well suited to studying these aspects of university culture. We examined practice, belonging, and self-conception as three elemental aspects of what constitute the relationship between individuals and the cultures they live in. The methods employed, of examining students' ethnographic fieldwork reflections, allowed for an examination and analysis of these three elements. There are limitations to this approach, such as the students' limited fieldwork experience, possible reluctance to write all that they truly think and feel about university culture, and the limited space or word count allowed for the students' reflections (500 words). However, the benefits of gaining the students' insider perspectives, and the insights this offers about university culture, make student-led ethnography a novel and effective research method.

There is a conspicuous absence in the students' written reflections, and thus from the analysis, of detailed descriptions of the interaction of class, gender, and ethnicity. These

elements of social identity shape the experience of learning in fundamental ways. However, the focus of the analysis in this thesis is on the issues emphasised by the students; the dynamics of age, academic practice, and sociality between students in and out of the classroom. This emphasis is partly a matter of the research design. The students were not expressly asked to discuss things such as class, gender, and ethnicity. Future research can be designed with prompts that encourage reflection on these aspects of their identity. As they are, the accounts offered by the students describe their experiences as members of a culture of learning. Their written accounts exemplify that 'for individuals, it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of the community' (Wenger 1998, p. 7).

Outline and description of articles/chapters and research questions

The first chapter (journal article one) is not directly about university but it is central to understanding the experiences that working-class people have throughout their lives negotiating formal education, work, and relationships. Much of the qualitative research literature on class focuses on university and work, but the interviewees in this research told life-stories of upward social mobility whose trajectories were rooted deeply in the material and emotional family worlds of their working-class backgrounds. The hidden injuries of class that Sennett and Cobb (1972) wrote about refer to personalisation of social inequalities, so that the limits on a person's freedoms and opportunities come to be seen as personal limits in worth and capability. This internalisation of class-based inequalities takes a peculiar form for the upwardly-mobile from working-class backgrounds, as they may feel they are placed in opposition to a newly developing self and a family and community of origin that are noticeably different yet still a part of their self-identity. This can lead to class divisions within the family, and 'competing subjectivities' (Lucey, Melody & Walkerdine 2003, p. 286) within the individual person. At the same time, the interviewees had strategies for trying to reconcile their pasts with their present at given life stages, as well as summoning their pasts as sources of strength and positive identity. This chapter examines how Bourdieu's (1999, p. 511) notion of the *cleft habitus* ('a habitus divided against itself') is useful, and may be expanded upon, to analyse the life-story accounts of working-class people living middle-class lives in university and beyond.

The underlying research questions in this chapter are about the nature of the habitus, as well as the nature of class culture in a particular time and place. To what degree is the habitus

pliable, or amenable to change? Regarding class-culture: can we learn more about the operations and impacts of class in a particular time and place by looking at biographical accounts and at the points of tension between class cultures? Studying how working-class students experience the tensions of being in the dominant culture of higher education, offers a picture of the shifting boundaries between classes that are otherwise invisible. By looking at how class tensions can play out within the home, between family and community members, this also helps shed light on elements of class. Class cultures are not fixed, but, like culture, change through time and historical, material circumstances.

Appendix I is best described here, in the context of the first chapter. It is a published book review of *The Plural Actor* (2011), by French sociologist Bernard Lahire. Lahire's theoretical work is a suitable addition to the theoretical development in chapter one of the notion that the habitus is, under some conditions, amenable to change. The socialisation that individual people undergo, Lahire argues, has grown increasingly heterogeneous. That is to say, people are multi-socialised to the degree that the variability of their social dispositions, the complex mix of their ways of being, may be experienced as self-produced rather than being of social origin. Lahire builds on Bourdieu's work, offering a sympathetic critique of his unifying principle of embodied action. People do not have unified selves, with a singular habitus that influences and reproduces action in differing circumstances. Rather, differing circumstances elicit a 'more complex mechanism of suspension/application or inhibition/activation of dispositions' (Lahire 2011, p. xii). Bourdieu wrote about a 'cleft habitus', in which some like a working-class university student, who feel themselves to be a fish-out-of-water, feel the distress of trying to be two opposed things at once. But Lahire argues globalised, diversified societies produce people with multiple, often contradictory dispositions, without necessarily experiencing a strained identity. This is because in some instances a part of the psyche is engaged, or applied, while in others it is suspended. People learn to be different in different circumstances. Lahire does not mean to imply individuals are somehow free of their socialising influences. If anything, they may have the illusion of freedom because of the diversity of those influences. For the research in this thesis on working-class students, Lahire's theoretical developments assist in describing the capacity the graduates had in negotiating the differing class-culture of university. For this research on mature-age students, it is also useful in understanding how people negotiate university cultures that they often find their membership within is contingent.

Chapter two (journal article two) draws on life-story interviews and begins the direct examination of working-class students' negotiation of university culture. Working-class students have to rely primarily on their academic capabilities for a sense of legitimacy in formal education (Christie et al., 2008; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2009). However, an often mentioned but little examined phenomenon can undermine this bid for legitimacy. Working-class students are prone to a sense of having flawed intellectual capacity. The findings discussed in this thesis suggest that many working-class students consider themselves to have a 'naturally', inexplicably flawed intelligence. This entails a paradox that such students live with; of being capable enough scholastically to make it into a university, but feeling their enrolment was based on a mistake. This pattern of self-doubt can be traced to a process of symbolic separation of cultural, social, and economic capital from technical skill or ability (Lareau & Weininger 2003). The dominant inherit the cultural capital (including practical skills and cultural know-how) that is legitimised by universities. While their scholastic achievements are largely dependent on their inherited resources, their abilities are often attributed to 'natural' ability. Conversely, lack of achievement is viewed as an indication of a lack of talent or natural ability amongst the working-class who often find they struggle with university as a result of the incongruence between their cultural capital and the social field of higher education. Chapter two analyses the interviewees' negotiation of these symbolic processes and the impact on their university experience, their emotional well-being, and their identities. The guiding research questions for this chapter are: What are the implications of the cultural expectation for independent learning? What experiences do working-class students have of this culture?

Chapter three (journal article three) draws on life-story interviews and continues the discussion of working-class students and university culture. Universities have long implicitly expected students to arrive in their first year prepared to learn independently, including things such as the ability to decipher explicit and implicit expectations, interpret and retain academic material, produce adequate levels of work, and navigate interpersonal dynamics amongst peers and staff. When a university degree was a pursuit less available for what are now called non-traditional students, prior to the 1970s, most students had the cultural, social, and financial capital necessary for the task of so-called independent learning. These symbolic and economic resources enable successful negotiation of university, and in this sense it is more accurate to state that learning has always been an inter-dependent (dependent on these resources), rather than independent, pursuit. In an era of continued expansion of higher

education, since the 1970s, many ‘non-traditional’ students do not have the same symbolic and economic resources at their disposal. The cultural expectation for independent learning at university suits those who arrive already equipped, but many non-traditional students are more likely to find this extra-ordinarily difficult. Chapter three examines the challenges working-class students encounter in becoming ‘legitimate’ university students, given their lower levels of cultural, social, and economic capital. They can become independent in their learning to the degree their cultural capital is congruent with the knowledge, skills, and expectations of the institution. Mastery of the student role is, in fact, dependent on inherited, acquired resources. In this way, ‘traditional’ students are dependent learners too; dependent on an inheritance of symbolic and economic capital. The guiding research question for this chapter is: How do working-class students experience and negotiate their disadvantage in inherited resources?

Chapter four (journal article four, co-authored with Professor Lee) turns to the discussion of mature-age students, and is the first of three chapters to draw on the data set of written reflective essays. Using written accounts of mature-age students, as well as school-leaver students, this chapter examines the differing priorities of these two demographics. The findings suggest that, due to differing scholastic practices, particularly in the classroom, some school-leavers stigmatise mature-age students. Goffman’s (1963) account of stigmatisation describes a process in which a person is stigmatised because they have attributes or qualities considered by the dominant members of a culture to be incongruous with the norm. Stigmatising labels, simplifies, and positions the offending individual as other. This leads to additional challenges for mature-age students in being and becoming university students. Some mature-age students alter their scholastic practices and attitudes in defence against this stigma. Others, however, also resist and reinterpret the normative practices of school leavers. Though university culture caters primarily to ‘youth cultures’ (Kasworm 2010), the focus and dedication of some older students is seen as an advantage by teaching staff. The guiding research questions for this chapter are: How do mature-age students experience the learning culture of university? And what impact does it have on their learning?

Chapter five (journal article five, co-authored with Professor Lee) examines the under-researched influence of age variation amongst mature-age students by examining the first-hand written accounts of a younger cohort of adult students (early 20s to early 30s) who are deemed ‘mature-age’ by the tertiary institution but whose experiences of university culture

complicate this identity. Inquiry into these students' experiences reveals that institutions may be missing important opportunities with what we argue is a 'young mature-age' demographic. Governmental and university policies, and higher education research, generally do not acknowledge *young* adult learners as distinct, but instead often assume 'mature-age' describes first-year students 22 years and older. This research indicates young mature-age students are, in important ways, much like older mature-age students, but in equally important ways, much like their younger, school-leaver peers. The combination of factors they have in common with these other two categories make young mature-age students a separate demographic. Chapter five argues that young mature-age students are particularly vulnerable to isolation within university cultures. Feeling alienated from both 'traditional' and 'mature age' cohorts, and of feeling 'in-between, or 'alone', many young mature-age students straddle the needs, interests, and desires of their older and younger peers. Importantly, many want a type of sociality, one centred on their learning, which they are presently not finding at university. We argue that conceptualising them as a demographic will advance understanding and allow for improved support of these otherwise isolated learners. The guiding research questions of this chapter are: What implications are there regarding age variation within the mature-age demographic for participation in university culture? What impact does age variation have on their identities as students?

Chapter six (journal article six) is the final chapter on mature-age students, examining their experiences of trying to balance study, work, and life. This chapter argues that mature-age students are likely to experience study-work-life *imbalance*, leading to sacrifices in the quality of one or more of these areas of their life. The chapter offers insights into the ways students' personal lives of work and family have profound impacts on their public, university educational experiences. The acquisition of cultural capital, and the necessary time investment needed to do so, are matters of concern for mature-age students who are stretched for time, especially when their circumstances require them to give priority to home and/or work. The findings suggest many mature-age students experience a conflict with their study, emotional strain trying to fit everything in, and ultimately have to make sacrifices in their studies, life, work, or all three. Better understanding of this seeming private matter, of study-work-life balance, can inform efforts by institutions and governments that host these students, with the aim of improving the quality of students' educational outcomes as well as that of the institution they are enrolled in. The guiding research questions for this chapter are: How do life-circumstances, particularly the necessity of balancing work and family/personal life with

study, impact the learning experience? How do personal concerns impact student identity formation?

Each chapter contains a distinct argument, with relevant evidence and literature, but there is an overarching contention that arises from the synthesis of these separate pieces: working-class and mature-age students are disadvantaged by lower levels of symbolic and economic resources for negotiating university, and they have additional challenges with adopting a student identity, adapting to the implicit and explicit expectations of university, and with adapting to the culture of the social space. This qualitative research has inbuilt limitations in the generalisability of the findings. Not all working-class students are this way. Not all mature-age students are that way. However, this thesis contributes to the research literature by broadening knowledge and understanding of some of the experiences these non-traditional students have at university. This thesis does not intend to point a finger at Australian universities or suggest they are careless institutions, unwilling to support working-class and mature-age students. On the contrary, this author assumes that universities and the people who run and staff them are keen to support all students and see them succeed. The findings in the thesis are not used to blame the institutions but rather to demonstrate ways that social structures and processes inadvertently may help or hinder (McKay and Devlin 2014). As Devlin and O'Shea (2011, p. 529) argue, 'It is important for reasons of both equity (giving students of equal potential equal opportunities to succeed) and economy (producing a good return for monies invested) that universities focus not only on access, but also on achievement for all students' (Devlin and O'Shea 2011, p. 529). The implications of the findings in this thesis can inform efforts of universities and policy makers to support students from non-traditional backgrounds. Understanding the sociological nuances of working-class and mature-age students' experiences in higher education presents an opportunity for improving their chances for success, bettering university outcomes, and enhancing social equity.

Chapter 1: Not entirely at home: Upward social mobility and early family-life

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Abstract

Current research on socioeconomic mobility documents difficulties upwardly-mobile people encounter at university and in professional work environments. However, early-life experiences of family, home, and community are largely overlooked as a primary point of inquiry. This article examines accounts of early family life given by upwardly-mobile Australians to consider the ways class processes impact family beginnings and life-trajectories. The in-depth interviews discussed here reveal that the negotiation of differing class cultures begins during childhood, in the home and community. This is illustrated most clearly through reflections on a sense of belonging (or not), and on material and cultural dynamics of youth. These narratives challenge widely accepted notions of homogenous working-class socialisation, and require a broader understanding of the complexity of ways the upwardly mobile negotiate relationships and identity. These are narratives of what happens when origins and ambitions are seemingly at odds.

Key Words

class/ family/ "habitus disruption"/ qualitative/ socialisation/ social mobility/working class

Introduction

Quantitative social-mobility research represents one of the most developed fields of sociology (Miller 2001), and is concerned with, among other things, measuring and defining class categories and boundaries. Qualitative research is a comparatively marginal field of study, and often works from the premise that class boundaries are fluid, without definite demarcations. The tradition of qualitative mobility research is small but rich, relying on life-

story interview and ethnography (cf. Bertaux 1981 and Bertaux and Thompson 1993, 1997; Miles et al. 2011; Sennett and Cobb 1972; and Newman 1999, on downward mobility), and has experienced a 'renewal' (Devine and Savage 2000) since the late 1990s (cf. Friedman 2014; Miles et al. 2011; Savage et al. 2001). Australia has a number of significant qualitative sociological studies involving an interest in class (cf. Brett and Moran 2006; Connell et al. 1982; Dempsey 1990; Huppatz 2010, 2012; Masterman-Smith and Pocock 2008; and Peel 1995, 2003). There is, however, a dearth of Australian literature on qualitative accounts of class *mobility*, mirroring the marginality of this specific field internationally. Two recent notable Australian exceptions are: Ramon Spaaij's *Sport and Social Mobility* (2011), an ethnography of the impact of sport team participation on individual class trajectories and the transfer of symbolic capital; and the work of Barbara Pini and colleagues (Pini et al. 2012; Pini and Previte 2013) on new wealth in Australian mining, consumption, and contested spaces of class. These mark a further turn toward understanding the lived experiences of Australians who rise and fall within larger socio-economic patterns, and what they can tell us about class processes in Australia.

Literature on social mobility processes suggests much of the changes the upwardly-mobile undergo happen primarily later in life, especially in higher education and work environments. Based on a qualitative study of upwardly mobile Australians, this article examines recollected accounts of early-family life to investigate how class mobility may begin earlier than usually presumed. These life-story accounts demonstrate the importance of considering early family and community experiences as the foundations for class mobility, not only class reproduction.

Class, family, and a divided self

When people experience class mobility, they often embody the conflicts of class. Sennett and Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972) refers to a moral economy of dignity that underlies the ideal of meritocracy, in which the individual is meant to be responsible for the limits or increases on their freedom; an ideology ubiquitous to neo-liberal societies (Wacquant 2009). Upward and downward mobility are widely perceived as originating entirely from personal ability and worth, rather than also from access to resources. This 'myth of meritocracy' (McNamee and Miller 2004) is substantiated when individuals account for their successes and failures according to their moral worth. The injuries of class are hidden because structural forces are internalised, and misrecognised as originating from the self.

Upwardly mobile people enter this moral economy on an upward trajectory that pits them in opposition to their old selves, families, and communities. Sennett and Cobb argue that an increase in freedom (upward mobility) results in an increase in vulnerability in relationships and identity. Family relationships perhaps suffer the most under these class mobility dynamics. Sennett and Cobb (1972: 128) wrote, for example, 'Working-class fathers see the whole point of sacrificing for their children to be that the children will become unlike themselves'. Social division can enter the family, posing a threat to relational cohesion.

Pierre Bourdieu (2002: 31) wrote that such scenarios lead to a 'dialectical confrontation' between a self socialised in a working-class family, and an emerging middle-class self that results from the exigencies of living and competing in dominant, or elite, fields of social life. These 'selves', or identities, are best explained by Bourdieu (1977; 1984) as habitus: complex schema of psychic and embodied social dispositions, derived from material circumstances and socialising influences, and shaping relational ways of being in the world. Critiques tend to centre on a reading of Bourdieu's theory of social practice, pertaining particularly to habitus, as overly deterministic. Bourdieu (1996: 108) allowed that the habitus can and does undergo alterations through time, though he argued dramatic change is statistically unlikely and, for the upwardly mobile, it is generally marked by a 'failure to fully assimilate into the bourgeoisie'. There is room here for debate, but qualitative research on class mobility indicates the habitus *is* amenable to change or alteration, but that, in fact, the processes pertaining to inculcation into a differing class culture are, in a word, rigorous. The potential for adaptation can actually be seen in the struggles undergone by the upwardly mobile, and in their (qualified) successes.

Literature on working-class student experiences of higher education demonstrates that university is a particularly fraught period of adaptation in the ongoing processes of social mobility. Universities, as institutions, are sites of inculcation of dominant class-cultural modes of social practice, and are related by 'structural homology' to broader structures of power (Bourdieu: 1996: 263). Higher education is where a break away from a working-class past is most acutely felt. Upward mobility leads, for many, to 'a painful dislocation between an old and a newly developing habitus, which are ranked hierarchically and carry connotations of inferiority and superiority' (Baxter and Britton 2001: 99). The experience can be disorienting, resulting in a dispositional distancing from the family and community of origin. These 'competing subjectivities' (Lucey et al. 2003: 286) often result, for example, in

feelings of being divided, dislocated, and damaged (cf. Aries and Seider 2005; Bufton 2003; Evans 2009; Ingram 2011; Lawler 1999), and at best, ambivalent feelings about one's mobility (Reay et al. 2009). Because social mobility entails rifts in identity and family relations, the individual must negotiate discrepancies between what had been and what was becoming their new life. Most relevant research on upward mobility focuses on these processes as they unfold in higher education, implying a view that family socialisation has a marginal role to play in stories of upward mobility.

Family socialisation is closely associated in the literature with the reproduction of class. Extensive valuable work has been done on classed parenting, such as Annette Lareau's (2003) *Unequal Childhoods*, an examination of how middle-class parenting practices reproduce structured life-chances (cf. Walkerdine et al. 2001; Gillies 2005). Class research benefits from these accounts of socialisation, but Lucey et al. (2003) caution against inadvertent pathologisation of working-class family life. They suggest that 'a deficit model underpins conceptions of working-class families… [implying they] must somehow be lacking that which ensures success in middle-class families' (2003: 289), thereby blurring issues of structural inequality. Equally, if working-class backgrounds are viewed as simply something to escape, then family origins may be overlooked for their complex role in the life-course, especially of upward mobility. Irwin and Elley (2011: 480) write that 'within recent literature there has been a tendency towards overstating the internal homogeneity of middle-class and working-class experiences'. This can easily result in underestimation of the degree to which a working-class background may be an integral part of upward mobility.

The disjunctive processes of movement away from social origins do not happen only later in life in higher education and work environments. In my research with upwardly mobile Australians living in Melbourne, it became clear the story of mobility begins much earlier. I argue we should start from the premise that the life-trajectories of the upwardly mobile germinate in early experiences of family and community. I reviewed literature related to higher education here for the express purpose of illustrating how key findings, about the subjective experiences and impact on the habitus, can be seen in operation much earlier in life. Bourdieu (1996: 106) wrote that the break away from origins, which results from inculcation in formal education, is 'simply the last in a long series of infinitesimal breaks, the culmination of innumerable differential deviations that in the end constitute the great shifts in social trajectories'. This article is about these infinitesimal breaks that mark the narrative

recollections of early life. I consider working-class family experience as heterogeneous in order to better understand what early family socialisation means to the upwardly mobile. Family is the complex environment where the equally complex processes of social mobility start to unfold. Bernard Lahire writes (2011:186), 'Sometimes contradictory socializing experience, can in/cohabit the same body...', and in this way, the upwardly mobile find themselves living complex classed narratives. The life-story interviews and analysis herein also offer a sympathetic critique of findings in the literature about divided identities and classed socialisation, suggesting mobility research needs to take account of heterogeneous socialisation and the complex individual negotiation of class-mobility processes.

Methods: biography and narrative

The methods employed herein for collecting and analysing data were chosen purposefully to approach questions of subjective experiences of social class. Class is as much economically determined as it is remade by people navigating lives within cultures. E. P. Thompson (1966: 9) wrote that class is made through interactions, that it is not a *thing*, but 'something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships'. Qualitative social mobility research has the advantage of capturing such nuances of human relationships. Some of the more prescient accounts of class mobility have been written by those who experienced the relational and personal drama themselves. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1970), for example, offers a compelling narrative of what happens when one is 'emotionally uprooted from their class' (239). *Strangers in Paradise* (Ryan and Sackrey 1985) and *This Fine Place so Far From Home* (Dews and Law 1995) are edited collections of autobiographical pieces written by academics from the working-class. They detail the triumphs and struggles of the upwardly mobile negotiating life at work and in community, with the emotional clarity of personally narrated experience.

The use of biographical methods also allows for examination of the subtleties of interpersonal relational dynamics. Daniel Bertaux practices and articulates a biographical method for studying mobility, which can depict the relational nuances of intergenerational transmission (Bertaux and Thompson (eds.) 1997; Bertaux (ed.) 1981). Conducting research in France amongst families of bakers, he likens families to micro-cultural climates, writing that life-story interviews 'help us to explore how men and women, parents and children, help or hinder each other's mobility' (35). Importantly, Bertaux emphasises the role of the family in

the story of mobility, suggesting that social mobility research too often fixates only on the individual. Finally, biographical accounts of social mobility allow for types of narrative analysis that suggest cultural dynamics at work in peoples' lives. Miles et al. (2011), in employing such analysis, describe the way the upwardly mobile are likely to offer 'modest' accounts of their success, a strategy that may allow one to maintain otherwise paradoxical narratives of oneself as both 'ordinary' (thus avoiding snobbery) and 'unique' (thus cohering with normative expectations for a 'linear hierarchical career'.

I utilised these biographical methods (Denzin 1989), and designed the interviews to encourage associative memory and narrative storytelling. Narrative accounts of life offer illustrative details, forming a rich life-text created by the teller. Narratives are structured and evaluative accounts, offering the storyteller's memory and assessment of the meaning of what happened (Elliot 2005). The analysis in this article is based upon life-story interviews with eleven adults in Melbourne, Australia, conducted in 2011. The accounts they offer are of experiences that took place in childhood, while still primary school age. Many of the quotes offer impressions they had, as adults, of their parents' attitudes, values, and practices. Each person was, at the time of interview, established in a professional or managerial career and each was a first-generation university student. Participants were selected based on snowball and purposive sampling models (Tranter 2010: 137-141). Their work experiences are not meant to be entirely representative of contemporary Australian middle- and upper middle-classes, however their work covers a range of occupational fields, from medicine to academia, business administration, law, social research and advocacy, and professional writing.

Occupation alone is not taken here to be sufficiently indicative of social class. Bourdieu's (1984; 1990) model of stratification describes peoples' relational positions in *social space* as based on overall conditions of existence, or distance from material necessity. The types and amount of capital (economic, cultural, social) one has, determine one's economic and symbolic position, and capacity for movement and accumulation of more capital, over time. While I do not view occupation as the sole determinant of peoples' position and negotiation of social space, occupations correlate more or less with economic and symbolic capital distributions. Importantly, my qualitative analysis suggests that upwardly mobile Australians view occupation as central not only to their socio-economic position, but also to their identity and relationships. The upwardly mobile manage to avoid the types of work they watched

their parents struggle through, but, as is shown, their parents' work, and the family-life closely linked to it, are viewed as an important part of their own trajectories.

In selecting for the appropriateness of potential interviewees, I required that the candidate, 1) considered themself to have come from a working-class family, especially that their parents had not participated in professional or managerial work, 2) completed at least a bachelor's university degree, 3) had experience working in a professional or managerial position, and 4) was still working at the time of the interview. A balance was sought regarding sex (five women; six men). Their ages range between 44 and 59 years old. Most of their fathers were employed in manual labour requiring varying levels of training (e.g. factory work, appliance repair, auto mechanic, farm labour; with the exceptions of two who did low level clerical work at one stage). Most mothers maintained similar types of manual labour (especially factory work) and nearly all carried out full-time domestic work. These criteria offered the project a wide range of experiences, and suit the nature of this qualitative research, which is intent on examining the meanings participants draw from their memories (Jackson 1996: 11).

The hidden injuries of class, at home

Class inequalities are maintained, in part, through the cultural demeaning or pathologisation by dominated classes (Skeggs 1997). Hierarchical pathologisation – Lawler's (1999: 5) description of class relations of 'superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality, judgment/shame' – occurred between these interviewees and their families. When strained class relational dynamics entered the home, it came at the price, for some, of estrangement, rejection, and shame. This section details some of the insidious class processes that enter family life of the upwardly mobile, as well as how *belonging* (or not belonging) played a role in the development of an independent identity. They experience a divided sense of self early on, but there are also hints of early modes of identity reconciliation, helped or hindered, in part, by diverse family attitudes and practices.

Intellectual curiosity played the early role for the interviewees of causing them to feel different from their families. They elicited strong feelings about books, for example, some saying that their young intellectual interest was what enabled them to endure challenging elements of childhood. Most parents recognised the importance of reading, like Vic's father who would wait for him outside the library in the car once a week while Vic made a hasty

selection of books. Their interests, as well as their achievements at school, made them stand out in their families, for better and worse. Some family members felt their own dignity was at risk when confronted by a high achieving daughter or son, perhaps most so for Rachel, who told this story about her father:

> When I started doing too well at [primary] school, [my father] would wake me up and say, 'You think you're a brain; you think you're too good for us don't you? Get out of here', and stuff like that. Again, totally threatened by it all, feeling that my success was a mirror to him being a failure. (Rachel)

Class-based pathologisation is especially insidious when it divides a family. Some of the upwardly-mobile interviewees reminded their families of the people involved in denying them equal social dignity. This even occurred, though to lesser degrees, for those whose families provided some semblance of the academically supportive environment many middle-class children are brought up in (Lareau 2003). Most of the interviewees were taught the value of hard work, but with an amendment regarding status:

> [My parents are] coming from the old background, where, you know, you don't rise above your station, which is a very working-class sort of philosophy, or mantra. You know your place. You work hard and you do as well as you can, but. (Christine)

She ended her thought abruptly, the word 'but' indicating a seeming impasse between aspiration and anxiety over family denigration. This contributed to childhoods of ambivalence, feeling part of a working-class family and simultaneously estranged from it, feelings of displacement within the home. Sennett and Cobb (1972: 183) write, 'The uncomfortable feelings about those who do not "make something of themselves" when they have a chance, come out of an assumption that there can be respect only as they become in some way distinctive, as they stand out from the mass'. One feels social pressure, including from family, to be aspirational, while simultaneously not wanting to feel different and distanced from family. The social rendering of dignity based on performance and achievement maintains boundaries between social classes. It is especially nefarious, though, when it poses a threat to relationships between the upwardly mobile and their own families.

While there is estrangement and other 'injuries', the challenges play out in complex, and at times, useful ways. There were indications the interviewees put their family-outsider status to use in the development of their own identity. Curiosity and intelligence were characteristics they ascribed to their younger selves, in hindsight, constructing narratives of class mobility in which they were 'always already middle-class' (Lawler 1999). They viewed their class movement as a process in which the 'real' self emerges only once they had realised their intellectual potentials. This location of the self in the past, as a version of the present self, lends some continuity to narratives of disrupted habitus and of negotiating incongruent patterns of class. It also served to bolster an independent identity. Where Rachel, for example, was made to feel guilty for being different, and vaguely told to 'get out', she viewed this as forcing her to, in her own words, 'find validation elsewhere'. For Rachel, as for others, a sense of legitimacy would have to come from within. Here, she comments on her negotiation of values (specifically integrity) within power dynamics in her professional work experience:

> I never learned to submit... It doesn't mean I've gotten rich or anything. But I never wanted power…I've just always said what I wanted to. So, you don't end up in a good place but you feel you have your integrity. (Rachel)

Lack of dignity and validation afforded by the family in early life, in regards to the emerging middle-class signifiers such as academic interest, instigated a turning inward for approval, and learning to be comfortable as different, which proved useful in later contexts of class incongruity. All the interviewees demonstrated similar types of psychological mechanisms, in which they transferred classed-family challenges from early life into types of resources. This proved to serve Rachel and other interviewees well when they later entered fields of education and work in which they again felt like outsiders.

'Escaping' insecurity

Socio-economic disadvantage limits opportunities, and it can also instigate self-limitation. Bourdieu (1984: 471) writes that: 'Objective limits become a sense of limits…a sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded'. A surprising finding in the interviewees' narratives is the significance of the way they negotiated family disadvantage to apparently defy this trend.

Their families struggled financially, ranging from periods of joblessness for some (and even periodic homelessness for two families), to 'humble' stability for others. This section explores the ways perceptions of and interactions with working-class constraints are integral to the negotiation of class mobility. The material constraints of their social milieu may predispose many working-class people toward self-limiting action. The interviewees, though, managed to use limitations as motivation to action, specifically, to 'escape' their socio-economic origins.

Much of the interview conversations regarding disadvantage centred on risk and security. The interviewees saw their parents' socio-economic struggles in light of risk; of having smaller margins for error, and of unforseen events. Social mobility was, in part, the story of a complex relation to risk and security. Each interviewee defined their parents' situation as something to avoid, ballast against which they would measure their own trajectories. Joel appears to try and turn the notion of cultural capital on its head, indicating the complexity of the self-narration taking place.

> My mom and dad were probably my greatest mentors, because I saw them struggle through life. I thought: I'm never going to do that… I'm moving out of here, and I'll do whatever I've got to do to make it happen. (Joel)

This demonstrates the possibility of viewing dominated circumstances as surmountable, but also betrays the necessary emotional distancing required for doing so. Socio-economic insecurity was reinforced, for some, through social shame. 'Class inequalities,' writes Sayer (2005: 954), 'mean that the "social bases of respect" in terms of access to valued ways of living are unequally distributed…' This is apparent in a passing comment Andrew made about an experience at primary school of, '… someone throwing money on the ground and saying that I could pick it up because I needed it, my family was poor…' The interviewees often qualified these types of stories with statements suggesting it was 'not that big of a deal', as though to reclaim the dignity often withheld from their families. The embarrassment of being compared to others with more material resources belies the process in which moral worth is measured by social position and material possession. Socio-economic disadvantage increases the risk of susceptibility to this type of denigration. The following passage from Lachlan's interview exemplifies the anxiety of the intersection of class-cultural worlds:

> Sometimes I was embarrassed having friends around my house [growing up]. We had a very basic house. My mother would not let [guests] smoke; terrified and had to keep the curtains down because she didn't want to fade the carpet. It was the mentality that you preserve things for life, [versus other] people who are mixing in a much higher socio-economic ability. So, in some senses I felt disadvantaged and embarrassed about it. (Lachlan)

Damage to health was another risk the interviewees sought to mitigate. There were some accounts of physical threat as well as concern about environmental exposure to chemicals, drug and alcohol abuse, and family attitudes about not caring, or leaving things to chance. Andrew, for example, is more risk averse than his father, whose attitude toward his own health and that of the family was haphazard at best. His father's heavy drinking was perceived as common practice amongst the men he knew. Andrew later altered his personal behaviours and choices based on insecurity about how his father ran the family during Andrew's childhood:

> Whilst it was warm and communal at one level, life was also disorganised. A parent died, another parent drank a lot. People smoked and drank. Life was just, just get on with it. There was no planning, no superannuation, no insurance, none of that sort of stuff more educated people cover themselves with. I don't want to be like that, I don't want to be like my father. I don't want to leave my kids without money. (Andrew)

The upwardly mobile, by definition, rise into a socio-economic atmosphere of diminished risk, but not without cost. They may have been motivated to 'get away', but they did not entirely escape the losses inherent in being from a struggling working-class family. One such cost was a compromise of some of their work-related aspirations. Reverberations of early experiences are seen in their later educational and career choices.

> A secure income becomes so important to you when you've seen so much insecurity in people. [….] I'm ready to admit, I would favour a secure job rather than a more interesting but insecure job, because of that fear. … So, you know, I don't take the chances I might take if ... I'd grown up differently. I don't have a safety net. (Alexander)

> For a long time I held the belief that I needed to repay them, because they were very poor putting me through school and supporting me through university …I really felt that I had to somehow really live this out for them…*I'll show them, I'll show them*. I mean, I have the diaries that actually still have that in there, like some horrible march. I wanted to be a speech and drama teacher, I didn't want to be a lawyer. […] I would say the defining drivers would be my mother, instilling this enormous competitive sense into me; and guilt [laugh]. (Adriana)

The type of upward mobility Adriana experienced was influenced by her emotional involvement with her family's financial struggles, as she lived out her mother's ambitions for her, rather than her own. It affected her life planning. Inherited fear of risk led others to defer their ambitions. Christine, for example, waited fifteen years to begin a university course largely because of her father who repeated throughout her childhood that a job was more sensible and certain than higher education. The pursuit of security influences the opportunities, choices, and life-timelines of the upwardly mobile.

Loss was a predominant part of the narratives, but another important part was that of inheritance. In the economy of cultural capital, confidence is, according to Bourdieu (1984), the true asset of the 'dominant fractions of society', whose habitus disposes them to the cultural patterns of thought and behaviour congruent with their higher levels of economic and symbolic capital. The interviewees indicated they struggled with confidence, but it was also apparent that some experiences of working-class family life were transferable into effective negotiation of middle-class lives. Many of the interviewees viewed their families' difficult circumstances not as simply regrettable, but as something that helped them to become resourceful people. The practical inventiveness was later transferred to a sense of competence and capabilities in middle-class contexts. Francesca, for example, cites her grandmother's practical instructions and influence as the source of her confidence in finding solutions when faced with new situations in her work life:

> She made sure I knew how to cook and sew. Really arcane bits of knowledge… You know, silly little tricks that poor people know. Like when your bed sheets are going to wear out in the middle. You cut them down the middle then sew them so the worn bits get moved. (Francesca)

This resourcefulness was augmented by another type of inheritance. Nine of the eleven interviewees felt their parents were not able to fulfil their potential in the work they were doing, whether in physical, emotional, and or intellectual capacities, due to material constraints. Stories emerged of one or both parents' intellect and capabilities that were stunted by lack of opportunity. This sense of their parents' unfulfilled potential was internalised, and articulated in the interview as a sense of duty to try seek out and take advantage of opportunities their parents could not. These nine thought their parents had what Vic termed 'bad opportunity'. Vic's mother had a mental acuity and wit that stood out amongst the people she worked with at a factory. He recognised that socio-economic constraints disabled his mother from experiencing higher education. The interviewees felt frustration over their parents' stifled capacities, especially when the waste of potential benefited others. Rachel had a similar view of her mother's limiting circumstances:

> [My mother's] a bright woman. I think she was also proud and cheeky and so on. But it got her nowhere except pregnant to a rich boy. And her brains could go nowhere except make money for the boss in the factory. She felt extremely intimidated by having a daughter who was an achiever. (Rachel)

Christine also told of her father not fulfilling his intellectual, specifically academic, potential. Social expectations required him to leave school as a young teenager, right when he had received a scholarship to attend a grammar school. As Christine said, 'So, that's part of the biography really, thinking that there was potential there for my father that wasn't realised'. This was part of her family narrative from childhood, which later bolstered her sense of the appropriateness of pursuing higher education. She saw herself as picking up on the path of studies where her father was compelled to step off. This was common amongst the interviewees, a feeling of carrying the torch, of succeeding a heritage of potential that was limited by economic constraints. Similarly, Alexander said:

> You would think [my father and uncle] would fit every stereotype of these sort of uncouth working-class men who lounge and watch television or whatever. But they both read voraciously. And they remind me of many men I've known in my life, working-class men who either are deprived or chose not to pursue formal

> education, certainly at a tertiary level, but had the insatiable appetite for intellectual knowledge. (Alexander)

Alexander's family experience seems to confound neat class categories. He argued against the hegemonic notion that intellectual knowledge is the property of the dominant classes, and drew on family members' interest in literature as an important symbolic resource for his own trajectory and sense of life chances. His account does not diminish the social processes of power and exclusion at work in class, but illustrates the way heterogeneous working-class family experiences may play a role in inter-generational mobility. A sense of having inherited potential became a part of the stories the interviewees told themselves about their lives. It was one of the ways their pasts became a source of confidence as they moved amongst middle-class worlds of academia and work.

Conclusion

The findings discussed in this article speak both to the fraught nature of upward mobility, and to the fortitude and creativity involved in navigating the labyrinth of often-conflicting class cultures. The interviewees described their sense of belonging in their families (or lack thereof) as important to their early identity development. Intellectual curiosity and high performance in school, in particular, made them feel different and stand out in their families. They seemed to have a desire to be distinctive, but this became a relational barrier between them and some family members. 'Such experiences,' writes Andrew Sayer (2005: 26), 'tend to produce a habitus divided against itself…doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities'. The interviewees did have what may be termed 'divided selves', but 'doomed' is too strong a word in this instance. They saw their family outsider status as training them to become comfortable being different, which they needed throughout their educational and occupational careers. In fact, they believed they were able to transfer their classed-family challenges into personal resources.

Disadvantage became a take-off point rather than only an internalised sense of limitations (though, this view came as the result of much personal turmoil). Their disadvantages – economic and health risk and insecurity, and emotional shame – were construed as motivators for 'escaping' toward a more secure life. The psycho-emotional dynamics of class mobility should never be underestimated, because the lasting and reproductive powers of social

inequalities are largely maintained through symbolic mechanisms. No matter how talented, it is hard work for the dominated to convince themselves they deserve or ought to have a *legitimate* stake in the dominant parts of social space. Nine of the eleven interviewees met this challenge partially by viewing themselves as inheritors of intellect and capability. They carried the torch for their parents, who did not have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. However, an additional 'hidden' cost of mobility was the compromise in the interviewees' own aspirations. Their backgrounds affected their life planning, their choices, and their life timelines. They believed they placed aspirational limitations on themselves in order to mitigate a sense of risk. They did not take their desired futures for granted, the way those from dominant-class backgrounds are more likely to do.

The findings imply a continuous nature of socio-economic mobility. While there are periods of concerted inculcation that necessitate conscious adaptation (such as university) the process of negotiating differing class-cultural identities does not appear to have a distinct beginning or ending. This article builds on findings in recent literature, particularly on higher education, to demonstrate that class-cultural adaptation, and the virtually inevitable struggles and relational damages entailed, begin in childhood, in the home, in the community, not only later during more obvious periods of habitus disruption. Additionally, these life-story narratives further demonstrate that classed-family experiences are not homogenous, and that they play an important role in the development of 'upward' trajectories. Lahire (2011) argues socialisation in late modernity is heterogeneous and results in multiple, often contradictory dispositions, without necessarily resulting in pathology or identity disturbance. This article demonstrates that deeper insights about the complexity of class dynamics are available upon closer examination of early family socialisation as heterogeneous.

The paradox of class (Duncan 2005) is that socio-economic inequality impacts life chances but does not appear to figure as predominantly in self-identification (see Emmison & Western 1991 regarding the Australian context). Class distinctions shift with social changes (Savage 2000), and they appear more as evolving constellations of practices and perspectives, rather than as distinct bounded categories. The analysis of these biographical accounts points to one significant way to better understand the experiences of class in a society. People who move between socio-economic domains (the upwardly and downwardly mobile) experience the 'boundaries' as *tension points*, as strain in their identities, relationships, and life trajectories. Their experiences of encountering those *tension points* help us see where and how socio-

economic inequality impacts lives. The narratives described here show ways that economic, cultural, and social capital all figure into life trajectories. These stories demonstrate the continued salience of class and the need for Australian sociology to address it in ongoing research. Much more work needs to be done to understand the possibilities and constraints for those with 'upward' ambitions, especially in a country with relatively good opportunities but little recognition of the challenges inherent in mobility. We will better understand the cultures of differing classes by considering the lives of those who negotiate both, from quite a young age.

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Chapter 2: The Perceived Inherent Vice of Working-Class University Students

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article in press, to be published online first by Wiley in *The Sociological Review*.

Abstract:

This article employs a psychosocial analysis to discuss ways that working-class students interpret their struggles at university as personal inferiority rather than as disadvantage. Using life-story interviews from a qualitative study of Australian university graduates, it examines working-class students' negotiation of university culture and their own identities. The article makes use of a legal term, *inherent vice*, to describe a process in which individuals and institutions are disposed to viewing lower levels of cultural capital in working-class students as an indication of their 'natural' inferiority, rather than as disadvantages of inheritable, symbolic resources. Working-class students employ significant forms of 'resistance' to develop their own resources and resourcefulness. However, they do not have equal access to what Skeggs refers to as techniques of selfhood required by the dominant symbolic in the field in which they are engaged. Building on Bourdieu's development of cultural capital, habitus clivé, and symbolic violence, these findings challenge deficit views of working-class students. They also raise questions about the responsibility of higher education institutions in understanding and equipping working-class students with the necessary resources, rather than relying on students to have been born with the 'right' background.

Key words: cultural capital; emotion; habitus clivé; higher education; psychosocial; symbolic violence; university; working-class students

Introduction

This article is concerned with the 'psychosocial' (Reay, 2015), or emotional, dynamics of university participation for working-class students. Using qualitative interviews with

Australian university graduates from working-class backgrounds, this is an examination of an under-studied aspect of identity development within the culture of higher education. I adopt a term from commercial law, *inherent vice*, as a metaphor to discuss findings highlighting a social process undermining working-class students. The legal term, inherent vice, refers to a hidden flaw in the nature of an insured object or subject; a defect that compromises its stability, or leads to its deterioration, and therefore renders the insurer of the object non-liable for damages. Inherent vice is an apt metaphor for the following social process (each aspect of which is discussed throughout the article): *Working-class students arrive at university with disadvantages in inherited symbolic and economic resources. However, they are prone to viewing their difficulties with university transition as deriving from inherent individual deficiencies. Universities also view students' struggles as a fault in their 'natural' capability, and therefore not the responsibility, or within the capacity, of the institution to ameliorate*. This article argues that the symbolic separation of capability from inherited resources exacerbates a tendency for working-class students to feel that they are flawed in their 'natural' ability.

The following review of literature contextualises the different parts of the argument described above, detailing some of what is known about the challenges working-class students face in adopting student identities, as well as describing the process in which skills come to be seen as separate from resources. Following this, three sections offer a closer look at the psychosocial (Reay, 2015) experiences of the working-class university graduates interviewed for this research. Their recollections of university are marked by a sense of their own illegitimacy, inadequacy, and insecurity and anxiety. Notably, these are the antithesis of the emotional assets arising from dominant-class backgrounds: entitlement, confidence, and security (Reay, 2001).

Working-class university students and the problem of legitimacy

Working-class students are particularly prone to viewing their own experiences, their language, manners, and appearance as symbols of fraudulence. Sennett and Cobb (1972) describe this as a hidden injury of class, one that is self-perpetuated by interpreting limitations on opportunity as limits in personal capacity and dignity. Working-class students are liable to view themselves as the wrong kind of person for higher education. They tend to worry, among other things, about their 'linguistic competence, e.g., their inability to articulate their ideas clearly, deficiencies in their grammar, their regional accents' (Aries and Seider,

2005: 426-427). Additionally, they often pre-determine their own experiences and views as an inferior and irrelevant basis for discussion in the classroom (Bowl, 2001: 157). The working class, writes Christie (2009: 131) 'are less likely to internalise discourses about university as a "right", and more likely to experience the process of identity formation [as a student] as one of emotional disorder and insecurity'. They view their status as students as a privilege, not an entitlement (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003: 610). Tellingly, first-generation, working-class students are more likely to struggle even when their prior academic achievements are equivalent to their peers (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013), and are more likely to drop out of university 'despite good academic standing' (Lehmann, 2007). The dominant-classes, however, are significantly more likely to view a new identity as university student as the expected, deserved, and 'natural' progression of their personal and family trajectory (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). Middle-class entitlement affords a sense of legitimacy that is born out of the idea that the institution is truly for people like them, the 'normal' or 'authentic' students (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003). Working-class students conversely are likely to view their participation as the outcome of 'a well-planned social mobility project', rather than simply 'an automatic transition or rite of passage' (Lehmann, 2012: 541).

Despite feeling illegitimate, working-class students have been found to draw on their academic capabilities as a source of validity (Christie et al., 2008; Lehmann, 2009; Reay et al., 2009). Among those who eventually 'find their feet' at university, many may be described as highly resourceful and resilient students, and some draw on their working-class backgrounds as a source of inspiration and strength (Lehmann, 2009). Working-class students may, through immersion in academic practices, experience alterations at the level of the habitus (Lee and Kramer, 2013). A sense of belonging and entitlement might emerge over time, particularly through turning resource deficits into personal strengths (Lehmann, 2009; Mallman 2015) and/or a type of adaptation to the environment (Granfield, 1991). However, Loveday (2015) raises some doubts about the degree to which working-class students in all universities and all fields of higher education feel they can 'pass' as middle class. As Loveday (2015: 572) also argues, implicit in much discourse (institutional and academic) about working-class university students is a focus on stories of 'success', amounting to the suppression or management of working-class backgrounds, and implying the superiority of middle-class forms of culture and knowledge.

While it is true that working-class students rely largely on their academic investment in education for a sense of belonging, there is a part of their experience to emerge from this research that is of serious consequence for their overall learning achievement and resilience: that is, the fact that working-class students tend to think they are intellectually flawed. Working-class students at all levels of education are troubled by a fear of failure, at the root of which lies the worry of 'finding "you're a nothing"' (Reay, 2001: 342). The pathologised identities of students with working-class backgrounds lead for many to a self-pathologisation, being 'to some extent caught up in a narrative that expects them to fail' (Quinn, 2004). As Bourdieu (1984: 471) writes, people define 'themselves as the established order defines them… condemning themselves to what they have to be, "modest", "humble" and "obscure"'. The findings discussed in this article suggest working-class students diminish themselves in this way, interpreting the challenges they face at university as indicative of natural inferiority.

This phenomenon points to the prevalence in formal education of a process involving cultural capital, in which inherited symbolic resources are disguised as natural talent (Lareau and Weininger, 2003). This separation of individual ability from the inheritance of symbolic resources allows the dominant fractions of society to maintain the legitimacy of their status and power through a perception of natural superiority (Bourdieu 1984). The cultural capital of the dominant is legitimised, in part, through the institutionalisation and professionalisation of knowledge, making universities significant sites for the reproduction of power relations. Cultural capital works by allowing 'culture to be used as a resource that provides access to scarce rewards, is subject to monopolization, and, under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next' (Lareau and Weininger, 2003: 587). In the case of university students, this entails a separation of resources (including cultural capital) from an individual's perceived capability and/or potential. Lareau and Weininger (2003: 580) argue that in Bourdieu's writing there is no 'distinction between cultural capital and "ability" or "technical" skill', rather they are 'irrevocably fused'. Working-class students play the game of, what Skeggs (2004) refers to as the 'dominant symbolic': a game of exchange-value in the accrual and deployment of material and symbolic resources disguised as natural ability, and so construed as deriving from inherent capacities rather than inherited resources.

Working-class students also have fewer emotional resources available to them to negotiate the rigors of higher education, specifically because they have fewer general resources

(cultural, social, and economic capital). Recent research on university transitions suggests that emotions play an important part in 'learning to be a university student' and that 'we can only understand how students negotiate new meanings and learning identities by looking to the emotional values which they extract from the learning process' (Christie et al., 2008: 572). Emotion can be understood as representative of the biographical understanding people attach to their affective experiences (Probyn, 2005), and as evaluative judgments and responses to what people believe to be happening in a given circumstance (Sayer, 2005a). Emotional responses are shaped by the dispositions of the habitus and thus are reasoned judgments about situations and processes that cohere with the classed dispositions of one's upbringing (Sayer, 2005a: 951). Emotional resources such as entitlement, confidence, and security (Reay, 2001) are linked with the possession of symbolic and economic resources (Sayer, 2005a). Reay (2015: 21) argues that the 'psychic economy of social class – feelings of ambivalence, inferiority and superiority, visceral aversions, recognition and abjection – is internalised and played out in practices'. This article discusses one such link between symbolic capital and emotional resources. Working-class university students bear the emotional weight of the separation of ability from resources as a personal hidden defect. The kind of person they want to be is one they fear they are not: intellectually capable. Though Granfield (1991: 336) famously found that working-class students at university were 'faking it to make it', he did make one mention of students' crises in competency, though without elaborating. This article is entirely about elaboration of this largely overlooked phenomenon: working-class students individualising and emotionally internalising their lack of inherited symbolic and economic capital. They come to see themselves as bearers of an inherent vice – a hidden flaw for which they are responsible, and for which they fear the inevitability of their failure.

Methods

The discussion in this article is based on the life-story interview reflections of Australians from working-class backgrounds but living middle-class lives after graduating from university. Twenty-nine people, 16 women and 13 men, gave life-story interviews, designed to elicit their narratives of social mobility from early memories to their current work and family lives. The research outcomes demonstrate that stories of social mobility are not simply a matter of a person being one thing (working class) and then becoming another (middle or

upper class). Rather, the interviewees experienced their identities and relationships as a complex negotiation between differing parts of themselves and of their class-cultural worlds, over the life-course. However, university stood out as a particularly significant time and place of struggle and transformation. This article focuses on their memories, interpretations, and emotional reflections that took place during university.

The research was conducted during two periods of data collection, in 2009 and 2012-2013. The interviewees' ages ranged from mid-30s to mid-60s. In selecting interviewees, I required that each person 1) had completed at least a bachelor's degree at university and was of the first generation in their family to participate in higher education 2) had experience in a professional or managerial career, and 3) came from a working-class background. For this third requirement, it was primarily important that they consider themselves to have working-class roots. Additionally, all of the interviewees' parents were employed in manual labour requiring varying skill and training levels, for example factory work, mechanic, or farm labour. The interview participants were recruited using purposive sampling (Liamputtong, 2012), chosen intentionally based on the characteristics described above. Many of the interviewees, having university degrees and professional careers, had developed vocabularies, literally and figuratively, for reflecting on and narrating their experiences of university and social mobility. I recruited people through colleagues and acquaintances, using emergent sampling techniques (Liamputtong, 2012: 18-19). I also found referrals through these initial interviewees, employing snowball sampling (Liamputtong, 2012: 17). This research method limits the applicability of the findings, given the potential for opinion and experience bias in a sample of people chosen within a couple degrees of separation from the researcher. However, the interviewees represent a wide range of professions and diverse social identities in regards to sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and urban/rural origin. While the interviewees' experiences are not representative of all upwardly-mobile people, in Australia or internationally, they are indicative of important processes that occur during and after university for working-class students.

The participants in this research were graduates, not students, as in most research about working-class university students. The advantage to interviewing current students is they are in the midst of their experience, with all of the wonder, anxiety, excitement, and struggle of being in the moment. However, there are advantages to the approach of interviewing graduates. Their professional work, community, social status and experience provide distinct views of the differences between class-cultures. Their stories and perspectives offer a

‘matured’ vantage point, one of having made it through university and having the time and distance to reflect on its impact on their lives. Some interviewees were as many as three decades out from their time at university, but the emotional nature of their experiences was delivered in the present of the interview with the clarity and gravity of something that just occurred.

The methods used in this research were chosen purposefully to approach questions of subjective experiences of social class at university. Using biographical methods (Denzin, 1989) allowed for examination of the subtleties of emotional interpretations of past experiences and interpersonal relational dynamics. Class, wrote Thompson (1966: 9), is not a thing, but ‘something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships’. Biography captures these graduates’ interactions with the people and culture of university and its impact on their identities particularly well, allowing intangible class processes to take shape in the particularities of individual accounts. The interviews were designed to evoke associative memories and reflections, with questions such as ‘Can you describe some of the emotions you associate with your time at university?’. These life-stories were analysed as narratives, which offer the teller’s recollections and interpretations of past events in ways that suggest their own meaning-making (Elliot 2005). Many of the interviews were conducted in different spaces at different times (home, work, and former university) to allow the narrative to expand with elaboration, repetition, and time for reflection. The repeat interviews that were conducted at the interviewees’ former university campus were particularly useful, evoking embodied memories of their time as working-class students negotiating the middle-class world of higher education.

Illegitimacy

An emotional and embodied sense of illegitimacy affects working-class students throughout their time at university. The habitus largely determines when one feels out of place (Bourdieu, 2002; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), and emotional reactions to circumstances are indicative of the dissonance between people’s habitus and the social space they inhabit. Reay (2015: 10) refers to the ‘psychosocial’ to understand such phenomena, which is the consideration of emotion as a point of ‘inquiry into the mutual constitution of the individual and the social relations within which they are enmeshed’. The habitus is an embodied sense of one’s past as it plays out in the present, and Reay (2005, 2015) argues that this process is a

deeply emotional one. Higher education is a social space built by the culture of the dominant, those who carry the relevant cultural capital and who feel justified in being there. The following passages quoted from the interviews represent reflections on the experience of being a self, a body and mind, out of place, and the resulting sense of illegitimacy. When asked, for example, about her memories of going to university, Adriana replied:

> I suddenly turned up and all these really confident, beautiful looking, eastern suburbs children, who didn't even know where Footscray and Yarraville were…They were so socially confident. I mean, I had no social skills. (Adriana, late 40s, lawyer)

The habitus shapes one's view of others through the prism of self-perception. In this case, Adriana sees confidence and beauty in the other and views herself as a contrast; someone from a different side of the city (suburbs known at that time for being more culturally diverse and lower socio-economic), with a different way of being socially. Saying she had 'no social skills' meant she thought her demeanour and ways of carrying herself at university were unacceptable. Her social dispositions resulted in a *feeling* of being out of place in that environment. Cultural dispositions are capital when they are embodied and enacted as though having come naturally, with ease, and in the 'right' way (Bourdieu, 1984). Working-class women, even more than men, are unlikely to *feel* they belong at university (Reay et al., 2010), and Adriana, like the majority of the interviewees, spoke about feeling displaced. She perceived that they, her more privileged peers, were from the right suburbs, were beautiful, and were socially adept, while she was none of these things. Shame, writes Sayer (2005a: 953-954) is a private, reflexive emotion (a self-evaluation) that is 'evoked by a failure of an individual or group to live according to their values or commitments, especially ones…which others also value'. Sayer (2005a: 954-955) explains that the "'social bases of respect' in terms of access to valued ways of living are unequally distributed and therefore shame is likely to be endemic to the experience of class'. Adriana's shame was a feeling invoked by personalising her class-based limitations. This self-assessment was not indicative of her capabilities or value, but is the emotional embodiment of class distinctions. Another interviewee described perceptions of the confident-other upon entering university:

> I was really surprised when I got to university and all the students in medicine were going around, all comparing their marks and like, walking around like they owned the planet. (Vic, late 40s, doctor)

The impression the dominant make on the dominated is one of confidence and control in their status (Bourdieu, 1984), implicitly putting the working-class in their place through the subtleties of embodied dispositions. Among most of the interviewees' first impressions of university were images of other students as entitled and legitimate. 'They walked around like they owned the planet' is an assessment of others' embodied confidence. Working-class students, on the other hand, particularly when attending elite institutions, do not consider themselves to be 'proper' students (Christie et al., 2008: 576; see also Reay et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2010).

This sense of illegitimacy was a part of most of the interviewees' experiences despite having done well academically. They already proved themselves worthy of participation at their universities by gaining entry, in fact, most of the interviewees were high achievers.

> I'd done HSC [university entrance exams] and all that, and I'd done remarkably well. [….] I had the validation that the state education system said that you're in the top 2% or whatever of the state, so you can go anywhere you want. [….] But, the day I walked in here as a student, I had this…I felt sick. And thinking, I'm gonna get found out. That, in some way that I'd bluffed my way through. That I didn't feel validated. (Alexander, late 40s, writer)

Despite having the validation of scholastic credentials there can still be a profound sense of illegitimacy. Alexander said he felt sick, an expression representing the emotional anxiety of feeling displaced, as well as a physical reaction to the sense of shame that comes with stigma. A stigmatised person is one whose actions or attributes are considered 'incongruous with [a] stereotype of what a given individual should be' (Goffman, 1963: 3). Although research (Reay, 2005) suggests that working-class students rely on academic merit for some sense of legitimacy, people like Alexander still deal with feelings of illegitimacy. There is a great amount of emotional work that goes into working-class students defending (to themselves) their right to be at university, even when their achievements entitle them to be there (Christie, 2009: 134). This sense of illegitimacy at university does not necessarily disappear once they graduate.

> I hadn't been up to [my] University for years and I went there for a conference back in the 90s and I just, you know, just stepping into the old arts building I can be made to

> feel incredibly illegitimate. I mean it's, there is a sense in which you kind of don't have the sort of confidence that people who've just armed through and accumulated cultural capital and taken it as their right. (Jane, 60s, retired academic)

Feelings of illegitimacy have long staying power, particularly for someone who attends an elite university, like Jane. Physical spaces, such as the university, contextualise the emotional being of the individual in that symbolic space, and can foster feelings of illegitimacy. Such illegitimacy, the result of habitus clivé, or dissonance between the class-culture of the institution and the class-culture embodied by the individual, can become 'sedimented in certain habitus' (Reay, 2015: 12), so that spuriousness shadows the upwardly mobile through their lives.

Inherent Vice

If illegitimacy arises from feelings of not belonging outwardly (in body, in speech, in signs of status), then inadequacy is wrought by the anxiety of not belonging inwardly (in capability, in potential). The interviewees, as students, were susceptible to viewing themselves as innately flawed. Such a flaw and its consequences are a perceived inherent vice, which, as described earlier, refers to a defect, or deficiency, in the nature or make-up of the subject. It gives students the sense they will be discovered at any time for what they fear they are: born with deficient capability and potential. This is as opposed to the 'inheritors' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979), those whose capital resources give them with a sense of inherent capability, and the self-assurance and ease that come with an embodied perception of being precisely where they are meant to be. Skeggs (2004: 91) argues that bourgeois models of self 'present the working-class as individualised moral lack', and that 'class relations of cultural exploitation are presented as a failure of the self to know, play, do, think and/or repeat itself the proper way'. For working-class university students this manifests strongly in a concern over a personal lack of 'natural' intellectual capacity.

> I found university very challenging in lots of ways. You know, I didn't have a father who was a lawyer who would come home and speak about it; it didn't come naturally to me. I didn't understand. I remember going into my contracts class. The lecturer said, day one, we're starting with remedies. I was like what the fuck are remedies? What? I didn't even know, like: contract, offer acceptance, contract breaks need a remedy. I

> couldn't put the pieces together. In lots of ways I was way too young and inexperienced to do a law degree. (Adriana, late 40s, lawyer)

Adriana suggests here that she was aware, as a university student, of her disadvantage in inherited social and cultural capital. Yet she still labelled her remembered self as 'too young and inexperienced'. She thought she had an insufficiently developed capability; and that things 'didn't come *naturally*'. There are echoes of Reay's (2003: 313) findings amongst working-class women in higher education who 'assume a rhetoric of personal inadequacy to explain events invariably linked to processes, systems and structures beyond their personal control'. Adriana viewed her challenges as personal deficiencies rather than class-based disadvantage.

> Yeah I mean I think I've always lacked confidence, in a sense, or lacked a strong sense of legitimacy that I can… I have had terrible struggles with writer's block and I think, I think it's interesting. I mean there are people who, I don't think they have any kind of anxieties about publishing. They are out there, because they are meant to be there, and they are quite confident to be there**.** (Jane, 60s, retired academic)

A sense of illegitimacy and perceived inadequacy affect the ability to perform. In Jane's case it manifested as writer's block, and it did not go away after university. Most of the interviewees mentioned still having confidence issues throughout their careers. Writer's block as a result of lack of confidence is about thinking the work you produce, what comes out of you, will be inferior, just as you think what is inside of you is inferior. Academic self-efficacy, write Kahu et al. (2015: 490), is about the emotional interpretation of one's own capacity to perform, and has a significant impact on student achievement. The diminishment of academic self-efficacy of working-class students is a handicap to their aspirations, their work, and their achievements. Hence Friedman's (2015: 12) finding that many working-class graduates sustained a 'paralytic suspicion that they somehow "weren't good enough"…a "fraud"…that a "fall" was just around the corner…or that they were forever in danger of being "caught out"'. It can come as a surprise then, for the upwardly mobile, when they do achieve at substantial levels or when they stand out amongst their peers.

> [My professor] suggested to me that I could go on to do honours, and if I liked, he could supervise me. I remember thinking, I remember saying to him, me? Honours,

> really? Do you think I could? [Laugh] Just this sort of surprise, you know. (Christine, early 40s, academic)

Christine and other interviewees presupposed little in regards to their capabilities and imagined futures. The things that may be taken for granted by other students are difficult to realise for working-class students. Christine was ten years into a successful career in media and publishing before going to university, and at university she performed very well, but by the time she finished her undergraduate degree she still could be surprised at the suggestion she do honours. University involves, for many working-class people, a perpetual pushing against the boundaries of 'a sense of one's place' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The fear of over-reaching and failing, writes Reay (2005: 923) is coupled with the 'shame and embarrassment of not being good enough'. When a person doubts their capacities, and experiences the shame of feeling they do not measure up, the surprise of achievement, as well as endorsement from legitimate others, comes as a shock that is difficult to internalise. For Rebecca, this was described as a journey of self-discovery. When I asked her what emotions she associated with her experience of university, she said:

> Probably confused. Feeling that I wasn't good enough socially, or intellectually; going to university, and feeling like I was really at the bottom of the pecking order as far as social status, but also intellectually. And almost dropping out in the first year, thinking I wouldn't get through. Feeling like I was a fraud, and I didn't belong there, is another feeling I had often. I also felt lucky to be there as well. I appreciated it a lot. But I felt like a fraud. I think I have that feeling all the time. I have that feeling now as well, that somebody will work out that I really shouldn't be a university lecturer. (Rebecca, mid 30s, lecturer)

The perceived inherent vice of working-class students is an intractable sense of intellectual inferiority. Hard work paid off for Rebecca in eventually securing a lecturing position, but it did not stop her from explaining her difficulties as perceived inherent vice.

Anxiety & Insecurity

Having the perceived inherent vice of working-class university students is to live with anxiety and insecurity. It is diametrically opposed to the sense of security of their more privileged peers. A certain level of resources (cultural, social, and economic) allow an embodiment of those resources as a sense of security. Confidence arises from such security,

that they have every reasonable expectation of succeeding in their endeavours. Skeggs (2004: 91) argues that 'self-making is class-making. It is impossible to produce what the dominant symbolic (and academic theories) identify as a self if one does not have access to the techniques and means to do it'. This gap between expectations and symbolic resources is often individualised and is a source of negative and taxing emotions.

> I basically did not have an early adulthood. I don't mind talking about this: I wasn't sexually active till I was 25…I'm gay, and I didn't come out till I was 25, 26. It's funny, people ask, what was it like being gay and coming out and that sort of stuff? I'm thinking: 'that was the least of my problems'. I was just concerned with surviving university. For me, it was basically living with this [working-class] background… I spent *some time* just trying to get around this notion of rich and poor, and privilege and not-privilege, and the impact upon my health. (Vic, late 40s, doctor)

Many of the emotional resources that go into identity formation are consumed by the difficulties of dealing with class anxiety at university. Reay (2015: 13) writes about the 'heavy psychic costs' involved in negotiating differing class-cultural worlds, involving an 'exhausting body of psychic, intellectual and interactive work'. In Vic's case, the anxiety impacted his physical and mental health, interfering with the expression of his sexuality. Perceived inherent vice necessitates the investment of a disproportionate amount of psycho-emotional energy. Similarly, Greg said:

> I think the difference for people that come from slightly more humble backgrounds, is that they spend a lot of mental energy, a lot of emotional energy psyching themselves up to believe they can do something before they can … get on and do it. I've often had conversations with people that just don't understand that at all. This is just so totally outside their experience. They couldn't really conceive of a world in which they're not surrounded by people who had confidence that they can do whatever they want.
> I think if you come from a working-class background, there can always be that little voice saying, *who are you kidding*? You have to keep that at bay. (Greg, mid 30s, academic)

Emotions (such as entitlement, confidence, and security [Reay, 2001]) may be said to be capital insofar as they have purchase for confronting and surmounting the rigours of higher education. For middle-class students, greater levels of cultural, social and economic capital can mitigate negative emotions such as fear and shame that otherwise come with being at university (Reay et al., 2005). Students like Greg navigate the challenges of university with less emotional capital and greater emotional turmoil.

> Anxiety. Just anxiety. I was just anxious the whole time. Initially I felt lost and out of my depth. When I realized that I couldn't cope with the work, instead of sort of feeling elated, I just felt more anxious, because I wanted to be as good as I possibly could, and so I was a really obsessive kind of student, who had to look at everything on a topic, and spend a lot of time in the library; there was this sense of anxiety. (Lucinda, 50s, academic)

This sense of insufficiency, and the drive to try and make up for it, shadows the experience of university with anxiety. Hard work certainly contributed to the interviewees' success. However, the emotions of anxiety and insecurity are there as embodied interpretations of disadvantages misperceived as personal inadequacy. Feelings like Lucinda's, of being out of one's depth, of being unable to cope with the work, make working-class students disadvantaged players in the game of the dominant symbolic (Skeggs 2004). The sense of illegitimacy makes them feel disqualified before they begin, and is a risk to educational outcomes. For the interviewees, all successful graduates, it did not halt their progress but it tainted their educational experiences. While traditional university students are buttressed by their inheritance of symbolic and economic capital, working-class students are exposed. They are made vulnerable by the anxiety of a perceived inherent vice.

Discussion and conclusion

The fear of having a deficient intellectual ability, of being inexplicably, naturally inferior, is the perceived inherent vice of working-class university students. *Inherent vice* refers to a hidden flaw in the nature of an insured object or subject (working-class student); a defect that compromises its stability, or leads to its deterioration, and therefore renders the insurer of the object (the university) non-liable for damages. *Vice*, with connotations of morality, is a particularly fitting word because questions of capability become moral issues in the psychic economy of class (Reay 2005; Sayer 2005b). They are moral insofar as they relate to a

person's sense of self identity and self-worth. What greater perceived *virtue* is there than intellectual ability in university, as well as in a society built upon the values of industry, autonomy, and progress? To fail to achieve in such a society is to fail to be a 'good' person or a valuable citizen. Working-class university students view their experience through a lens of personal inadequacy rather than structural disadvantage. Regarding their status as students, they feel illegitimate. Regarding their capability and potential they feel inherently flawed. Regarding their ability to be diligent and resilient they deal with greater levels of anxiety and insecurity. Confidence, security, and entitlement are unequally distributed so far as other forms of capital are unequally distributed. And this is how class is made, as Skeggs (1997: 6) writes, '…at the intimate level as a 'structure of feeling' in which doubt, anxiety and fear inform the production of subjectivity'. Class is reproduced through processes both structural and deeply personal.

This article employs a psychosocial (Reay 2015) analysis by elaborating on specific emotional dynamics of Bourdieu's conceptualisations of cultural capital, habitus clivé and symbolic violence. Cultural capital is involved in a process whereby inherited symbolic resources are taken to be natural talent (Lareau and Weininger, 2003). This is a separation of inherited resources from natural 'ability', two things that are, in fact, analytically inseparable, but in symbolic practice, perceived as separate (Lareau and Weininger, 2003: 580). The dominant maintain the illusion of their legitimate right to dominance through the misapprehension of their inheritance as superior ability and value (and in this regard, it can be thought of as a perception of inherent virtue). The inverse of this is the perceived inherent vice of the dominated. Working-class university students have less cultural capital, but due to the symbolic separation of inheritable resources from ability, they are liable to misrecognise this as inferior ability and value. This article offers evidence for how this misperception operates at the level of feeling, as emotional, embodied understanding of the self.

Bourdieu's writing about habitus clivé, or a divided habitus, was informed by his research as well as his own experience of upward social mobility (Bourdieu, 2007), and signifies what happens when, through social mobility, one undergoes the 'contradictions of succession' (Bourdieu, 1999: 510). Habitus clivé is a 'habitus divided against itself…doomed to a kind of duplication, a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities' (Bourdieu, 1999: 511). Friedman (2015) notes that Bourdieu did not elaborate in great detail about this type of habitus disruption, and Friedman's work, as well that of others such as

Lawler (1999) and Atkinson (2012), emphasise the experiences of displacement, discomfort, and disloyalty that the upwardly mobile contend with. This article elaborates on the potential for habitus clivé to involve a double perception, or misperception, of one's intellectual capacity and value. The perceived inherent vice of working-class university students is a division of the self between the actual intellectual capacity and the perceived capacity. This aspect of habitus clivé bears further research and development for understanding these symbolic and psychosocial processes.

Perpetuation of this aspect of habitus clivé amongst working-class students is a specific form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), that in which the dominated participate complicity, mostly unknowingly, in their own domination. The separation of 'natural ability' from inherited resources is analytically unachievable, but it is symbolically useful in serving to perpetually disguise advantage and disadvantage as natural ability and inability. The perceived inherent vice of working-class students is *symbolic* violence in that it 'is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 172). It is *violent* so far as it partially explains the imposition of social reproduction of the dominant/dominated structure of society. The symbolic violence described in this article, however, is not presumed to arise from malevolent universities. On the contrary, this author assumes that universities and their 'gatekeepers' are generally keen to support students and see them succeed. The findings in the thesis are not used to blame the institutions but rather to demonstrate ways that social structures and processes inadvertently may help or hinder students (McKay and Devlin 2014).

The term *perceived inherent vice*, when applied to working-class university students, challenges deficit views of the working class. The graduates described in this article are examples of people who, based on their achievements, are clearly not intellectually flawed. They are, like many from working-class backgrounds, highly capable, adaptable, and resourceful people. The actions they take in the face of their disadvantages may be viewed as forms of resistance to otherwise highly durable patterns of social reproduction (Bourdieu 1984: 471). Despite contrary evidence, though, they believed as students, and some well into their later lives, that they were made of flawed and inferior intellectual matter. The interviewees did not go into great detail about the role of the institution in their struggle (though there were some mentions in interviews). Many of them, for example in the case of Christine, received assistance at times from helpful and/or encouraging university staff.

However, in Christine's case, this is not evidence of an intentional and systematic approach to assisting working-class students, rather it is an example of a professor recognising outstanding talent. Christine, like all of the interviewees, eventually became successful students despite their disadvantages in symbolic and economic resources, and despite their obstinate self-doubt. These are 'success' stories, which makes them even more illustrative of how difficult it is for a student to proceed with a perceived inherent vice.

What about all the new students from working-class backgrounds who arrive at university each year? If it is not the university's responsibility to address their perceived inherent vice, then this inadvertently further problematises the students, i.e. *they* lack confidence. This article argues that, on the contrary, it is the systematic, structural, and symbolic process, involving the separation of cultural capital from 'ability' or 'potential', that maintains the illusion of some being 'gifted' while others are deficient. The institution and its people are in the best position to intervene in this perpetuation. Perceived inherent vice, as a concept, draws attention to the co-implication of individuals and institutions in perpetuating the pathologisation of working-class students. University education is largely founded on the principle of separation of skills and 'talent' (Lareau and Weininger, 2003). Based on this principle, students and institutions both personalise students' struggles. If it were not so, there would presumably be much larger and more concerted efforts to equip working-class students with the cultural capital of the institution. If the university does not play an active role in ameliorating this psychosocial process, then unfortunately it participates in it by default. The concept of the perceived inherent vice is aimed at convincing those who staff universities and determine policy to consider the opportunity that their roles present in changing the experience of working-class students.

The expansion of higher education in countries like Australia and 'widening access' to those traditionally excluded from opportunities to attend university, brings challenges to accommodating students from more diverse backgrounds and differing levels of educational and economic resources. Universities in these countries have undergone significant changes toward 'lean-and-mean' pedagogies (Blackmore, 1997: 92), involving, among other things, increasingly larger class sizes, casualised teaching staff, and fewer contact hours with teaching staff for students. This has led, particularly amongst non-traditional students, to 'frustrated participants' (Bowl, 2001). Universities, fiscally stretched as they are, may view non-traditional student demographics, who may require more time and attention, as a drain on

resources (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Unfortunately, such university contexts exacerbate the perceived inherent vice of working-class university students.

What is needed is a two-way expectation and process between the responsibilities of the learner and the institution (Devlin, 2013) that 'bridge socio-cultural incongruity' experienced by many students. Universities, their staff, and the teaching and strategies they employ can seek to adapt to working-class students, if the institutions want to improve viability and serve a socially valuable role. Devlin and O'Shea (2011) argue that institutions can pay particular attention to, and adapt to, student needs and speak in a way they understand, while maintaining academic challenge. This does not have to mean 'dumbing down' curriculum (Haggis, 2006), but, rather, adjusting teaching processes and accessibility, as well as putting resources and time into mentoring students. To address this pattern of a perceived inherent vice, teaching and mentoring approaches should assume all students carry equal potential but unequal access to resources. The institution is in a position (challenging as it may be) to equip and train students who have been otherwise under-resourced. A university that does that will have more and stronger graduates. A higher education system like that may have a greater impact in addressing social inequality.

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Chapter 3: Working-class university students and the trouble with 'independent learning': the mediating role of cultural capital and the work of 'concerted *self*-cultivation'

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Abstract:

University students are often conceptualised as 'independent learners' who do not (and should not) require additional support in adapting to the particular literacy and pedagogy of higher education. Based on data from a qualitative study of Australian university graduates, this article examines how working-class students negotiate the expectation to learn independently with the obstacle of having fewer inherited resources of the requisite social, cultural, and economic capitals. These students 'made it'; they graduated despite these difficulties. Their experiences suggest, though, that limited institutional support and conceptions of the independent learner made their university time significantly more difficult. These findings challenge the appropriateness of the expectation that all students, no matter their backgrounds, begin university as independent learners. *Inter*-dependent learning is suggested as a better approach and attitude for university, particularly given the rise in working-class and other non-traditional, or first-generation, university students.

Keywords: cultural capital; concerted cultivation; independent learning; working-class students; university

Introduction and Background

University education has long entailed the expectation that students are able to learn independently. From semester one, a person is tested in their capacity to negotiate the role and skills of a student. This includes, among other things, deciphering explicit and implicit expectations, interpreting and retaining academic material, producing adequate levels of

work, and navigating the interpersonal dynamics of university culture. Teaching staff help guide students, and other assistance is often available. However, universities effectively operate under a presupposition that students arrive in their first year equipped for learning these things independently. This is imbedded into the culture of higher education, and built into many of its pedagogical structures.

When a university degree was a pursuit almost exclusively for the elite, most students had the cultural, social, and financial capital requisite to the task of so-called 'independent learning'. These symbolic and economic resources enable successful negotiation of university, and in this sense it is more accurate to state that learning has always been an inter-dependent (dependent on these resources), rather than independent, pursuit. In an era of continued expansion of higher education, many 'non-traditional' students do not have the same symbolic and economic resources at their disposal. The cultural expectation for independent learning at university suits those who arrive already equipped, but working-class, as well as other 'non-traditional' students are more likely to find this extra-ordinarily difficult. Using interviews from a qualitative, interview-based study of working-class university graduates, this article is examines these challenges working-class students encounter in becoming independent learners on their own initiative. The experiences of the interviewees are the basis for this article's discussion of the unsuitability of the cultural expectation that they do so.

'Independent learning' is an often used phrase in contemporary higher education institutions, pedagogy, and research. It carries numerous connotations and meanings, but in this article it is used to refer to the general, implicit, and long-standing expectation that people learn to be university students independently, as if on their own. Universities presume students will be independent learners, whether this term has been explicitly stated within institutional discourses or not. There is no singular definition, and there are numerous terms that seem to amount to the same thing, including 'self-regulated' and 'lifelong learner' (McKendry and Boyd, 209). Conceptions of the independent learner include characteristics such as quick and flexible adaptability, self-management, and self-direction (Christie, Barron, and D'Annunzio-Green 2013, citing Krause and Coates 2008). The notion of independent learning is ubiquitous in higher education, and according to McKendry and Boyd (2012, 210) 'the overall consensus appears to be responsibility or ownership of learning on the part of the learner'. Such an assumption of students' responsibility is the

default position of universities. That learners will learn to become students on their own, seems, on one hand, to assign autonomy and even dignity to learners, taking for granted their facility to the task of self-directed learning. However, there are fundamental problems with this when all university students are presumed to arrive prepared in this way. Learning to learn at university is not, in fact, an independent undertaking but one that requires a foundation of academic and social know-how that is inherited by more privileged students, particularly those with a family history of higher education.

The presumption of independent learning does not suit all, or perhaps most university students, particularly because many of these expectations are implicit and are expected too soon (Leathwood 2006). The challenges of ascertaining the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu 1990a) for cultural outsiders, when they are left on their own to do so, are heightened by the quandary that people do not know what they do not know. As Haggis (2006, 524) writes, 'these underlying principles are usually only implicit in course outlines, assessment instructions and assumptions about the structuring of work, and are therefore difficult for those unfamiliar with the discourse to see and understand'. Students' understanding and capability with expectations are central to their success, and 'if students are unclear about what is expected from them in higher education, or there is a mismatch of expectations between the student and the institution, this can lead to withdrawal' (McKendry and Boyd 2012, 211). There are structural barriers and life circumstances that make such an expectation inappropriate for many students, due to social and institutional factors. The institutional factors, or challenges encountered in the learning process, include: managing the implicit nature of many expectations as well as communication with staff, plus the realities of the necessity of doing paid work and other time commitments (Collier and Morgan 2008), limited contact with teaching staff for explanation and input on work (Christie, Barron and D'Annunzio-Green 2013), and difficulty navigating the administrative system (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). Without direct guidance in these and other elements of negotiating higher education, independent learning is a fraught exercise. While it is unlikely universities presume that independent learning means learning is an entirely solitary activity, one of the greatest concerns is that students will interpret it this way (McKendry and Boyd 2012, 210). Other research suggests regardless of how students interpret it, many non-traditional first-year students feel they are expected to be independent too soon, and that they have been 'left to sink or swim' (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, 610). While some students successfully become independent learners, there are plenty who

wind up with, as Collier and Morgan (2008) found, high expectations but uneven transitions, and those who simply struggle. This article presents further evidence that the struggle is immense even for some working-class university students who are otherwise considered scholastically 'successful'.

The pedagogical model of independent learning (as distinct from the general cultural expectation under discussion) is something that arose, as Goode (2007, 590) writes, out of ideas of empowerment and self-determination, based on "'self-directed learning", which is in turn seen to be a guiding principle of "adult learning"', and 'the corresponding shift for the student is from passive recipient to one who is more independent of the teacher, more responsible for the direction of her/his own studies'. The pedagogical model aims to actively guide students toward such self-directed learning through intentional structuring of courses and guidance. McKendry and Boyd (2012) point out that early key texts and theory on models of 'independent learning' emerged from pedagogical philosophies suggesting adults learn differently from children. This pedagogical model represents an effort to standardise a process to assist students toward *becoming* independent learners. While potentially constructive in addressing this issue, the 'independent learning' pedagogy has not been shown to have made any widespread impact on the structure of higher education, in the UK or in Australia, nor on the taken-for-granted cultural expectation that students become independent learners on their own. The discourse of 'independent learning' has spread far and wide, but without the support and processes suggested by the pedagogical model. There is concern over how discourses of independent learning can be used for institutional convenience, rather than genuine concern with assisting non-traditional students. As Haggis (2006, 524) writes, 'though embedded within many research accounts as an obvious good, these ideas [such as independent learning] are not neutral '"truths" about learning', rather they 'reveal much about what is encouraged and rewarded in higher education'.

Independent learners come to be seen as students 'who can succeed in the shortest possible time with few demands on institutional resources' (Read, Archer and Leathwood 2003, 272). The institutional discourse too easily glides into an assumption of student responsibility in which it is the *student's* responsibility to arrive at the institution with all of the requisite social, cultural, and economic capital resources. In an era of 'widened access' to higher education, this is increasingly unrealistic and problematic for non-traditional students (Gale 2011). Independent learning has its place, as Goode (2007, 600) writes, but 'the discourse

has been captured by an educational agenda that needs to reconcile the inherent tensions between the potential demands of "empowered" educational "consumers", and staff who are more accountable than ever before for delivering both high-quality research and high-quality teaching'. The corollary to the independent learning expectation is that the notion of dependence becomes pathologised. The construction in such discourses of the ideal student is one who is financially as well as academically independent of need for assistance. In fact, any needs easily become pathologised and associated with inferiority and immaturity (for a review of relevant literature see Leathwood 2006, 615). Reification of 'independence' and the 'autonomous scholar' serve management agendas (Goode 2007, 591), and are part and parcel of the 'lean-and-mean' pedagogies (Blackmore 1997, 92), involving, among other things, increasingly larger class sizes, casualised teaching staff, and fewer contact hours with teaching staff. In this environment of pedagogical economic rationale, non-traditional students are pathologised and implicitly punished for not having the 'right' background (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003).

Working-class students, identity, and cultural capital

Conceptualising working-class, first-generation university students as independent learners is particularly problematic. This is due to inequalities of inherited resources of cultural, social, and economic capital, as well as the additional challenges they face in the formation of a student identity. Adopting an identity as a (legitimate) student has been shown to be central to engaging in learning processes (Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber 2007). Working-class university students are prone to seeing themselves as cultural outsiders at university and struggle to adopt a sense of legitimacy (Watson et al. 2009). More privileged students carry a habitus disposition congruent with the dominant culture of the field of higher education (Bourdieu 1990b), and as Reay (2002, 402) found, for traditional university students 'extending [their] education was more often than not simply part of the normal life course'. Such apparent acceptance of the inevitability of higher education is an inheritance of the dominant. This is to the contrary for the working-class, amongst whom, as Lehmann (2012, 541) found, 'even committed students did not perceive of their studies as an automatic transition or rite of passage, but as a well-planned social mobility project'. There are degrees of success for working-class people in adopting the role of a university student. Watson et al. (2009), for example, found that working-class students experience different degrees of fit between their habitus and the practices and expectations of the field of higher

education, ranging from those who fit in, to those who adapt, those who resist, and those who feel excluded. Similarly, Lehmann (2012) found that in the development of student roles, experiences ranged from detachment, commitment, alienation, and estrangement. Regardless of final outcomes, research on working-class students transitioning into university suggest that habitus incongruence between class cultures (Atkinson 2012; Baxter and Britton 2001; Friedman 2015) makes the adoption of such an identity difficult, and often a self-conscious effort.

In addition to the challenges of adopting an identity as a student, things are further complicated for the working-class by the role that cultural capital plays in independent learning. As an inherited resource, cultural capital consists of sets of knowledge and competencies that form the foundation to successful university transition. This transition, particularly in the first year, is, as Gale and Parker (2014, 737) write, about 'the capability to navigate change' in regards to students' capabilities. Cultural capital constitutes inherited resources for adapting to the expectations and demands of higher education.
Lareau and Weininger (2003) offer a systematic review of Bourdieu's work on cultural capital, demonstrating how Bourdieu argued that cultural capital and technical skill or ability cannot be analytically separated. A sociological view of technical skill or ability is a view not only of a person's abilities (or what would seem to be their 'natural' facilities) but of the resources that are invested in developing those capacities, in addition to the institutionalisation and validation of those particular skills and abilities. Already having the requisite baseline of cultural capital recognisable in higher education places students from dominant classes well ahead of the curve. Their knowledge, skills, and social competence come from prior familial inheritance. They can become independent in their learning to the degree their cultural capital is congruent with the knowledge, skills, and expectations of the institution. Learning and adapting is largely about pattern recognition, having the knowledge and dispositions to incorporate new knowledge and differing dispositions, which leaves working-class students in a position of unease, whereas 'it is easier for traditional students entering the university to become "role experts," due to their greater familiarity with higher education based on their family's past experiences within that institution' (Collier and Morgan 2008, 442). Role mastery involves the incorporation of explicit as well as implicit knowledge, and much of learning in higher education is about tacit knowledge, which involves students' ability to detect and absorb the implicit within the culture of higher education. This is one of the primary ways that class inequalities are perpetuated:

> The implements of this cultural 'tool kit' – the skills and preferences conducive to successfully negotiating the 'rules of the game' in particular areas of social action – are not evenly distributed across the socioeconomic spectrum, and these disparities tend to be transmitted inter-generationally. Put another way, the behavioural repertoire (practices) available to middle-class families – via their habitus and cultural capital – has greater currency within formal institutional settings such as the school (field) than does that of working-class families, and the resulting differences in educational and socioeconomic outcomes tend to perpetuate this imbalance across the next generation (Edgerton and Roberts 2014, 197).

Cultural capital refers to 'institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion' (Lareau and Weininger 2003, 587, citing Lamont and Lareau 1988). Such tacit knowledge required for university students to achieve mastery of their role and its requirements comes with an ability to navigate and perform the attitudes and informal knowledge that make cultural capital so complex. Cultural capital works by allowing 'culture to be used as a resource that provides access to scarce rewards, is subject to monopolization, and, under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next' (Lareau and Weininger 2003, 587). Becoming an independent learner is largely about mastering these capacities. However, there is nothing independent about this process. Middle and upper-class students are dependent learners too. They are dependent on the inheritance that they accept as a 'natural' quality of their intellect and capabilities. This dependence is masked by a process of naturalisation of ability that obscures social advantage. Goode (2007, 600) writes that the 'individualisation of learning underplays the inherent interdependence of learning and teaching, the collaborative nature of learning as a social practice, and the shared responsibilities of students and supervisors'.

This article discusses research about first-hand accounts of working-class students negotiating the discourses and expectations of higher education as independent learners. When interviewed, these graduates offered accounts of having been overwhelmed and on their own to navigate academic and social integration, both of which were problematic. In most cases, these former students had devised strategies to cope with the expectation for independent learning, but they struggled with having to do so independently. Their stories

challenge the appropriateness of the default expectation of independent learning for all students when the symbolic and economic resources required for doing so are unequally distributed.

Methods

The analysis in this article is based upon life-story interviews with 29 adults in Melbourne, Australia, conducted during two periods of data collection, in 2009 and 2012-2013. The interviews were extensive, with questions covering the life-course, and most people were interviewed two or three times, in different locations (home, work, former university) to elicit embodied memories tied to those places of significance. This article focuses on their recollections and interpretations of experiences that took place in university. Many of the quotes offer impressions they had, as adults, of their former, student selves, and the impact of university on their lives since. Each person was, at the time of interview, established in a professional or managerial career and each had been a first-generation university student from a working-class family background.

Much relevant research, quite reasonably, studies working-class university students currently enrolled in their studies. However, the professional status of the students in this research, and the fact of their upward socio-economic mobility, provides a distinct perspective from which to examine university culture. Having 'made it', they are more familiar with the nuanced differences between their working-class backgrounds and their current middle and upper-middle class work and social environments. They experienced the struggles of negotiating the independent learning expectation at university, were able to find their way through it, and were able to consider it from the perspective of further life experience and the distance of time. The deeply felt, emotional nature of the experiences came through clearly in many of the interviews, as though the experiences they recounted had only just happened.

The qualitative methods employed for collecting and analysing data were chosen purposefully to approach questions of subjective experiences of being working-class in a middle-class, university environment. I utilised biographical methods (Denzin 1989), and designed qualitative interviews to encourage narrative story-telling. The use of biographical methods allowed for examination of the subtleties of interpersonal relational dynamics, and many of the questions were open-ended, encouraging associative memories (such as, 'Can

you describe some of the emotions you associate with your time at university?'). Narrative accounts of life offer illustrative details, forming a life-text created by the teller in the context of the interview. Narratives are structured and evaluative accounts, offering the storyteller's memory and assessment of the meaning of what happened (Elliot 2005). This method suited the aim of capturing students' interactions with university culture particularly well, allowing its otherwise intangible elements to take shape in the particulars of life-stories.

On your own to figure it out

Being an independent learner for many working-class students entails, in large part, trying to learn the discourses and expectations of university by themselves. Their experience can be marked by the sense they are on their own to figure out academic processes, an implicit expectation for independence that can come as a shock (Read, Archer and Leathwood 2003, 270). Navigating the changes required of the first-year transition is much more difficult, in comparison to their more privileged peers who often appear to have the 'proper' symbolic and economic resources. Without the cultural capital of the dominant classes, working-class students feel they are behind and on their own to cover lost ground. Knowledge and capabilities for navigating higher education are learnable, inheritable resources, and function as cultural capital (Lareau and Weininger 2003). Being behind, not having inherited these resources, makes a person feel alone, isolated in their attempt to attain this knowledge and skill. Working-class students may assume they should arrive with these resources inherently, rather than realising that they do not already have, and are not provided by the institution, the necessary 'frames of reference' for deciphering and learning institutional processes (Northedge 2003). The interviewees each discussed the immense challenge of learning on their own, such as Vic, who, referring to the challenge of encountering class-cultural differences, said:

> Just, that cultural thing was just so hard to deal with, just the sheer volume. It was all so new to me, and I had no guideposts, no rudder, I had to basically, you know, problems would come up all day every day…They [other students] know how it works. Because, you know, 'my father does medicine or my cousin does that'. They know that after your third year you choose a hospital. So, I knew nothing of that. I had to rely on written documentation. I had none of that family. Medicine is actually a very, there's quite a lot

> families that do medicine, their children do it. You know…a lot of medical dynasty type families. (Vic, late 40s, doctor)

It would be easy to underestimate how challenging the negotiation of first-year transition is when a student does not have the cultural capital resources available. Vic spoke about the overwhelming differences he encountered between himself and the culture of higher education, saying that figuring out how to navigate them was a major undertaking because he felt that he was on his own. His lack of 'guideposts' can be thought of as social capital; the influence, knowledge, and advantage of others in one's social circle. His lack of a 'rudder' can be thought of as lower cultural capital, the resources acquired from one's background. The things that others might be adept at handling (particularly with their parents' help) become problems to be solved, largely independently, for working-class students. They, like Vic, are more likely to experience these feelings of being overwhelmed when they are expected to become an independent learner independently.

> I almost dropped out in the first year, thinking I wouldn't get through. Feeling like I was a fraud, and I didn't belong there. I had a teacher back from school, she was really encouraging, and said, "Stay with it. You'll get there, just stick it out." She was right. I wasn't particularly good. I didn't get very good grades, particularly in the first couple of years, but I started to find my niche, which was really important. Back at school I could grow the things I was good at, and I'd been a good student, because I had the support. When I was on my own [at university], I really had to find what it was I was good at. (Rebecca, 30s, academic)

It can be detrimental to students when they are left on their own to find their way academically. Some first-generation university students nearly drop out, as a result of a lack of guidance, and this despite even performing well academically (Lehmann 2007). They cannot rely on their families or even peers to give them the kind of advice and conversation necessary to help guide them academically. Fortunately, Rebecca had a former high school counsellor to advise her, but she struggled through her first couple of years, after nearly dropping out. Universities have assistance available, and presumably Rebecca could have found someone to advise her. But the world of higher education is intimidating in the first year, and all the more so for those with little prior knowledge of it. Where some may think that such students 'lacked commitment to proactively seek out help' (Christie, Barron and

D'Annunzio-Green 2013, 634), I argue that such students often do not know how to seek it, or who to seek it from. One does not know what one does not know. Crozier and Reay (2011) write that universities with 'loose framing' (citing the work of Bernstein), or lowered expectations and lowered support, disadvantage working-class students who require the opposite: expectations sustained at the level of their traditional-student peers combined with high levels of guidance and support.

> I was not coping well with uni at the time. I went the first time when I was 18. Something was happening and I went to the doctors because I kept falling asleep everywhere and I didn't know what was wrong with me. It may have been I had chronic fatigue or could have been very depressed. I didn't meet very many people at uni, not many friends. I could have been having a stress reaction to feeling like nobody gave a fuck. Nobody knew your name, nobody cared. (Francesca, mid 40s, manager)

The challenge with entering university is not just about academic skills, but about social integration. Working-class students are often adrift socially, especially at first, due to a lack of know-how and confidence. Much of the confidence necessary for meeting people and engaging in the social fabric of university, including peers and staff, is about being able to navigate the interpersonal dynamics of the dominant classes. Francesca dropped out from the stress induced by this difficulty of feeling anonymous and disconnected socially and academically. Recent research on the university transition suggests that emotions play an inextricably important part in 'learning to be a university student' (Christie et al. 2008, 572), and that 'we can only understand how students negotiate new meanings and learning identities by looking to the emotional values which they extract from the learning process'. As evaluative judgments, Francesca's visceral, emotional reactions to the first-year transition were about the trouble working-class students can have integrating socially and the implications this has for their learning. Social integration and academic success are closely linked (Tinto 1997). Working-class students may feel they have arrived at a culturally foreign environment, and without assistance in navigating it they can become marginalised. This inter-personal challenge in turn hurts their chances for successful academic integration. Both socially and academically, the working-class graduates in this study felt they were on their own to figure it out.

Conscious work learning the game: concerted *self*-cultivation

This section is about the self-reflexive, conscious effort some working-class students employ to learn the 'rules of the game' of higher education. All students must work to adapt, but the interviewees described in this research found the process to be one of concerted effort. Middle and upper-class students are more likely to take to university like a fish to water, and, like the proverbial fish, are often not aware of the water. Working-class students who are new to the environment are acutely aware of the water and must learn on their own how to swim. Annette Lareau (2003) wrote about the concerted cultivation that middle-class parents employ to train their children to be middle-class, actively instilling in them cultural capital. Independent learning for working-class students involves concerted *self*-cultivation. They engage in the necessary adjustments and acquisition of knowledge and skills as self-reflexive agents. Another way of stating this is they learn to become independent learners independently. As students they demonstrated, in the words of Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009, 1105) 'self-conscious reflexivity…in which self-awareness and a propensity for self-improvement become incorporated into the habitus'. The interviewees in this research discussed having employed this self-cultivation successfully, but some found it challenging, unnerving, and reflected with relief that they had 'figured it out'. These are accounts from graduates who, thinking back on their university experiences, recognise the way they consciously sought to learn the rules of the game.

> The more you mix with people at that level, the more you're likely to acquire the same tastes or whatever. I mean, I knew that I wanted to be interested in other things as well. But it's a bit of conscious work to do that. (Lachlan, mid 50s, business entrepreneur)

Adapting to the 'dominant-class' culture of university in the first-year transition is a conscious effort, or in Lachlan's words 'conscious work'. There are indications in this and other quotes (and overall in the interview narratives) of the 'project of the self' necessary in an individualised society (Giddens 1991). The type of self-reflexive project many working-class university students engage in is to become middle class (Lehmann 2009), though this is complicated by recurring ambivalent feelings. Students like Lachlan, through conscious effort, adjust to the culture of higher education over time, potentially even experiencing degrees of belonging (Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2009). Lachlan was attempting to adjust his

tastes and to try to become socially integrated. For Lachlan's peers, university culture was a continuation of the tastes and habits of their upbringing. The 'dominant' classes take for granted much of the required knowledge and skills gained through social integration, thanks to their cultural and social capital. Whereas, for working-class students, adapting to the requirements of independent learning is an active effort. The challenge is heightened by the fact that the 'underlying principles are usually only implicit' (Haggis 2006, 524).

> It does take the ability to look outside yourself…appreciate that people do behave in certain ways. The thing is if you can adapt to particular institutional and social situations…paths are made much easier. So, whilst I still had some anxieties about certain sorts of social situations that doesn't mean I can't survive… it's not about being a chameleon, it's about recognising there are different codes in different situations. (Andrew, mid 40s, academic)

Andrew was speaking about the ability to see things in a different way, to observe and discern the implicit social and cultural cues. This did not come without embarrassing or difficult moments (i.e. being laughed at for accents, etc.) for him and other interviewees. In his research, James (1995) found that, due to differences in the use and accent of spoken language, working-class university students experience a home/university dichotomy, one which distances them from their family and friends. Working-class students spend time and energy trying to close those distances by finding ways to adapt, to fit in. Learning to do so (with varying degrees of success) may be seen as a useful skill to develop. However, the fact that working-class students need to do so is the operational point. The culture of university includes dominant ways of thinking and doing and socially dominant discourses (Read, Archer and Leathwood 2003, 269), and discerning and learning these is necessary for successful transition. Students like Andrew must do so without guidance, relying on their own ability to 'recognise different codes'.

> If you choose to propel yourself into something different, which everyone else is comfortable with and you're not ... it means a whole lot of difficult adjustments and decisions, and moral judgments sometimes too. You even have to go, okay, I need to adjust and adapt to survive in this. How far do you go for a reasonable adjustment, at what point are you selling your soul and pretending you're something you're not? Again, you have to actually think that through. How much adjustment can you do to be

> pragmatic and survive or do you just start aping the manners and styles of the people you think you want to aspire to be? As someone who hates snobbery and class distinction, there are limits to how far I'm going to go. (Greg, 30s, academic)

This quote from Greg demonstrates a personal negotiation that students from dominant-class families would not be familiar with. Not only is the process one of conscious adjustment, it is also a matter of personal, moral, and values adjustment. This is about the sacrifices of self, the adjustment to something a person is not sure they want to be. It is about the difficulties of managing a self-reflexive process in which they become something other, and something they perhaps dislike or even despise. Reay (2002, 404) writes about the complexity working-class students face in individualised discourses of 'becoming yourself', the process in which becoming and being middle class can feel like 'losing oneself'. Becoming an independent learner, adopting the modes and codes of learning in higher education can feel like much more – for working-class university students it can be a matter of becoming something else entirely – an adjustment, or a rupture, of the self. This further problematises the expectation on all students to *begin* university as independent learners by making the adoption of the implicit and explicit roles of a student a matter of personal and ambivalent transformation.

The exigencies of self-discipline and hard work

Consciously trying to adapt to the expectations of being an independent learner requires a substantial work-load. By coming into university with fewer symbolic and economic resources, the interviewees felt they had to work much harder to keep up. The first-year transition is difficult as it is, without the extra challenge of learning the tacit and explicit discourses, the bureaucracy, the expectations, and the social knowhow, on one's own. One of the more challenging things for working-class students is becoming self-disciplined and self-regulated (Crozier and Reay 2011) and to take responsibility for their own learning (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). The most successful working-class students manage to do so, demonstrating degrees of self-discipline and determined hard work that, in some ways, are models for what the institution would like in an autonomous student. 'The new subject of neo-liberalism', writes Leathwood (2006, 614-615), 'is expected to take full responsibility for their own lives and futures as self-reliant, self-managing autonomous individuals, engaging in the "choice" practices of the market economy and providing for themselves free from any dependence on the state'. Self-discipline and hard work were the things the interviewees in

this research recalled relying on to substitute for a lack of symbolic and economic resources. People like this, who manage to make up for being left on their own through hard work, would seem to be examples that prove the rule of the difficulty in overcoming the disadvantage of inherited resources.

> I spent most of my time just problem solving, working out ways to getting at things. You know, just ways to work out time tables, and planning to make sure stuff was done the next day. I got into very routine habits. It was the only way I could get through. So, I had to work out everything myself. I had no curriculum, no one to tell me how to pace it. (Vic, 50s, doctor)

> What was it like at Uni? It was really tough….I was pretty focused on my studies. I couldn't afford the books. I just went to the library. Wealthy people lived in the colleges. They had their own tutors. I just went to the library, then to a pub and get a meal, then go back to the library until it was time to go home. First year was really tough. I was very focused. I wouldn't do sport because I wanted to study. I organised study groups on weekends and holidays. The only time I had off was Sunday night. I'd study all weekend except for Sunday night. I absolutely just went flat out. (Fred, 50s, doctor)

Vic and Fred exemplify the situation of students who rely on their capacity to put in long hours to compensate for lack of guidance. While many students apply themselves and work hard at university, the difference can be seen in the necessity that they figure out how to do it alone, and that they have only their efforts to fall back on, not tutors or family advice. It is through careful, regimented time management that they are able to adjust. Part of the difficulty is not knowing what you do not know: from not knowing what to ask for in help from lecturers (McKay and Devlin 2014, 959), to not feeling they could say something and not understanding written or spoken expectations (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber 2007). Becoming an independent learner, for many working-class students, requires an inordinate amount of their time. Vic and Fred, as indicated above, would seem to be models for self-disciplined action, but perhaps not all students could be expected to display this degree of self-determination while navigating the unknown of higher education.

> I think that might be the feeling that a lot of people have, who push themselves. They feel like they have to pedal hard to maintain where they are, or they'll lose their job, or they won't finish their PhD, because it's harder for them; more than anybody else. It may not be, it's just the feeling that they have. I always thought I wasn't the smartest kid, but I worked. I often did a lot more work than what I thought other people were doing, in order to get the same mark that they would, for example. I had no evidence of that, but that's how I saw myself. (Rebecca, 30s, academic)

Students with working-class backgrounds have to work harder to reach a point where they can learn independently at university. Not arriving with the requisite symbolic and economic resources means a student cannot focus their time and energy primarily on their learning and building social networks. The focus becomes getting to a baseline level of confidence and competence, perhaps where other students were when they first entered university. The fact that a student feels they have to 'pedal harder' is not something to pity the student for. Rather, they need acknowledgement that they are starting from well behind the line, and that the expectation they become independent learners is tempered, and modified, by the relevant knowledge, guidance, and supports that would bring them to the level.

Conclusion

Understanding how working-class students' differing social, cultural, and economic capitals affect their experiences of university, challenges the expectation and rhetoric of the independent learner. The life-stories of these upwardly mobile, working-class graduates provide demonstrations of the difficulties confronting those who undertake the transition into university without the cultural and social capital of their peers. These students felt alone in their efforts to decipher the discourses, bureaucracy, and cultural and social dispositions of the higher education system. The fact is, they did it. They completed their degrees (taking longer for some than others). They had successful careers at the time of the interview. It is conscious work learning the rules and nuances of the game of university, one that requires concerted self-cultivation. It is through self-discipline and hard work that these graduates were able to meet the task. This is not to suggest that university is not or should not be challenging. And these people are examples of working-class students 'successfully' negotiating university. But these students are also examples of the extra-ordinary efforts involved in making it, in negotiating the class-cultural dissonance. As Read, Archer and

Leathwood (2003, 272-273) argue, some learn to the play the game and even become confident and achieve much, but the culture of university goes unchallenged. The assumptions about all students going to university on an equal footing, continue to disadvantage working-class students, who are prone to take responsibility for this learning independence whether they are able to handle it on their own or not. After all, students from middle and upper-class families do not become independent learners independently either.

Rather than independent learning, *interdependent* learning suggests a more useful way of framing responsibility in the educational process. What is needed is for institutions to adapt to learners as much as learners adapt to the institution (Devlin 2013). Thomas (2014, 815) argues that when low-socio economic status students do not do well, they are often blamed entirely for not being independent learners (and policy initiatives with good intentions have built in deficit models accordingly), rather than addressing 'how past or current educational policies, systems and practices contribute to, or perpetuate, the experience of disadvantage'. Devlin (2011) points out that rather than blaming the students, and rather than blaming the institutional culture per se, a useful perspective is one of there being a gap or 'social-cultural incongruity' that needs to be closed through a mutual effort. Part of this effort would come through a process of 'demystifying academic culture and discourse' (McKay and Devlin 2014) for non-traditional students. Learning to be an independent learner can happen best if the implicit is, as much as possible, made explicit. Citing the work of Polanyi and others, O'Donovan, Price, and Rust (2004) explain that all knowledge has a tacit dimension:

> Knowledge is seen as constructed, and more meaningful and useful than information or data, and the construction of this useful or meaningful knowledge embraces both explicit and tacit dimensions. Consequently, a single-minded concentration on explicit knowledge, and the careful articulation of assessment requirements and standards is not, in itself, sufficient to share meaningful knowledge of the assessment process (O'Donovan, Price, and Rust 2004, 329).

A number of scholars argue that the academic curriculum itself is the best place for embedded inculcation into student identity and expectations, and is an important, though challenging task (Devlin and O'Shea 2011, 533). This would not involve abandoning the challenge, rigor, or expectations on the students but would involve an approach that adjusts to the learning needs of different students (Haggis 2006, 530). Haggis (2006, 531) suggests

collective inquiry, or the process of learning how to learn in a particular subject, with the instructor. Lower socio-economic students have more difficulty adjusting to the expectations and teaching styles of university than other students, and the way to address this is through an active effort on the part of universities to model the curriculum and orientation to suit the needs, interests, and backgrounds of the increasingly diverse student bodies in the era of widened access to university. The potential impact is to demystify the process and to assist working-class students in becoming independent learners, *inter*-dependently.

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Chapter 4: Stigmatized learners: mature-age students negotiating university culture

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Abstract

Research on the socially-situated nature of learning shows how practices and identities are affected by participation in communities, but very little is known about how mature-age students experience the relational dynamics of university. Based on data from a qualitative study of first-year students, we consider written accounts by older learners to examine how they negotiate the culture of higher education. We found mature-age students encounter a university culture dominated by younger students who draw separating boundaries between the social and the academic and stigmatise older students because of their academic practices. Drawing on Lave and Wenger's learning theory, we examine the way mature-age students negotiate the process of becoming legitimate members of the learning community, and the resistance they face in doing so. Knowing how mature-age students learn, and how to support them, depends on examining their negotiation of university culture, as well as their differing aspirations and needs.

Keywords: learner identity; mature-age students; older learners; socially situated learning; university culture

Introduction

Mature-age students are a key concern of higher education research and policy due, in part, to widened university access and the promotion of 'life-long learning'. Universities want increased enrolments in the name of equity and social inclusion and *need* them due to the

exigencies of knowledge economies, and concomitant credential inflation (Collins 2002; Van de Werfhorst and Andersen 2005). Governments continue to pursue policies of widened access, and universities increasingly aim to attract and retain so-called 'non-traditional' cohorts, particularly those over 21 years of age. Yet the transformation of global higher education (hereafter HE) to 'mass' systems has not resulted in greater equality globally (Shavit 2007), particular with rises in tuition fees and lower levels of governmental funding for universities. This relates to disjunctions between the eagerness to increase 'non-traditional' student enrolments and the institutional lack of willingness and/or ability to offer sufficient support. Older (and other 'non-traditional') students are insufficiently understood, and policies and HE institutional cultures are often ill-suited to their particular needs and interests.

All students must adjust to new learning environments at university, but mature-age students have the additional difficulties of having a minority status, having little recent involvement in formal learning structures, and having additional responsibilities and pressures outside of university (O'Donnell and Tobbell 2007). HE institutions want to include these students, placing an emphasis on recruitment and retention, but fail to adequately recognise the challenges faced by those who have *traditionally* been structurally excluded from such institutions (David 2011). 'Non-traditional' students encounter additional stress during their first-year transition in HE, a time already fraught with emotional challenges for most students (Christie 2009). The term 'mature-age' is not nuanced enough to account for the varying experiences of older entry students, which are shaped by additional factors such as class background, gender, ethnicity, and disability.

Recent higher education literature challenges oversimplified accounts of students by considering the ways students with diverse social identities negotiate academic processes within differing types of HE institutional cultures (cf. Clayton, Crozier, and Reay 2009). This research, some of which is discussed in the following pages, shows that mature-age students engage in processes of identity formation, involving change and, at times, risk to their established identities and relationships (Baxter and Britton 2001). However, there is incomplete knowledge regarding how mature-age students negotiate the learning community of students with regard to particular academic and social practices. This article uses written accounts by mature age and school-leaver students to examine the ways that, due to differing priorities and academic practices, school leavers may stigmatise mature-age students. We

find this leads mature-age students to alter some of their practices, but they also have ways of reinterpreting their status in the university. School leavers are the 'traditional' students who continue to determine normative student practices, but if HE institutions want to grow and support older demographics, and *widen* notions about *who* university is for, they need to understand these relational dynamics and find ways to encourage and support mature-age students with their differing priorities, needs, and dispositions to learning.

Widening access and mature-age students

Sociologies of education emphasise the importance of social identities and life-circumstances to educational experiences. However, HE policy and institutional culture more closely resemble neoliberal discourse, which shifts responsibility for learning entirely onto the individual (Olssen 2006), with little consideration of historically structured disadvantage. The 'new student' in HE is an 'independent learner', someone who requires a minimum of institutional time and resources, serving the increasingly rationalised operational modes of HE (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). Theses 'new' students are often viewed as a liability to HE institutions because they may need different or additional assistance and are pathologised for being 'deficient: in ability, in not having a "proper" educational background, or in lacking the appropriate aspirations and attitudes' (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, 599). It is perhaps easier, and more convenient, for HE institutions to promote and treat students as 'flexible', individualised learners than it is for the institutions themselves to accommodate students with differing educational narratives. Gale & Parker (2012) argue that HE processes and curriculum should acknowledge and encourage differing learning modes connected to diverse social identities and 'life pathways'. When the individual is expected to conform to the institution this neutralises the institution's responsibility, 'rendering [mature-age students] safe and unchallenging' (James 1995, 453-4).

Students are more likely to see their challenges as personal inadequacies, grappling with feelings of guilt and inadequacy, if HE institutions individualise personal responsibility (Reay 2003). The 'ideal learner', from an institutional view, is young, well resourced, and not bound by conflicting family obligations; in other words, able to build their life entirely around the 'greedy institution' of HE (Edwards 1993). Due to their age, and their sometimes-fraught former relations to education, older students may feel that they did not study at the *right* time, personalising their different educational trajectories as 'barriers within us' (Waller

2006, 69-70). Anything that competes with HE for time and attention is considered 'baggage' (Edwards 1993), particularly family, rather than seeing these commitments are integral to students' identities. Edwards (1993, 13) argues that the tensions women in particular experience between the family and HE are tied to the 'socially constructed value base of the institution'. Women's perspectives, writes David (2012, 680) are largely absent from dominant research agendas, yet their involvement in HE is one of the central features of global transformations in HE. These issues contribute to complications mature-age women and men face in becoming full participants in the community of learners. The importance of interactions amongst learners is central to the learning process itself, and we turn now to a review of literature that emphasises learning as socially situated.

Learning takes place in communities with distinct cultures and practices (Lave and Wenger 1991), but most institutions presume learning is an individual affair and that it 'has a beginning and an end, that it is best separated from the rest of our activities, and that it is the result of teaching' (Wenger 1998, 3). Educational research and policy also tends to privilege the individual, rational components of learning (Christie et al. 2008, 568). To participate in higher education is to learn, enact, and/or resist the rituals and practices with meanings tied to that community and tradition. Wider social and historical factors influence the development and maintenance of valued practices in such communities (O'Donnell and Tobbell 2007). 'Dispositions to learning' are influenced by the culture of the educational institution (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2000), and becoming a part of a learning community is a process of engaging in pre-established roles and practices.

Mature-age students are disadvantaged by an identity that is marginalised and detached from student networks of sociality and information (Christie, Munro, and Wager 2005). While research suggests that social integration is critical for student retention (Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld 2005), little is known about what sociality mature-age students want and need at university. What is known is that 'non-traditional' students (including mature age) select universities they feel are for people like them, i.e. with similar social class and ethnic demographics (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010). Friendship and community cohorts play a large part in one's ability to imagine a place for oneself at university (Heath, Fuller, and Johnston 2010). Many stay in close proximity to home, choosing geographic familiarity to mitigate the financial and emotional risks of returning to HE (Clayton, Crozier, and Reay

2009).[1] Such self-selection demonstrates an awareness and compliance with institutional hierarchies that suggest 'enduring and diverging regimes' between elite and non-elite, further and higher education, and 'old' and 'new' universities (Parry 2009).

Becoming a student, particularly a mature-age student, is a highly emotional process. Christie, Munro, and Wager (2005) note there has been a near absence of consideration in higher education research of the emotional dynamics of inhabiting a new learner identity amongst other students, which is especially vital for understanding the first-year transition (Christie 2009). The research discussed in this paper demonstrates ways mature-age students, during their first-year transition, are subject to emotional experiences (shame, confusion, and frustration), which occur when their practices do not cohere seamlessly with the dominant student norms. Goffman (1963) outlined the process whereby a person is stigmatised because they have attributes considered by the dominant participants of a culture to be incongruous, not what they 'should be'. Stigmatising serves to label, explain, and socially position the offending individual. We found that, while the stigmatised identities of mature-age students can make their transition to university particularly challenging, the very practices and attitudes that lead to their stigmatisation are often those their instructors value as ideal for learning. Mature-age students alter some of their practices, but they also resist and reinterpret the normative practices of school leavers. We approached these issues with a concern for the experiences and subjective impressions of the students themselves, seeking to emphasise their articulations of the first-year transition.

Methodology

Students enrolled in a first-year subject at [retracted for referee process] University in 2009, in Melbourne, Australia, undertook an assessment task entitled 'University Culture'. The subject, titled [retracted], was coordinated by [retracted] and was open for enrolment to students from across the university. The 487 students were invited to participate in research based on their assessment tasks by giving permission for their written work to be used as data

[1] Mature-age students are more likely to stay close to home for HE, but evidence suggests they encounter relational divisions and hardship between them and their families and networks of friends (Merrill 2014: 7). HE changes people, and these can divide people due to issues of changes in verbal expression and worldview (James 1995: 460-1). The conflicts and divisions can be particularly nefarious for women and their partners (Edwards 1993) and generally for work those from working-class backgrounds (author name retracted).

for the project. The University's Human Ethics Committee granted ethics approval and students were reassured they were not obliged to participate in the project.[2]

The students conducted basic participant observation fieldwork in different settings of the university. They were instructed to observe, reflect on and write about elements of 'university culture', in particular: interactions between students as well as students and staff, cultural rituals, social spaces and study-work-life balance. In a short written reflective exercise, students were asked to 'reflect on what shapes your own perspectives and experiences of university'. They were also asked to reflect on how their experiences compared to those of the students described in an account of a U.S. college by Rebekah Nathan (2005, 90-106).[3]

The assignment introduced the students to active research, and encouraged them to reflect on the university as a cultural institution and to think reflexively about their own experience of university. The students undertook the participant observation with enthusiasm and their written reflections demonstrate insightful, serious, and at times emotional reflection on university culture and their place within it. The data in this paper come from the written reflections of the 344 (of the 487) students who consented to their work being used for the project. Those students completed a questionnaire giving details of their age, gender, ethnic identity, study load (full or part time), whether they were local or international students, and the number of hours of paid work they undertook while studying. There was a predominance of females in the class (64.5%) [the other students reported 33.7% male and 1.8% gave no answer] and students were from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, although 55% self-identified simply as 'Australian'. Their ages ranged from 18 to 56, with 42.5% of the cohort aged 21 and over and therefore considered 'mature-age' by the university.[4]

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[2] Students knew that their lecturer, [retracted], would not grade their assignments (that work was done by tutors), so there was no link between their participation and their mark in the subject.

[3] The student participants in our research were given the Nathan (2005) reading to inspire ideas for their own writing. Some of the language the students used, which we analyse in this article, is influenced by what they read, however, they tended to refer to the text only briefly, and some did not refer to Nathan at all. The text supplied them some additional vocabulary that they employed to offer accounts (often impassioned accounts) of their own observations and embodied experiences of negotiating university culture.

[4] The mature-age students quoted in this article range from 22 to 56 years of age. There are important differences in the experiences, circumstances, needs, and interests of students within this broad range. For example, drawing on this same research project, we write elsewhere (retracted) about the experiences of 'young mature-age students', particularly those between 22 and their early 30s who do not readily identify with school leavers or 'mature-age' cohorts. These students often feel isolated,

The chapter of Rebekah Nathan's (2005) college ethnography the students read includes some discussion of the divide students often maintain between the social and the academic in university culture. Nathan concludes that school leavers think most of their learning experience happens outside the formal academic structures of the institution, beyond the content of academic texts. She claims many school leavers view the social as an essential part of their education and respond to this by maintaining a culture of equality, informality, and intimacy in and out of the classroom. Many of the students in our study (school leavers and mature age) identified this phenomenon in their own university experience and expressed strong opinions and feelings as well as detail about its particular operation in their own local context. The acceptance of older students by younger students has been shown to vary by discipline, with humanities and social sciences being somewhat more amenable to older students drawing on their life-experience in class (Brooks 2005). Despite this study being conducted in a social science subject (with students from other faculties as well) the school leavers did have distinct issues with the practices of those older than them.

The following discussion is about how mature-age students are stigmatised by younger students, and how they cope with it. Conspicuously absent from the students' work, and thus from our analysis, are detailed descriptions of the interaction of class, gender, and ethnicity. While we acknowledge the importance of these elements of social identity in shaping the experience of learning, in what follows we focus our analysis on the issues emphasised by the students; the dynamics of age, academic practice, and sociality between students in and out of the classroom. We turn now to the accounts offered by these students, who were asked to reflect on their experiences as members of a culture of learning. Their written accounts [5] are exemplary of the way that 'for individuals, it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of the community' (Wenger 1998, 7).

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thinking they are the 'only ones' who fall between officially recognised and popularly operationalised categories of student. Accordingly, we do not presume all of the students discussed in this article can be spoken for as a homogenous 'mature-age student' cohort. We discuss some experiences they had in common while recognising these experiences need more complexification in further research to account for differences within this broad range of ages.

[5] We made minor edits to correct typos and grammatical errors.

Anxieties about fitting into university culture

Numerous studies of the first-year transition in HE discuss the shock to students entering a new environment, especially of elite institutions (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). Yet HE institutions perhaps underestimate this transitional shock for mature-age students, whose 'maturity' may be presumed to inoculate them. The risks and uncertainties involved in developing a new learner identity have distinct elements for mature-age students (Gallacher et al. 2002), particularly since many older students represent historically marginalised demographics, like working-class students who are more likely to become detached and estranged from the social life of the university (Lehmann 2012: 529-30). Adults who have been distanced from formal education for some time are particularly vulnerable to anxiety of return (Davies and Williams 2001), especially those who had negative previous experiences with the education system (Brine and Waller 2004). Our research indicates mature students are aware of the importance of the role of the community in their learning and, in fact, are anxious about their position in the university.

> Coming into university as a mature-age student is not easy mentally. Yes I did come to university to get a degree but I had to ask myself some questions like, will I get along with my fellow colleagues or what would they think about my age and would they socialise with me if they knew I was a mature-age student. Afraid that socially I wouldn't be accepted because of my age. (Male 22-25)
> Whilst I was still deciding [whether to attend university] one of my major concerns was how students and staff would receive me. Rationality dictated that my social concerns had little or nothing to do with the reasons I wanted to study in the first place and must be put aside. Rationality however did not stop the

> anxiety I suffered when first walking into the university grounds. I wondered if I was alone here with this 'exposure dread'. (Male 26-35)

These passages evoke feelings of anxiety about finding a place at university, and the necessity of time to adapt to new routines, spaces, and practices. Much discourse around mature student identity depicts a responsible, sacrificing older learner, 'constructed as the ideal student' (Williams 1997, 43, as cited in Waller 2006, 124). Many mature-age students are concerned about sociality, and quite reasonably desire social connection in the student community, even if they may be more focused on their studies. Older students enter university with more life-experience, but often with just as much insecurity about their position.

> My first year of university as a mature-aged student is an experience quite different to that of fellow school leavers. My first week of university I wandered around quite nervously unaware of how this life works, knowing no one in first year.... [School leavers] saw my role as mature age, something I was quite capable of sorting out for myself and that orientation week was not necessary. During this first week, in fear of looking stupid, I clumsily navigated my way around this new world, attended all my tutorials and lectures and tried to fit in like I had done this before. (Female 22-25)

> I started thinking of just what I was doing here and where I fit into this institution, everyone was young and seemed fresh out of school, well accustomed to such rituals. I, on the other hand, had been out there in the work force for a decade and was well accustomed to routine of the daily grind. (Male 26-35)

Belonging was a key concern for these students, who otherwise, as discussed later in the article, are focused more on obtaining a university education than developing a new social life. However, they experienced an expectation from the institution as well as their younger peers that they would 'hit the ground running', simply by virtue of their age. The implication and assumption is that older first-year students 'have it together' and do not require the same level of support and guidance as their younger peers. Kasworm (2010: 144) suggests that universities lack sufficient policies, procedures, and services for mature-age students, still demonstrating a 'highly stylised institution focused on the young adult learner'. Our findings also suggest

insufficient understanding of and support for older students, particularly in the first-year transition.

‘Normal’ student practice and stigma

During their first year many of the mature-age students displayed enthusiasm for learning and inadvertently discovered what other students considered acceptable and unacceptable practice. Learning is inseparable from the meaningful practices of a community and our analytical emphasis is on the *informal* learning that takes place via participation in a community of learning. Wenger (1998) argues that learning is primarily the result of immersed experience, and that learning not only depends on practice, it *is* practice (1998, 95). The formal knowledge and systems for learning in HE are coupled with ‘embedded’, tacit knowledge (Christie et al. 2008, 572). School leavers have an unwritten but widely shared mode of participation in the classroom. Mature-age students become aware their behaviour breaks tacit codes of conduct when informal sanctions are administered by school leavers. This marks their discovery of a student culture that maintains a distinct division between the social and the academic. We offer the following quote from a participant, at length, to open discussion of these issues.

> After the first few weeks at university I would have to say there are two features that dominate; my struggle with the sheer weight of reading and my attempts to tone down my displays of enthusiasm. Being at university fulfils a dream I have nurtured for many years. It is not considered cool by most students to show enthusiasm for university study. In the second week of semester, a young man sitting next to me in a tutorial told me I ‘would not be so keen for long’. I think he really meant that he hoped this was the case. For his sake, and the sake of others, I try to tone down any visibility of excitement. I can see that I am given some leeway as a mature-age student and that it is generally expected that I will be overly keen. Anyone asking too many questions will cause a flurry of glances to go around the room. I have had questions I wanted to ask but felt I could not. This pressure to walk the finely acceptable line is so great that I have been troubled with it for days after a tutorial and even vowed to myself that it was vital that I said nothing at the following week’s tutorial. (Female 46-55)

This student's account of sanctions, such as snide comments and glances about the room, are of encounters with the tacit boundaries between the academic and the social. Acts of stigmatisation are aimed at people with attributes considered 'incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be' (Goffman 1963, 3). The stigma belongs to the one whose body or actions incite others to react with disapproval, demonstrating their opposition as maintainers of social norms. Goffman offers accounts of the visceral discomfort brought on by formal or informal sanctions against the stigmatised, which are experienced as shame. The more invested one is in becoming and/or being a legitimate member of a community, the more severe the shame reaction may be when one is unable to participate in an accepted way (Probyn 2005). These moments of shame draw an important link between academic actions and routines, and the meanings invested in them within university culture. The respondents showed indications they were not only aware of the stigma toward their enthusiasm to participate, but that they chose to modify their behaviour. The following passages reveal keen awareness of normative practices regarding enthusiasm, amount of speaking in class, and degree of familiarity with instructors.

> I wanted to talk more with my tutor last semester, but felt careful about appearing too friendly in front of other students. On one occasion, I was really uncomfortable with the silence that followed the lecturer posing a question, so I gave him my response when he was outside during the break. (Female 46-55)

> I feel comfortable talking to the lecturer and less bound by the unconscious social norms that mediate the lecture halls' proceedings. However this is not to say I am immune, in fact, I will often wait to the end of class to ask the lecturer personally rather than break the student silence. (Male 26-35)

A number of respondents indicated, as this last quote suggests, that as mature-age students they were subject to differing expectations. However, while they may be given some leeway – as their age already sets them apart – mature-age students are nonetheless burdened with disparaging references to their participation. The emotional impact on mature-age students should not be underestimated. There is, for many, high anxiety about attending university at a mature age (Davies and Williams 2001), including the aforementioned risks to identity and relationships outside of university. The first-year transition involves developing

an identity as a learner, and is a psychically complex endeavour. Learning at university involves identity work, and it is largely dependent on 'the emotional values which [students] extract from the learning process' (Christie et al. 2008, 572). Mature-age students must engage with this process in a stigmatised role, that of the 'mature-age student'. They begin to shape their thoughts and interactions accordingly.

> My first tutorial did proceed through the university first class ritual of self introduction. I was the oldest in the group and promised not to be the annoying mature age student. (Female 46-55)

> When I returned to university in the 90s, I was far more worried about talking too much and, more specifically, seeming like an obnoxious mature age student. (Female 36-45)

The attachment of 'annoying' and 'obnoxious' to 'mature-age' becomes a type in university culture; a stigmatised other. These students' time in the classroom is marked by an awareness of being the 'other'. Their reaction, in many cases, is to try not to stand out, but being made to 'tone down' their enthusiasm causes them to feel like outsiders. This can result in a significant demographic who think they do not fit in or contribute to university culture, and numerous respondents in this study wrote that as mature-age students they 'contribute very little, if at all to the social culture of university' (Male 30). Elspeth Probyn (2005, 39) writes that 'the disjuncture of place, self and interest' make one want to disappear, to blend in and hide, to avoid the shame. University instructors often bemoan the lack of active participation in classrooms. Mature-age students who demonstrate their academic enthusiasm in the classroom encounter the paradox of exhibiting what the instructor considers an ideal zeal for learning while defying the expectations of the student culture. Later in the article we detail some of the ways mature-age students negotiate this seeming paradox, but first we turn to accounts given by school leavers of their impressions of mature-age students' practices. We analyse these accounts for what they tell us about the values and objectives surrounding the academic/social divide of university culture.

School leavers' views: endangering equality

One significant element of school leavers' reflections on university culture were their comments about mature-age students. The content and tone of their comments betray

disapproval of what they see as a pattern in older students' practices. Their written observations offer their commentary on the ways mature-age students engage in the community of practice, and they make their assessments from their position as 'normals' (Goffman 1963). They articulate (sometimes implicitly) the values of the community, which older students seem to defy, even if inadvertently.

> Older and mature-aged students...seem to have more enthusiasm about studies. This is seen by the fact that they, to the *anguish* of the less eager, are usually the ones willing to ask questions throughout lectures and *dominate* the discussion of tutorial classes. This enthusiasm however can also cause a slight rift between the mature aged students and those fresh from high school. (Emphases added) (Female 19)

There is a clear emotional element to this student's account of the way mature students' enthusiasm draws distinctions. Displays of enthusiasm appeared to be the main concern of the 'normals' in their assessment of mature students' practices. This can be seen in descriptions of mature students' preparedness, amount of participation in discussions, and familiarity with instructors. The following passage can be read for tone as well as content to decipher the emotional dynamics on display in such expressions of concern about the university student culture.

> I have observed in some of my lectures that mature-aged students tend to have a inclination to ask questions to the lecturer that not only don't have anything to do with the lecture, but questions in which they sought to find out extra information or simply contribute their point of view. What was even stranger was the realization that at times, some of my lecturers were able to answer these students by mentioning their first name before asking them to continue, something that I never would have guessed to have happen at university given the sheer size of the number of students studying that subject. (Female 18)

This passage not only articulates bafflement at older students' perceived familiarity with instructors, it also offers a back-handed critique of what are seen as derivative or self-important practices. Perhaps a more generous view of such participation is that it displays curiosity and intellectual interest, but these opinions speak to the complexities of maintaining

normative values. The findings of this study suggest an academic/social divide in university culture, but not without a relational logic. These critiques of mature students' practices are more about maintaining the values of the student culture, rather than a straightforward resistance to the scholastic.

> The older students (if any are present) tend to do most of the talking. There is still a distinct ideological divide between younger and older students. In the tutorials I have attended, the two demographics seldom talk to one another (unless, of course, for an exercise or group work task), and if this ever does happen, the older student will always initiate any conversation. (Female 18)

> [Mature-age students] were noticeably a lot less social before and after lectures in comparison to the rest of the class. They completely go against the norm of 'equality'. Social acceptance appeared to be the last of their concerns. (Female 18)

The link here is between academic practice and social connectedness. This is the reason school leavers cite for their own subdued participation. To them, university education is not just set in a social context, it *is* the social context. Many view parties and other social events as necessary to their academic education, as they view social dynamics in and out of the classroom as essential to the overall experience. Rebekah Nathan (2005, 97) found that many undergraduate students viewed academic life as tangential to student/peer culture. The students in our study also draw a distinct separation between the two, but for reasons of peer equality and the maintenance and strengthening of social ties, which are seen as essential to the success of their own educational experience. These school leavers assess mature-age students' practices with these implicit criteria: do their actions support a perceived equality in the classroom? And do they threaten equality of status and the value of social connection in and out of the classroom?

Making judgments and re-evaluating practices

Lave and Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning suggests people first learn as peripheral participants and move eventually toward a legitimate and full participation. At

university, mature-age students can find this process toward full participation is problematised by, among other factors, the question of whether, and how, they obtain status as a 'student'. They are seen by many younger students as a sub-set of students, one with differing needs and practices. Mature-age students often have difficulty inhabiting the student role (O'Donnell and Tobell 2007), as they grapple with feelings that their age disqualifies them as full legitimate members of the community, or 'imposters' (Reay 2002). Becoming a full participant in university social life does not seem achievable or, in all cases, desirable to them. Similarly, (Kasworm 2010) reports mature-age students find advantages in their 'maturity' (including a more active role in the classroom), but they experience a lack of collegiality and friendship with others, even including other mature-age students. This causes anxiety, but it also requires mature-age students to negotiate their student status in creative ways. They rely on their ability to not only alter their practices but to re-interpret their practices in light of the expectations of instructors and of their own desired level of and modes of participation. The written reflections demonstrate mature students' disillusionment with university culture, which aligns closely with the disappointments of university staff who bemoan the lack of intellectual seriousness and engagement amongst some students. They begin to see themselves as a type of university student – mature age – which is a stigmatised identity from the perspective of younger students, but also indicates a level of academic maturity as defined by their instructors.

> While I focus as much time and energy as possible on my academic work, ensuring I complete readings and assignments on time, I constantly appear to be in the minority with this attitude. This has challenged my perception of what university life would be like. Being non-compulsory, I expected students in higher-education to be passionate and enthusiastic about their course work. In reality, however, most students – particularly those in their late teens – prioritise the social aspects of university life over their academic pursuits. (Female 22-25)

This student's disillusionment with university culture articulates not simply that she does not 'fit' into university culture, but that this culture turns out to be different than what she anticipated. Mature students reported that some practices associated with school leavers (i.e. talking during lectures and lack of preparation and seriousness for tutorials and assignments) are distracting, annoying, and frustrating. These practices were viewed as a direct affront and interference to *their* aims at university, namely, scholastic achievement.

Some of the accounts express an exasperated and, sometimes, morally evaluative tone, such as the following:

> Younger students always seem so disorganised to me, having come from an administrative background in a very corporate environment. I often find myself getting frustrated and taking over during group meetings in an effort to get the group members to express their ideas and try to plan the project, but then when I realise I am doing this I step back a bit and try to relax....I was surprised at how much of our allocated meeting time consisted of the group discussing everything except the project we were there to do. (Female 26-35)

> As a mature age student I find myself highly motivated to study and there has been numerous times I have spun around in the lecture hall to shoot a look at people chatting idly while class is in progress. The culprits are invariably younger students. (Male 26-35)

> My solitude in lectures helps me to remain concentrated, unlike some students who somehow manage to talk throughout an entire lecture. I often want to ask these students to stop talking but I don't, I am too conscious about bringing attention to myself. I really don't understand why students attend the lectures if they are going to talk through the whole thing. (Female 26-35)

These students draw on a moralising discourse to help raise the legitimacy of their own practices. Andrew Sayer (2005, 948) describes the moralising significance of affective sentiments such as shame, guilt, and pride. They are 'evaluative judgements'; emotional reactions which demonstrate the psychic response. The feelings of frustration with school leavers appear to signal a contest for the most valued practices. Through their discourse, mature-age students try to reclaim some of their sense of right behaviour in the educational domain, and therefore their own legitimacy as participants. This may not win them full membership as 'student' in school leavers' regard, but it does move them toward a self-defined membership; one based more on the expectations of the academic institution. Part of this re-interpretation of the learning process can be seen in some mature students' rationalisation, or interpretation, of school leavers' differing focus and priorities within

university culture. From this position, mature-age students offer their own critique of school leavers' practices.

> My younger peers appear to focus more energy on the social aspects than fellow mature-age students. ... Talking to younger students it became evident that many still lived at home, therefore did not have the responsibility of a part (or full) time job which most older students have. (Female 22-25)

> I find it quite humorous as it seems that some of these '18 year old straight out of high school students' are there only to socialise and they attend university because they're expected too. Some don't have such responsibilities as trying to work and to balance their lives as they're still young. On the other hand, when I look at the older students they're the ones often doing what I'm doing just standing there waiting patiently for the class to begin as we know time is running out for us, trying to balance four university subjects is hard enough as it while worrying about what others did on the weekend. (Male 22-25)

Membership in the learning community is far from straightforward for mature-age students, and they must find new ways of approaching and interpreting their learning experience. Their descriptions suggest they attempt to find their own take on the social/academic divide during the first-year transition. The students in our study offered three reasons they are not as interested in the social side of HE, each interrelated: they already had a social life, they were focused on academic study, and they already had enough trouble managing the work/life balance. These circumstantial realities played into their own academic practices (including their displays of enthusiasm and level of participation) and formed the justifications for their actions. While Christie, Munro, and Wager (2005) suggest mature-age students are disadvantaged in regards to participating in the wider dynamics of university culture, the students in our study either defined their own forms of participation or chose to restrict their participation to the academic domain. In doing so, many were able to claim their own academic practices as superior to those of the school leavers and this was reinforced by the values of university staff.

Conclusion

Our findings confirm the importance of socially situated models of learning and indicate that higher education research and education policy will benefit from further understanding the processes involved in adopting and inhabiting a 'student' identity, particularly as this is negotiated amongst other students. By examining the reflections of mature-age students on their experiences during their first year at university we show not only how social identities impact on learning, but how engagement with the learning community requires individual navigation and interpretation. Contrary to school leavers' perceptions, mature-age students enter university with anxieties about pressures external and internal to university life. Once they begin their studies, they participate with degrees of enthusiasm and dedication, which defy the culture of equality maintained by younger students, often resulting in mature-age students being stigmatised.

The emotional component of these accounts suggests an interesting reversal of the shame response to stigma detailed earlier. While school leavers disapprove of older students' enthusiasm and active engagement, mature-age students find themselves equally critical of the practices of school leavers. For the sake of discussion we may assume all these students have similar educational values, but their ideas for how they will extract the most from their education differ. The competition between these sets of values shows conflict between principles within the learning community (Goffman 1956). Importantly, this represents a struggle on the part of mature students against the apparent normative subduing of expressed interest, in the name of maintaining separation between the academic and the social in the classroom. Their struggle highlights the way students negotiate and construct their identities, while they are being shaped by the cultures in which they learn. Clearly, learning is much more than simply individual cognitive capacities, it 'is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of the community' (Wenger 1998). Understanding these dynamics is important if mature-age students are to be supported in meeting their educational goals as they face the challenges of new learning environments and the norms of university culture.

Whether fair or not, mature-age students are seen by school leavers to pose a threat to the practices that maintain a nuanced amalgam of the social and the scholastic. Consequently, they are denied full membership as 'proper' or 'normal' students. Judging from these mature-

age students' written accounts, though, their exclusion from the social is often viewed as inadvertently advantageous, since their focus is on their scholastic ambitions. It could be said that these students *choose* the scholastic over the social. However, to what degree is *choice* involved if one inhabits a stigmatised role, has to grapple with whether one will maintain or adjust one's practices, and resolves to accept that the social aspect of the learning experience will be minimal or non-existent? This may be choice, but within constraints. Globally, as HE continues to expand and older students form majorities of student populations, perhaps their interests, needs, and dispositions to learning will have a greater influence on university-student culture. Currently, though, it is necessary to take a closer look at what is happening in and out of the classroom for these students. The stigmatising processes described in this article pose additional challenges to mature-age students, a large and diverse demographic that represent an important part of the present and future of higher education.

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Chapter 5: Isolated learners: Young mature-age students, university culture, and desire for academic sociality

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Abstract

The experiences of *young* mature-age students are under-researched and/or unacknowledged in higher education literature and university policy. This qualitative study on diverse student experiences indicates that, due to their age (early 20s to early 30s), many young mature-age students feel 'out of the loop' and 'alienated' from university culture. The sample was drawn from a large first-year subject and analyses students' written reflections on their identities within the culture of university. Using grounded theory and NVivo coding software to analyse the written assignments, the experience of isolation amongst the young mature-age demographic was a prominent and unanticipated finding. Students in this age range want academic-based sociality but do not identify as either school leaver or 'mature-age'. They have difficulty finding other young mature-age students and think they are alone. Universities generally do not distinguish young mature-age from the larger cohort of mature-age students and are therefore unable to help young mature-age students meet each other. Given the significance of the socially situated nature of learning for engagement, retention, and outcomes, we argue this lack of recognition and structural support for young mature-age students exacerbates the challenges they face in adopting new learner identities and practices.

Keywords: Young mature-age, higher education, university culture, learner identity, student support

Introduction and background

Mature-age students are an increasingly important part of higher education, yet their interactions with university culture, and the impact these experiences have on their learning and identities, remain under-researched. 'Mature-age' generally refers simply ages 22 and up and the higher education literature has relatively little to say about how age variations impact on learning amongst older students. The range of age and life-circumstances is so variable that the label 'mature age' risks over-simplifying adult learning experiences. Adult students are generally viewed as an important target demographic for the expansion of higher education due to decreases in traditional younger populations as well as the exigencies of market demand for increased and diversified skills across the labour force. There is greater pressure than ever, as well as opportunity, to pursue credentials and to be a lifelong learner. The past couple of decades of research resulted in better understanding about older students' diverse social backgrounds as well as the challenges they face as learners, but there is an implicit assumption that 'mature-age' students all share the same general interests and modes of engagement with higher education. Here we focus on the under-studied influence of age variation amongst older students by examining the first-hand written accounts of a younger cohort of adult students (early 20s to early 30s) who are deemed 'mature-age' by the tertiary institution but whose experiences of university culture complicate this identity. Inquiry into these students' experiences reveals that institutions may be missing important opportunities with what we argue is a 'young mature-age' (YMA) demographic.

Understanding the varied experiences of older learners and being able to support their learning accordingly is more important than ever. Expansion of higher education (HE) over the past three decades resulted in a shift toward the 'the adult university', involving the recruitment of more 'mature-age' students (Bourgeois, Duke, Guyot, & Merrill, 1999). Internationally, numerous governments recognise the necessity for recruiting and retaining more 'non-traditional' students to maintain institutional viability, and have set specific targets to increase the percentage of their populations with HE degrees (for a review see Gale and Parker, 2014). However, these older potential learners have traditionally been excluded from HE and face greater challenges in becoming students. The literature on HE transition for adults emphasises the risks of participation particularly with regard to 'rupture with previous social networks and also, risks associated with identity formation' (O'Shea 2013, p. 4). Adult students often experience high levels of anxiety about returning to education (Davies and

Williams, 2001), and are not necessarily the already-competent learners that institutions, instructors, and younger students may assume they are. These challenges are relevant to mature-age students of all ages, but they 'play out' in differing ways for *young* mature-age students.

Despite the potential risks of returning to formal education, university offers important 'transitions and turning points' (O'Shea, 2013), particularly regarding potential opportunities for personal and intellectual development as well as occupational and status mobility. Studying as a mature-age student can have a great impact on someone's life, as Swain & Hammond (2011) and other researchers in education have demonstrated. Still, very little is known about the circumstances, experiences, and interests of adult learners between their early 20s and early 30s. This is partially because governmental and HE policies, and HE research agendas, generally do not acknowledge *young* adult learners as distinct, but instead make assumptions that position them as essentially the same as either school leavers or older mature-age students. Our research indicates that these YMA students are, in important ways, much like older mature-age students, but in equally important ways, much like their younger, school-leaver peers. The combination of factors they have in common with these other two categories make YMA students a separate demographic in crucial ways. We use the word 'demographic' here because our research shows that YMA students are unlikely to feel they are a part of a cohort. This gets to the heart of our argument, that young mature-age students are particularly vulnerable to isolation within university cultures. They are a demographic with distinct learner characteristics, and recognising them as such is vital for improving their learning experiences and outcomes in tertiary education. This article focuses on these YMA students and the problem they encounter in feeling alone in the middle of the other groups of students. We examine these students' accounts to offer a better understanding of why they are more likely to experience university culture as isolated learners. First, we contextualise our research within the broader literature on mature-age students and student identity formation.

Research on mature-age student experiences

The diverse experiences of mature-age learners make categorising or defining them difficult and problematic. The 'epistemological underpinnings' of many attempts at understanding mature-age students, writes James (1995), result in 'species approaches', which limit the findings and sociological understanding of the research subjects. To remedy the tendency in

HE literature to give overly determined shorthand accounts of older students, it is necessary to consider biographical factors to understand the variety of their motivations and life and learning circumstances (Waller, 2006). Particularly in regards to adults in their 20s, write Crossan, Field, Gallacher, & Merrill (2003, p. 57), 'there is no hard and fast distinction between "young person" and "adult", not least because transitions between "youth" and "adulthood" are increasingly blurred and fragmented'. Students in their 20s are generally considered either similar to school leavers or older mature-age students; for example, Osborne, Marks, & Turner (2004, p. 296-297) describe 'delayed traditional' students (those in their 20s) as 'similar to 18 year olds in terms of their interests and commitments'. However, arguments have been made that bundling 'non-traditional' students (including mature-age) into simple categories decreases institutional responsibility for acknowledging and supporting the widely differing needs and learning styles of the student demographics now represented as a result of 'widening access' of the last few decades (Gale and Parker, 2014). Universities play an important role in equity and social mobility (Waller, Holford, Jarvis, Milana, & Webb, 2014), and ought to be motivated by this imperative. Regardless of institutional motivations, though, it is in the interest of institutions to better understand and support students toward engagement and persistence through their studies. YMA students are one such demographic in need of more attention in the research literature. Given there is very little written about *young* mature-age students, we review here literature on mature-age students, in general, that has relevance to the YMA demographic as well.

Adult students are often viewed as ideal students – more motivated, focused, and dedicated to their studies – and notably, are positioned as ideal subjects of neoliberal institutions of higher learning (Morrissey, 2013). As Read, Archer and Leatherwood (2003, p. 272) write, 'The almost "mythic" qualities of the independent learner reflect the current economic and material contexts of higher education, representing an ideal student who can proceed efficiently through the system without support or additional assistance'. Individual responsibility, particularly the view that life-outcomes are entirely the result of one's efforts (or lack thereof), is one of the main 'institutional logics' of neoliberalism (Wacquant, 2009), and can be readily seen in expectations of university students (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Academic transition and completion come to be viewed broadly as an individual problem rather than an institutional imperative (Gale and Parker, 2014). This helps explain why we know so little about how to support older learners. Research on support services during the first-year transition is voluminous, but there is a blind-spot regarding mature-age

students (Kasworm, 2010; Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009). Idealised portrayal of older learners as *independent learners* lends itself to an under-emphasis, particularly in university policy, on the structural factors affecting all mature learners' educational trajectories, as well as the subjective challenges they may face as they try to navigate university culture.

Older students are subject to particular challenges and are not simply trouble-free independent learners. Their educational pathways are often fragmented and/or non-linear trajectories (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Regardless of experience in the workforce, success in work does not guarantee success in HE for older students (Waller, 2006). Research demonstrates that many older students experience tenuous identities as learners, with sometimes fraught relations with learning environments (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & Mccune, 2008, p. 569), often personalising past failures as indicative of their future educational potential outcomes (Reay, 2003). Crossan et al. (2003) suggest older learners' identities as students are 'fragile and contingent' and their participation at university is complicated by their age and differing life circumstances, particularly those from lower socio-economic status backgrounds (Lee and Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2014). While we now understand more about the importance of the identities and circumstances adults bring with them to HE, there is still relatively little known about the experiences mature-age students have within HE cultures of learning. One of the most important dynamics to consider is the social component of learning, about which we discovered YMA students have particularly complex experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

University culture and student identity

To understand mature-age students' experiences of higher education, it is necessary to understand the ways students undergo a process of identity formation within the culture of learning. Learners are socially situated in 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), complex networks of interpersonal and institutional relations. New initiates to a community of practice begin as 'legitimate *peripheral* participants', and move toward full participation as they adopt and skilfully participate in the valued practices of the community. To become a learner is to engage in a process of becoming over time, where the identity undergoes changes as the learner adapts to the cultural norms and practices of the learning community (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000). Learning-identity is constructed through participation in practice, and evidence suggests older learners, in general, face

obstacles to becoming full participants precisely because of differing practices. Due to age and differing life circumstances, there are issues for older learners as to whether they are able to undergo the process of becoming a student in the same manner as 'traditional students', whether there are hindrances to their full participation, and how perhaps they may participate fully but differently. Christie et al. (2008, p. 576-577) found that mature-age students did not consider themselves 'full members of the university community' and that they negotiated 'conflicting feelings about their membership of the university'. These students viewed themselves as legitimate participants in academic pursuits, but not as 'proper' students, i.e. that the social aspects of university life were inaccessible for them. We found that YMA students are in an equally or even more precarious position with regards to participation in the community of learning and the process of becoming students.

The formation of student identity and the capacity to become a part of the learning community matter because research shows that peer support and social integration in HE is imperative to encouraging student retention and performance. The 'student integration thesis' (Jacobs and Berkowitz King, 2002) suggests students' involvements in academic and extramural groups, as well as whether they live on campus and have friendship networks within the institution, correlate positively with persistence and completion (see the work of Vincent Tinto and colleagues, e.g. Tinto, 1997). Social support at university can take the place of the support otherwise found within families and home communities, particularly for students who move away from home for HE and/or whose family backgrounds do not involve experience and extensive knowledge of HE systems (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). While most literature focuses on the social integration of school leavers in HE, research shows that supportive social relationships and networks are equally important to the persistence of older students (Faust and Courtenay, 2002; Merrill, 2014). However, these often consist of prior social networks rather than integration in the social life of the university (Gallacher, Crossan, Field & Merrill, 2002). Some YMA students may have this type of prior-networks support as well, but our research findings suggest that many of them have a different experience of university than older mature-age students. The question of social integration is vexed for YMA students, who feel disconnected from school-leavers but express desire for social integration in HE and dismay at not being able to achieve it.

In our research on student experiences of university culture, we found a significant difference between first-year mature-age students between their early 20s and early 30s compared to

older mature age-students. ‘Traditional’ and ‘mature age’ categories gloss over what we found to be a particular set of experiences of university culture; namely, of feeling alienated from both ‘traditional’ and ‘mature age’ cohorts, and of feeling ‘in-between, or ‘alone’. Many YMA students straddle the needs, interests, and desires of their older and younger peers. Importantly, many want a type of sociality, one centred on their learning, which they are presently not finding at university. We argue that conceptualising them as a demographic will advance understanding and allow for improved support of these otherwise isolated learners. Such support has implications for young mature-age students’ sense of belonging in university culture, their identity as students, and their recruitment, retention, and academic performance.

Research Design

Participants

The YMA students discussed in this article are part of a cohort of students who participated in a research project on ‘University Culture’ via a reflective written assessment task of the same name. The students were enrolled in a first-year anthropology subject at [retracted for review process] University in 2009, in Melbourne, Australia, and were enrolled in a wide range of degrees. There were 487 students enrolled in the subject and 344 gave written consent to have their assignments used as data for the project, which had been approved by the University’s Human Ethics Committee. Their subject coordinator, [retracted for review process], was not involved in marking their assignments and students were not obliged to participate in the project.

In addition to the students’ reflective written assignments, data were collected through a short survey of their age, gender, ethnic identity, study load (full or part time), whether they were local or international students, and the number of hours of paid work they undertook while studying. The participants were 64.5% female and 33.7% male, and 1.8% gave no answer (these numbers approximately match the percentages of all 487 students enrolled in the subject; additionally, the social sciences at our University have higher female enrolments on the whole). Students were from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, although 55% self-identified simply as ‘Australian’. Their ages ranged from 18 to 56, with 42.5% of the cohort aged 22 and over and therefore considered ‘mature-age’ by the university. Of the 344 participants, 101 were between the ages of 22 and 33, meaning that 29.4% of the participating

students were young mature-age. The top end of this age range was selected because this is the oldest age of students in our study who wrote about feeling in between school leaver and mature-age. It was striking to find that these students typically claimed they were the only ones experiencing those feelings, given that YMA students constituted nearly a third of our sample.

Data collection and analytical approach

The assessment task was partially inspired by an ethnography of a U.S. college (Nathan, 2005) which analyses the culture of undergraduate life. The aim of the assignment was to introduce students to fieldwork through basic participant observation in relation to one or more aspects of university culture. Students could choose to observe interactions between students, or between students and staff, cultural rituals, social spaces and to reflect on their experience of study-work-life balance. The assignment also aimed to teach the concept of reflexivity, so students were asked to 'reflect on what shapes your own perspectives and experiences of university' and to discuss how this compared to the students described in a chapter of Rebekah Nathan's ethnography (2005, p. 90-106). Although the Nathan reading influenced some of the language used by students they tended to refer to her text only briefly, or not at all. The students' written assignments proved to be a rich source of data for gaining insight into the lived experiences and perceptions of undergraduate students.

This research method allowed us access to perspectives that students rarely have the opportunity to express. We asked the students to analyse undergraduate university culture from the inside, and they offered insightful, emotive, and often compelling depictions of their lives in higher education. Ethnography has a long history of providing deep insight into the culture of societies, institutions and groups. Work conducted from an emic, or insider's, perspective allows a particular view of cultural dynamics. Using the student's written reflections, we employed an interpretive approach (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 205), drawing on the meaning, practices, and reflections made by the student participants themselves. We aimed to view the culture of university as experienced and interpreted by the students, to interpret their world 'as things are' for them (Jackson, 1996). NVivo software was used to employ inductive and deductive approaches to analysing the qualitative data of the written assignments.

One of the key issues to emerge in Nathan's (2005) ethnography is the relationship between academic and social interests in university culture. She found the majority of the students in the college where she conducted her fieldwork were school leavers and they tended to see their learning as happening mostly outside the classroom. The social life they associated with university culture was paramount in their overall experience. They also expressed strong views regarding the importance of maintaining equality and informality within and beyond the classroom. This impacted on their scholastic and social practices, often resulting in a separating boundary between the two, e.g. subdued enthusiasm and participation in the classroom and limited academic discussion outside the classroom. The students in our study raised these issues as well, but with a clear pattern of differences between younger, school leaver students and older mature-age students. We write elsewhere (year retracted for review process) about a process in which mature-age students become 'stigmatised learners' at university. We found that school leaver students were predominantly concerned with maintaining boundaries between the scholastic and the social, in contrast with older mature-age students who were primarily concerned only with their academic work and mostly uninterested in sociality at university. It was the *young* mature-age students who surprised us because they appear to want both the academic and the social experience, despite seldom achieving this aim.

Isolated learners: neither school leaver nor 'mature age'

Age, particularly perceived age in relation to others, is important to the experience of learning (Brooks, 2005), and is under-researched. Social integration plays an important role in students' success and participation at university is partly about the development of identity as a student, about having a sense that one belongs. Education is a process of identity formation or a 'conscious reshaping of the self' (Baxter and Britton, 2001, p. 94). The scholastic dynamics of university, which can be quite stressful, are closely linked with student identity and sense of belonging. Young mature-age students are susceptible to feeling they do not belong, that they are the odd-one-out. The following are examples of YMA students' reflections on their sense of being the only one 'in between':

> On my student card under my name in nice big bold letters it says 'mature age'. I'm only 24! I don't feel like I'm at a mature age, but when I first started here everyone was either 18-20 or 30-50. I often was left wondering where I was meant to fit in. (Female 24)

> For me university is a place first and foremost to gain knowledge about the world and people. Part of this *learning process* is the interaction (or lack of) that we experience with other students. As a mature age student I feel a little *alienated from the university social life* because I'm not young enough to hang with the fresh out of high school kids, yet the older mature age students mistake me for a nineteen year old. I'm left floating between the two social groups. (Female 22; emphasis added)

The second student distinctly draws a link between the learning process and social integration (or alienation) at university. Like the other YMA students, she felt she was the only one in that situation; participating in the academic aspects of university, but feeling like an intruder, out of place. The YMA students were concerned about where they are meant to fit in, and how they could become a part of the culture of learning.

In their reflections on being alone in the middle, between the school leavers and older mature-age students, many of the YMA students compared themselves to those other demographics. Their common experience was one of feeling they could not relate to either group. The notion of maturity enters the picture, but in a complicated way. Although maturity is to a degree subjective, the YMA students had difficulty relating to either school leavers or older mature-age students specifically due to differences in life experience, interests, and age-related dispositions.

> I find that I don't have much in common with any particular group as I am not quite as 'mature' as the other mature-aged students and even though closer in age I feel much older than the school leavers. (Female 23)

> I am inclined to think my experience at university may be different to the majority of students because as a 22 year old, I am a few years older than those just out of secondary school, yet I feel I am too inexperienced in life to classify myself as a 'mature-aged' student. I confess that I find it easier to relate to the mature-age students because their views on life are closer to mine. (Male 22)

There is a clear tension here between having views that are closer to mature-age students, and not feeling they can classify themselves as mature-aged. Not having much in common, having difficulty relating; these students experience university as misfits, socially out of place. Higher education research is beginning to demonstrate the importance of emotions,

particularly feelings of connection to university culture, to learning outcomes. Christie et al. (2008) argue for a greater emphasis in education research on the emotional work involved in becoming a student, and that the literature on learning predominantly privileges 'outcome measures and individual aptitudes to learning over issues about university cultures and the social nature of learning' (568). Importantly, this emotion work is tied to the formation of new identities through social engagement. A sense of social isolation at university can result in YMA students dislocated from the institution and its culture, so can have an impact on learning outcomes.

Most of the older students in our study reported not having an interest in sociality/friendships at university, whereas for most of the YMA there were indications they very much wanted this. Older mature-age students typically report being too busy for sociality at university and many say they are not interested anyway (reference retracted for review process). However, YMA students' written accounts suggest the inability to fit in and have experiences of sociality at university is one of their greatest concerns as students, emblemised by the question, *where am I meant to fit in*?

> In lectures, I tend to sit somewhere *in the middle of the room and always alone*. Returning to study after completing VCE in 2000 has meant that I am quite a bit older than most of my fellow students and have not yet made any solid friendships in my first year at university. I have noticed that many of the students in my classes have come to university with their friends from high school or if not, they at least have 'friends of friends'. I however, have been a full-time Legal Secretary for the last five years and do not often have any common ground with other first year students. (Female 27; emphasis added)

This student's perception that those around her are already socially established coming into university, combined with her desire to have 'solid friendships' and the perceived gulf between her and the other students around her results in unfulfilled desire. Without 'common ground' with other students she figuratively is isolated within the institution and literally sits 'somewhere in the middle of the room and always alone'. She acknowledges this is directly because of her age and work-life experience, and results in her struggle to belong.

YMA students do not feel they have a place in the sociality of university culture, yet they want such a place. The following two sections examine what sort of sociality they want, and

reasons they are not finding it amongst the school leavers or the older mature-age students. These YMA students are in their tutorial groups, the lecture theatres, the library, the campus cafes, and walking the corridors and pathways of the university thinking they are misfits because of their age. As we have shown, each appears to think they are the only one in that position, that they are an anomaly, and their perception of being isolated inevitably shapes their experience of university.

Barriers to social connection with school leavers

The young mature-age students in this study felt their life experience outside formal education made them more 'mature' than school leavers, further distancing them from university culture. While older and young mature-age students may not have entered HE at what some consider to be the 'right time', many offer accounts in which they position themselves as being at an advantage because of their more focused, purposeful study (Waller, 2005). Their identity as students is positional in relation to school leavers, in that YMA students identify as purposeful and mature in relation to supposedly unfocussed school leavers (Kasworm, 2010). This section focuses on how work-life experience makes YMA students feel there is in fact a gap in 'maturity' and a barrier to sociality between themselves and school leavers.

Being 'closer' to their high school experience than older students, YMA students appear to more consciously compare their attitude toward learning now with what it would have been coming straight from high school. Attitudes toward learning, and the associated practices, were an important part of the perceived maturity gulf that separated these YMA students from school leavers by as little as a few years.

> I spent one year at university as a school leaver and after a seven-year sabbatical have returned as a mature ager. Because of these experiences, I have some insight into both lifestyles. As a mature age student, my motivation and appreciation for university are completely different. Although I have to work and have more time restraints that could affect my studies, I am more focused academically and always schedule adequate study time. (Female 25)

This is one way that YMAs are more like older mature-age students, in their reporting that they have much more focused reasons/purpose in their studies. This type of maturity affects

academic practice. While it makes them more like older mature-age, it does not serve to draw them socially to that cohort. It merely tends to separate them from school leavers because they see themselves as more mature in their attitudes toward education and unlikely to socially connect with these younger students.

> As a mature-age student of twenty-five, my experiences at university have been shaped as much by my experience after high-school as that within it. The cliques, groups and modes of socialisation that I suspect many students moving directly from high school are so enamoured of seem slightly alien to me. (Male 25)

It is the intervening years between secondary school and university that create a felt difference for YMA students. School leavers' modes of sociality are different enough, in regards to perceived maturity of motivation and social interaction, that YMAs feel they are on their own.

Purposefulness and focus are certainly not the exclusive motivational domains of older students, however there is an important difference that YMA students perceive between school leavers and themselves. They view their life experiences, including things like work, travel, and building their own families, as forming another boundary to social connection with school leavers. Additionally, being even a few years older seems to make a significant difference in tastes and habits, which were perceived as a significant barrier to social interaction.

> There are several factors that shape my perspective and experiences at University, the most influential is being a mature age student and working full time. I am blatantly aware of the age gap between myself and the other students. I apologetically slink in and slide into a chair next to a young man. His back turns as he discusses the night before and I notice the branding on his black t-shirt his greasy scruffy hair and untied shoelaces. I am instantly divided from the class as all I can think of is my failed marriage mixed with the fact I have a sensible layering of clothes for Melbourne damp weather. This aesthetic difference coupled with my motivation for attending university silently isolated me from other students. (Female 29)

Universities admit adults of all ages, but older adults can feel the institution is not truly for them. As the passage above indicates, YMA students are subject to feeling they are equally as out of place as older mature-age students, due to perceived gaps in maturity, different

interests, differing styles, and different motivations for being at university. Even aesthetic differences in taste can pose a barrier to social connection and, as the following student indicates, to participating in the 'university experience':

> The differences between a mature age student and a school leaving student can be immense, from where you go for coffee or drinks, to what music you listen to. This can have the undesired effect of long pauses in conversation whilst waiting in the hallway for a tutorial to begin. I have found that being able to relate to one another is a very important part of the university experience. (Male 24)

> I know some fresh out of high school kids from my first semester History course but I try and avoid them as they distract me with nonsensical 'jokes' throughout the lecture, and I like to concentrate. I have, on occasion, found myself having a coffee or grabbing some lunch with these school-leavers. I also find it mind numbing when socialising with mixed-sex groups as they flirt incessantly, as though incapable of just friendship. They ask extremely personal questions, pushing each other. (Male 23)

Such difficulties in making conversation and relating on an aesthetic level are issues of perceived age/maturity differences. Difficulty in social connection leads to difficulty identifying as a legitimate member of the culture. These YMA students are left asking themselves, *what kind of student am I,* and, *do I belong here?*

Barriers to social connection with mature-age students

While YMA students felt more 'mature' than school leavers, they generally did not feel they could or wanted to identify as 'mature-age students'. There are often important and problematic differences between 'institutional age' (with indicators such as 'mature age') and 'experiential age' (Aapola, 2002). YMA students do not readily identify as 'mature-age', causing confusion about their identity and social position within the university. They share many of the life circumstances and challenges in fitting academic work into their lives (Kahu, Stephens, Zepke, & Leach, 2014), dispositions toward learning, and 'maturity' of older mature-age students, but they also have the desire for sociality felt by many school leavers (although their desired *type* of sociality differs). This section examines how, despite being

busy with life commitments, YMA students desire social integration and a sociality based on shared scholastic interests.

Many older mature-age students (from mid-30s) do not want to participate in the social aspects of university culture (reference retracted for review process). They are also stigmatised due to their differing classroom dispositions and practices. These are the two main distinctions between mature-age and YMA students, and two of the main barriers to social interaction between these demographics.

> I'm very aware of being labelled that mature-aged girl who always has something to say. Many times in class I really did feel like I was saving the teacher by speaking up and having a go at the answer. But I really don't want to be that person that asks a million questions right at the end of a tutorial and have everyone get annoyed at me. (Female 24)

> My experience of social life within the university is minimal; it is sometimes difficult to easily slot into friendship groups of school leavers as well as mature age students. (Female 22)

The tension between feeling older than and different to school leavers, yet equally distanced from mature-age students, can be seen in ambivalent accounts like these. The first student was wary of her desired academic practices, particularly the amount she participated in class discussion, potentially tying her to stigmatised notions of mature-age students as 'dominating' and 'obnoxious' (reference retracted for review process). Where other older students more or less reconcile with these derogatory opinions some school leavers have of them, YMA students are less comfortable standing out in the classroom and being seen as 'mature age'. Their academic practices have an impact on how they can (or cannot) situate themselves in regards to their student identity. The second student quoted above, like most of the students described in this article, found it difficult to integrate socially with both younger and older students. YMA students cannot easily fit in with the 'friendship groups' apparent around them.

Older students are generally more likely to face the challenge of 'competing roles' (Jacobs and Berkowitz King, 2002), and are forced to compartmentalise their lives due to competition between their home and family commitments, work, and university (Clayton, Crozier, & Reay, 2009). Older students are also more likely to have fractured schedules in order to

enable a precarious work-life-study balance (Stone and O'Shea, 2013). This applies to YMA students as well, who have many competing demands on their time and energies, as opposed to having university activities virtually filling their daily lives like many school leavers (Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). However, YMA students are still interested in scholastic sociality; that which centres on their classes and academic interests.

> I don't feel like I'm having the 'college experience'. Is it because I'm mature age and have already had my fun before university? I don't have the late night talks, friendships and life experiences that Nathan wrote about. And I can't help but wonder if it's because I just don't have the time to hang around school and chat. I have a job, a partner and family to put before all of those things and don't see how I can balance one more thing on my already over loaded plate. (Female 24)

Dominant public perceptions are still that school leavers participate in HE 'at the right time' (Waller, 2005, p. 70). YMA students may view their competing demands as further evidence that they cannot participate in university culture because they are not the 'right' kind of student: straight from secondary school, unencumbered of family commitments or work responsibilities, and able to be dedicated virtually entirely to the 'greedy institution' of HE (Edwards, 1993). Unfortunately, this often results in students taking personal responsibility for perceived inadequacy (Reay, 2003). This is further complicated for YMA students, many of whom desire a form of the student life experience. When the student above asked rhetorically why she was missing out on a socially integrated experience the answer she comes to is that she already 'had her fun', implying her exemption from university sociality is caused by her decision not to enter university directly after secondary school. Young mature-age students face barriers to the type of scholastic-based social interaction they desire, but they think it is their fault. They believe they are one of very few in their circumstance as a student, leaving them feeling they are isolated learners; unaccounted for and socially alone at university.

Conclusion

Young mature age (YMA) students have been defined in this article as between the ages of 22 and 33, although it is not our intention to impose a pre-determined limit on who can or should consider themselves young mature-age. The contention of this article is that students' perception and experience of their age, in relation to other students, is what counts. We have

argued that universities need to be more aware of differences within the category now regarded simply as ‘mature-age’ in order to provide more targeted forms of support to students.

Many YMA students want more social interaction and feel this part of their educational experience is lacking. They report a lack of collegiality with both school leavers and older mature-age students. The YMA students in our research appeared to believe not only that they were between the two main student demographics, but also that they were the *only ones* in that situation. They thought they were alone, and so perceived themselves to be isolated learners. YMA students are likely to be too busy for much of an additional social life and they associate making friends with activities that distract from, rather than enhance, their education. Yet they still express the desire for social integration at university involving a particular *type* of socialising, one focused more on academic interest. Experiencing this form of sociality would help make university life seem less overwhelming for YMA students and is likely to enhance their studies rather than prove distracting.

Understanding these and other nuances of the learning experience is vital as mature-age students become increasingly important participants in higher education. Previously under-represented demographics, including older learners, need the support of higher education institutions to deal with the additional challenges they face, particularly in feeling out of place at university. Such support gives a clear message that institutions view these learners as people who belong. The culture of universities needs to match their constituents, and when it does it will enable these students to more easily develop identities as students. At this stage there is still limited understanding of older students’ needs and experiences.

Learning is a social enterprise at university, and the social experiences students have shape their learning. YMA students who cannot find their place within the social fabric of university feel isolated and feel that they do not belong; they spend time and energy worrying about *where they are meant to fit*. Many will be hindered in the process of establishing their identity as students (potentially leaving university or struggling unnecessarily) because they cannot easily self-identify as a fully *legitimate* student and member of the learning community. Peer integration and support correlate positively with persistence and completion but YMA students have difficulty finding them and more research needs to be done to find out what impact this has on their learning outcomes.

The mid-20s to mid-30s can be time of great transition in a person's life. People change and 'mature' as a result of experiences over the life course, including through work, travel, formal and informal education, and family commitments. Their views, tastes, manner of speaking, interests, and habits may alter significantly in the decade or so after completing secondary school. Young mature-age students would find that they have much in common with other YMA students, if they could find them. Their reflections on their experiences of university culture indicate that they want to socially integrate and if they were aware of the existence of a young mature-age cohort they would want to form 'mature' friendships, based on shared academic interests. We suggest higher education institutions would do well to recognise the existence of the YMA cohort and actively facilitate their contact with each other. Such efforts would increase YMA students' social integration, improve retention rates and enhance their learning outcomes. Young mature-age students do not have to be isolated learners.

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Chapter 6: Study-work-life *im*balance for mature-age students in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Mature-age university students, fulfilling the expectation to be lifelong learners, are often presumed to be self-managed learners who 'prioritise correctly' with their studies. This article suggests that many have work-loads (including paid and unpaid) that are 'maxed –out', and many are making necessary sacrifices either in home, work, or study, or all three. Their experiences negotiating study-work-life balance have gone mostly undocumented, resulting in perpetuation of unsuitable expectations and insufficient support. This article uses data from qualitative research, specifically, written reflective assignments by mature-age students, written about their experiences, identity, and perceptions of university culture. The research findings suggest many mature-age students are experiencing study-work-life *imbalance*. This is likely to negatively affect their retention and learning outcomes, making a greater disparity between their actual capacity and their demonstrated capacity. This is partially related to the under-emphasis in university culture of the place of mature-age students. Transition into university for mature-age students, as for all students, requires time and financial resources, both of which many mature-age students find in short supply. Better understanding of their situations attempting to find study-work-life balance may encourage more targeted support in the classroom and in government and university policy.

Introduction: the new 'student worker', overwhelmed

University students are now doing more paid work than ever. The traditional, full-time student, one who is able to dedicate their working hours of the day to their studies, has gradually become a minority in countries like Australia (Munro, 2011a) and the UK (Curtis & Shani, p. 2002). This article is about mature-age learners who work while studying; part of the 'student workers' (Robbins, 2010) who make up a growing proportion of higher

education participants. The argument herein springs from a concern over how different social demographics of students have differing opportunities and access to the full benefits of university education. In Australia, approximately 70% of full-time undergraduate students work an average of 15 hours a week (James, Bexley, Devlin, & Marginson, 2007; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). These students are more likely to see themselves as 'hybrid student-workers' (Munro, 2011a, p. 118), yet, as Curtis and Shani (2002, p. 136) write, 'we persist in thinking of students as full-time'. Making study, work, and life come into balance is not a straightforward thing for many mature-age students. As paid workloads have increased, undergraduates in general are more likely than ever to express concern about their ability to balance their overloaded responsibilities (Leese, 2010; Munro, 2011a). A notable Institute for Quality of Daily Life Survey in the UK (2014) found a marked increase in students who express such concerns, from 30% to 84% between 2004 and 2014. The same difficulties with balance apply to full-time and part-time students, as both have been found to have 'different but equivalent demands on their time and were equally at risk of overload and conflict' (Lowe & Gayle, 2007, p. 229-230).

As access to higher education has broadened to 'non-traditional' students, especially low socio-economic, mature age, women, and ethnic minority students, the need to combine paid work with study to support themselves has become even more pronounced. The quandary over study-work-life balance is the largest issue at stake for many mature-age students, but it is often viewed as their own problem to sort out. This is an under-researched area, with still limited understanding of the subjective, emotional dynamics of learning as a student worker. Lowe and Gayle (2007, p. 227) write that 'an improved understanding of the complexity of the inter-relationship between employment, studying and home (or family) life is critical to theorizing lifelong learning and developing evidence-based policy'. Universities now cater to a majority of student workers, and it is a pressing matter that at all levels of higher education, there is better understanding of these students' circumstances, experiences, and the appropriate types of support and expectations to have of them. Accounts from students about their own experiences of study-work-life balance have received relatively scant attention to date, and there is very little qualitative research on this topic in general (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Munro, 2011b; Robbins, 2010). This article reports on findings from qualitative research, offering perspectives on the emotional dynamics of, what is for many, the ongoing challenge of trying to find a balance between study, work, and life.

‘Mature-age’ constitutes a greatly diverse range of students with differing backgrounds (James, 1995; Waller, 2006), but many have in common the need to conduct paid work while studying. Research has made it clear the majority are working for financial need, not simply to support inflated lifestyles (Bradley et al., 2008; Hall, 2010; Robbins, 2010, p. 110; and for a review of other relevant literature see Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005, p. 237). As Robbins (2010, p. 107) writes, ‘the complexities of life and the balancing of priorities or conflicts are sometimes the result of lack of choice rather than poor choice’. Mature-age students, who are more likely to work additional hours (Callender, 2008, p. 366), may find the pursuit of study-work-life balance particularly vexing. The negative impacts of paid work on studies have the greatest effect on students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Callender, 2008; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

Term-time work can have a detrimental impact on students’ studies. Callender (2008, p. 371-373) found that, when controlling for other factors, overall, more term-time working equates to decreases in achievement and lower degree classifications, and that ‘students working the average number of hours a week (15 hours) were a third less likely to get a good degree than an identical non-working student’. Term-time work is strongly associated with missed lectures, less study time, and increased stress (for a review of relevant literature see Callender 2008, p. 362). Hall (2010, p. 445) found that 93.6% of their undergraduate students surveyed reported that work interfered with university, affecting their motivation and concentration on study. Term time work has potential benefits, but ‘while work may facilitate the transition to full-time employment and expose students to transferable skills, it arguably may inhibit other skills formation and forfeit their enriched university experience’ (Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005, p. 242).

Collier and Morgan (2008) write about the distinction between actual-capacity versus demonstrated-capacity for students in higher education. Success in university depends largely on putting in the hours. Students who struggle to find balance in their lives due mainly to work hours are less likely to reach their actual capacity for degree achievement. The findings discussed in this article suggest that mature-age students who work find it very difficult to achieve balance in their lives, and their experiences are in fact marked by sacrifice. The sacrifice some have to make is in their academic performance, as well as their overall capacity to ‘get the most out of uni’. They will, in Collier and Morgan’s (2008) terms, struggle in, and maybe not achieve, the transition from learning about the student role, to

understanding it, then to mastering it. For those with economic resources behind them, such sacrifices are not as likely, making this an issue of socio-economic (in)equality. This is about not having the economic capital to facilitate the acquisition of cultural capital, which is so vital to transition into university and the student role. This article argues that mature-age students are likely to experience study-work-life *imbalance*, leading to sacrifices in the quality of one or more of these areas of their life. While this is a pressing issue for students from all diverse backgrounds, it appears to be particularly timely to discuss and debate given the increasing numbers of mature-age students attending university.

Mature-age students, time, and university transition

Global growth in enrolments in higher education, including in Australia, consist of large numbers of older students. Approximately 40% of Australian university students are between 25 and 64 years old, another 59% being between 15 and 24 years old (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). In numbers, this looks like: 220,600 students between 45 and 64; 266,700 between 35 and 44; and 490,300 between 25 and 35 years old (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The Australian government is committed to increasing numbers of older learners in university with its 2025 goals, including having 40% of all Australian 25-34 year-olds participating in higher education (Bradley et al., 2008). This trend toward more mature-age students is changing the face of universities, but university culture has not necessarily kept pace. Kasworm (2010, p. 144) writes that 'the research university faces important challenges to realign its undergraduate mission and environment in support of a more diverse student population and specifically in support of the adult undergraduate'.

With the growth in mature-age students there has been increased research about their experiences, however, numerous assumptions and gaps in understanding persist. James (1995) argues that 'species' approaches to understanding mature-age students leads to assumptions and simplifications of their experiences, which may serve institutional agendas more than the purpose of properly supporting them. Mature-age students encounter youth cultures in universities, with uneven interests in supporting older learners (Kasworm, 2010). Research suggests some mature-age students feel they have a marginal, and sometimes even stigmatised, status within university culture (reference retracted for review). Overall, the costs and risks of participating in higher education are magnified for mature-age students, particularly in regards to income loss and the risk of return-on-investment at an older age

(Chesters 2014). This is not least because, as Chesters (2014, p. 12) reports, a university degree for those over the age of 25 may provide an elevation in status but is not strongly correlated with increased earning power. In the classroom, older students may appear to be among the most 'mature' in regards to academic capability and focus, however while they are often construed as ideal students, learning careers for many older students are not linear, and are often learning processes involving 'fragile' student identities (Gallacher, Crossan, Field, & Merrill, 2002). The emotional dynamics of a return to formal education can be fraught for mature-age students (Christie, Munro, & Wager, 2005). For some, age and negative former experiences of education can provoke feelings of shame for not having studied at the *right* time (Waller 2006), or not measuring up in a society that places high premiums on formal education (Waller, Bovill, & Pitt, 2011, p. 522).

Social integration is something mature-age working students are likely to miss out on due to pressures of their other commitments and responsibilities (Yorke, 2000). Research demonstrates that for many students integration into the social fabric of the university is associated with stronger likelihood of student retention (Tinto 1994; Yorke 1999), and improves overall 'student engagement' (Kahu, 2013, p. 767). Unfortunately, in addition to having competing time commitments, older students often report feeling isolated from the 'ethos of higher education institutions' (Bowl, 2001, p. 145), and are less likely to feel they are 'full members of the university community' (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008, p. 576). Some even find they are stigmatised amongst other students for their approaches to learning (reference retracted for review). Part of the reason social integration is important for university participation is the need to acquire the requisite cultural capital, which many mature-age students may not have, being that many are first-generation and/or working-class students (REF – WC and MA). Transition, Gale and Parker (2012, p. 737) write, is about 'the capability to navigate change' in required capacities for learning. Successful university participation requires resources, including economic, social, and cultural capital, to negotiate and adapt to its expectations and rigours (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). The acquisition of cultural capital requires an investment of time and energy, particularly for first-generation university students (Bathmaker et al. 2013). Many mature-age students have less time and energy to invest in acquiring cultural capital. Collier and Morgan (2008, p. 442) write that 'it is easier for traditional students entering the university to become "role experts", due to their greater familiarity with higher education based on their family's past experiences within that institution'. The acquisition of cultural capital, and the necessary time investment

needed to do so, are matters of concern for mature-age students who are stretched for time, especially when their circumstances require them to give priority to home and/or work.

The homeplace, or the 'life' in the study-work-life balance, is too easily viewed as a separate concern from the interests of universities. As important as a sense of belonging at university is, there is little recognition of the way heavy loads of work and life responsibilities make it more difficult for many mature aged students' academic and social integration, and consequently 'delay the sense of belonging' (Chapman, 2015, p. 1). Home lives are considered private and are therefore not a concern to the institution. Feminist arguments suggest that a separation of public and private spheres 'frequently keeps women's issues, concerns and experiences hidden from view, as "private" areas are not subject to research investigation or policy development' (Gouthro, 2009, p. 162). Edwards (1993, 13) argues that tensions between the family and higher education, particularly for women, are tied to the larger, 'socially constructed value base of the institution'. Women's perspectives are often absent from research and pedagogical agendas even though their participation is one of the central features of global transformations in higher education. As Leathwood (2006, p. 616, 630) writes, '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'. Other research indicates mature-age students have been dealing with this lack of recognition for some time. Bowl (2001, p. 145) for example, writes mature-age students 'were concerned about inadequate funding, lack of childcare, difficulties with the benefits system and the unresponsiveness of educational institutions to the issues faced by adult students with childcare responsibilities'. Discussing experiences of post-graduate, sole-parent students, Hook (2016, p. 1) writes that universities are reproduced as 'child-free' places, which leads to 'conflict with [student parents'] sense of belonging and engagement with university spaces and practices'. There is evidence that women blame themselves if they fall short of meeting all the demands placed on them, such as in Reay's (2003, p. 313) research, where she found mature-age women students 'assume a rhetoric of personal inadequacy to explain events invariably linked to processes, systems and structures beyond their personal control…The combination of personal responsibility and personal inadequacy'.

This seeming private matter, of study-work-life balance, ought to be of great concern to the institutions and governments that host these students. The subjective, emotional dynamics of

learning as a student worker have implications for the quality of the educational experience students have, and consequently have implications for the quality of the institution and the students it graduates. This article contributes to a now growing body of research on mature-age students by giving due notice to qualitative accounts of the students themselves. Using reflective essays written by first-year mature-age students, this research considers the first-person accounts of experiences of trying to find study-work-life balance. The findings suggest that their time at university is marked by study-work-life *imbalance*. This article offers insights into the ways that their personal lives have profound impacts on their public, university educational experiences.

Research Design

The mature-age students discussed in this article are part of a cohort who participated in a research project on 'University Culture' via a reflective written assessment task. The students were part of a first-year anthropology subject at [retracted for review process] University in 2009, in Melbourne, Australia, and were enrolled in a wide range of degrees. There were 487 students enrolled in the subject and 344 gave written consent to have their assignments used as data for the project, which had been approved by the University's Human Ethics Committee. Their subject coordinator, [retracted for review process], was not involved in marking their assignments and students were not obliged to participate in the project.

In addition to the students' reflective written assignments, data were collected through a short survey of their age, gender, ethnic identity, study load (full or part time), whether they were local or international students, and the number of hours of paid work they undertook while studying. The participants were 64.5% female and 33.7% male, and 1.8% gave no answer (these numbers approximately match the percentages of all 487 students enrolled in the subject; additionally, the social sciences at our University have higher female enrolments on the whole). Students were from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, although 55% self-identified simply as 'Australian'. Their ages ranged from 18 to 56, with 42.5% of the cohort aged 22 and over and therefore considered 'mature-age' by the university. The mature-age students quoted in this article range from 22 to 56 years of age. There are important differences in the experiences, circumstances, needs, and interests of students within this broad range. For example, drawing on this same research project, we write elsewhere (retracted) about the experiences of 'young mature-age students', particularly those between

22 and their early 30s who do not readily identify with school leavers or ‘mature-age’ cohorts. These students often feel isolated, thinking they are the ‘only ones’ who fall between officially recognised and popularly operationalised categories of student. Accordingly, we do not presume all of the students discussed in this article can be spoken for as a homogenous ‘mature-age student’ cohort. We discuss some experiences they had in common while recognising these experiences need more complexification in further research to account for differences within this broad range of ages.

The assessment task was partially inspired by an ethnography of a U.S. college (Nathan, 2005), which analyses the culture of undergraduate life. The aim of the assignment was to introduce students to anthropological fieldwork through basic participant observation in relation to one or more aspects of university culture. Students could choose to observe interactions between students, or between students and staff, cultural rituals, social spaces and to reflect on their experience of study-work-life balance. The assignment also aimed to teach the concept of reflexivity, so students were asked to ‘reflect on what shapes your own perspectives and experiences of university’ and to discuss how this compared to the students described in a chapter of Rebekah Nathan’s ethnography (2005, p. 90-106). Although the Nathan reading influenced some of the language used by students they tended to refer to her text only briefly, or not at all. The students’ written assignments proved to be a rich source of data for gaining insight into the lived experiences and perceptions of undergraduate students.

This research method allowed access to perspectives that students rarely have the opportunity to express. We asked the students to analyse undergraduate university culture from the inside, and they offered insightful, emotive, and often compelling depictions of their lives in higher education. Ethnography has a long history of providing deep insight into the culture of societies, institutions and groups. Work conducted from an emic, or insider’s, perspective allows a particular view of cultural dynamics. Using the student’s written reflections, we employed an interpretive approach (Denzin, Lincoln, & Giardina, 2006, p. 205), drawing on the meaning, practices, and reflections made by the student participants themselves. NVivo software was used to employ inductive and deductive approaches to analysing the qualitative data of the written assignments. Through these analytical approaches, issues around study-work-life balance emerged as one of themes students wrote most passionately about.

Study-work-life imbalance and conflict with study

Whether working for financial need and/or for promotion at work or expansion of skills, working while studying is central to many mature-age students' experience of higher education. The amount of time students dedicate to work can become problematic for their transition into the student role. Collier and Morgan (2008) argue that mastery of the student role relies on the possession of cultural capital, to ascertain and learn both the implicit and explicit expectations and skills. Gaining this cultural capital requires time, especially for those who come to university from non-traditional backgrounds. In Chapman's (2015) research, she found that mature students have difficulties with their work, a heightened fear of judgment, difficulty starting, and difficulty letting go of assignments.

Added to these challenges, mature-age students who have difficulties finding 'balance' between study, work, and other life commitments have the disadvantage of a lack of time to support the acquisition of cultural capital resources. This section is about how term-time work can come into conflict with study and can deter students in their efforts to integrate academically and socially.

> To sustain the momentum of studying whilst working full time is extremely challenging, and working in the CBD [central business district] 13 kilometres from the university], I do not have the luxury of being able to spend time on campus, so I find LMS an essential "life-line".
>
> (Male, 46-55 years old, part-time study, working 31-35 hours per week)

Managing other commitments, particularly paid work for some, limits the amount of time mature-age students may spend on campus, engaged in the embodied pedagogical processes. This has implications for their ability to participate in classes and integrate academically or socially, as well as their capacity to adopt an identity as a student (Darmody, Smyth, & Unger, 2008).

> Not only do I need to complete my school work (readings, assignments, essays, revision) I also need to keep my home running smoothly. With my fiancée working, it has been my responsibility to shop, cook and clean as well as trying to find the time to work. Working, for me, equals the loss of studying time; time that I will need to find during the week to make up. It has been one long endless battle for more time.

(Female, 23 years old, full-time study, working 6-10 hours per week)

These and other students in the study reported that paid work and home responsibilities competed with their studies. Bozick (2007) found that economic resources, or a lack thereof, played a significant role in making it through the first year of university, with lower resources equating to lower retention and performance. When balance is not a possibility, study time tends to be the thing that has to be sacrificed.

> I began my studies in earnest in the second semester of 2006 for the third time. My first experience of studying at university was as a nineteen year old in 1984. I abandoned my studies in 1985 and subsequently returned for a second round in 1995. At that time I was working full-time in a field that proved very demanding, very stressful and had me working very long hours. My attempts at balancing work and study saw me *balancing nothing at all* and, consequently, my second return to university and study was again relatively short lived and disjointed. These three occasions in which I was a first year student were each very different and each saw my interactions with fellow students changing quite significantly.
>
> (Female, 36-45 years old, part-time study, working 16-20 hours per week)

The significance of the impact of study-work-life imbalance is, of course, most pronounced when a student 'abandons' their studies. Financial hardship and competing family commitments are the top reasons for withdrawal for mature-age students (for a review see Thomas, 2002, p. 427-428). Even when these mature-age students stay enrolled and engaged in their courses, the predominant experience of most of the participants in this research is one of being at times overwhelmed and unable to find balance, which negatively impacted their studies.

Emotions and the strain of fitting everything in

The process of negotiating the university transition is a deeply emotional one. Emotions have an important part to play in 'learning to be a university student', write Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, and McCune (2008, p. 572). This can be particularly fraught with frustration, guilt, and or shame (Waller et al. 2011), when there is a discrepancy between what Collier and Morgan (2008, p. 429) refer to as actual capacity versus demonstrated capacity, that is, when

these students are unable to perform to their potential because of the necessity of maintaining an overburden of work, and other commitments. Such experiences of emotional frustration can impact academic self-efficacy, what Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke (2015, p. 490) describe as the emotional interpretation of one's own capacity to perform. This section analyses passages from the students' writing that demonstrate some of the emotional difficulties they encounter.

> As I sit at my computer writing this assignment, my rapidly growing "TO DO LIST" glares out at me from the wall and it seems that the topic 'Work/life/study balance' would be more aptly named 'Work/life/study MAYHEM'! I live out of home, work 25 hours a week in order to pay rent, bills, living expenditures and travel debts, whilst attempting to maintain social relationships with people I love. These commitments seriously impede on the amount of time I have to spend at university and drastically increase stress levels with the prospects of trying to fit everything in, as well as achieving good grades often feeling like an impossible task!
> (Female, 24 years old, full-time study, working 16-20 hours per week)

While older students are more likely to treat their studies like a 'surrogate occupation' (Warmington, 2002), an assumption that they are in a position to give more time to their studies would be misdirected. In fact, as Waller et al. (2011) suggest, older students are likely to carry a suspicion that they did not achieve a place at university on their own merits and they carry a great anxiety about being found out as a fraud. It is all the more pressing a matter for them that they cannot find the time necessary to perform at their potential. The above student's account of 'mayhem' is emotionally charged, indicating her frustrations with imbalance and the ensuing stress.

> When I made the decision to come to University, I thought to myself, "Great! I'm ready for this – this will be my priority and it's going to make me happy". Little did I realise what I was in for. Struggling to fit in my full-time-gone-part-time job, social life, family life and boyfriend, after a couple of weeks in, I started thinking, "How the hell do people do this? Is this normal? Am I supposed to feel this behind in my work?" But somehow – don't ask me how – I managed to survive. After a semester of limited sleep and a few breakdowns later, I managed to pass the first half of the year (to my surprise) with three B's and a D (let's ignore that last mark).

(Female, 24 years old, full-time study, working 21-25 hours per week)

This student gives indications of emotional distress ('breakdowns'), isolation ('Is this normal?'), and of being overwhelmed. She made it through, studying full-time, working 20 plus hours per week, but the experience took an emotional toll, to a degree that might lead many to dropping out of their degree (ref – on drop out…). The role of emotions in the learning process should not be underestimated (Christie et al., 2008). The impact of emotional strain on students' quality of life ought to be a concern to educators, as well as its impact on quality of learning outcomes.

Sacrifice, not balance

Attempts at attaining stability often result in disappointment for overloaded mature-age students. Sacrifice and compromise, more than balance, mark the experiences of many of the older students in this research. This finding is consistent with other research on experiences of mature-age students, such as Stone and O'Shea's (2013), which found that older students often feel they have to 'give up' parts of their lives to make it work. The 'frustrated participants' in Bowl's (2001) work were mature-age students who dealt with, among other things, a sense that their time constraints were their own problem to deal with. The following passages are about the reality of student sacrifice, rather than balance.

> I am a mature age student, returning to tertiary education for the second time. In relation to the study/work/life balance, I feel under pressure to divide my time efficiently and resourcefully among these three key aspects, which, consequently effects my time spent in social situations and contributing the culture of the university. I have found when balancing study, work and life, one usually has to give, and in my case, it is the life.
>
> (Female, 25-35 years old, full-time study, working 21-25 hours per week)

> I have dramatically cut back my working and social life. To the point where I don't feel like I do anything else. This does not help with stress levels and stress does not help turn assignments' in.
>
> (Female, 24 years old, full-time study, working 21-25 hours per week)

There is little semblance of balance here, rather a sacrifice of a part of the experience of education and life. Other research has found that mature-age students cope with competing demands by limiting social activities/engagement, particularly women, which adds to the isolation of their educational experience (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006, p. 34; Hall, 2010). The stress of sacrifice, as indicated for the second student above, can exacerbate the already difficult task of managing study-work-life imbalance.

> I need to work around three children and a job. My three hours on campus twice a week are tightly slotted in between family and work commitments and any deviation causes significant disruption to either or both. I desperately need to familiarise myself with the library but so far have not had time to look in it let alone make good use of it. I need to learn as much as possible whilst on campus as the complexity of balancing family life and work commitments sometimes means that study time outside contact hours is compromised, thus impacting on my learning experience and potentially my academic success.
>
> (Female, 46-55 years old, part-time study, working 21-25 hours per week)

This is the reality for many students now, on and straight back off campus, with no time for social interaction, juggling parenting, work, and other commitments. Working in term time is reported by many students to negatively impact their studies, including their study time and outcomes (grades etc.) (for a review of relevant literature see Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005, p. 241). Economic considerations figure predominantly in the decisions of 'non-traditional' students (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001), before, during, and after their studies. Paid work during term times is an essential component of many of these students' experiences, and this research, and it impinges on their 'learning experience'.

> Attending university is a sacrifice for my husband and I. Reducing work hours and watching promotions pass me by time and time again reminds me of that cost. Also the fact that our plans for a family are pushed back makes me realise the gravity of being here. It makes rushing from work to lectures, from the library to get dinner going and to chip away at the mountain of laundry all important and worth it.
>
> (Female, 25 years old, full-time study, working 21-25 hours per week)

Not only are there costs in the potential for social and academic integration at university, as well as in the ability to achieve the degree and results a student is able to, there are costs involved in career and family planning. Women in this situation in particular are likely to feel overwhelmed by competing demands and the real costs involved and born by the individual (Edwards, 1993). The mature-age students described in this article are not students who can have it all. Nor are they asking for it all. In fact, they appear willing to make these sacrifices in order to participate. Students like the one above choose to study because they feel it is worth the impact that imbalance has on their home and work, as well as their educational experience.

Conclusion

It would be simple and easy to disregard these concerns as 'private' matters, but the interaction between 'private' and 'public' are indelibly and powerfully linked. Perhaps some readers would respond with a sentiment along the lines that university is challenging, and if someone wants to participate then it is their responsibility to manage their time. Things like family and work that compete with higher education for students' time are often seen as 'baggage', rather than as integral to students' lives and identities (Edwards, 1993). But with the growing diversity of university students, and the potential role higher education has in broadening opportunities, paid work and personal life are important considerations in many students' success. Gouthro (2009, p. 165) aptly writes that 'Screening out significant factors such as gender or race that impact upon an individual's ability to participate and how they are perceived within a marketized society depoliticizes lifelong learning' (Gouthro, 2009, p. 165). Mature-age students, like other 'non-traditional' students, are participating in higher education at unprecedented numbers, but they are having diminished study, work, and life experiences.

Expressions of emotional strain were common amongst the students in this research, and more research needs to be done to discover the impact this may be having on students' studies, as well as their mental health. University can be an isolating experience for mature-age students (reference retracted for review). Emotional strain is likely exacerbated by this isolation. While many mature-age students may not have time for socialising on campus, there are things that can be done to facilitate social connections amongst mature-age students. Universities can encourage student integration through programmes that group students

together into cohorts based on shared interests and circumstances. Tinto (1994) have found that social integration is very important, but we still know very little about how this works for mature-age students. More research is needed on their experiences, and whether being a part of a cohort, with more opportunities to share experiences of challenge with imbalance might help mature-age students negotiate the emotional challenges.

Students are, ultimately, responsible for their learning, but the ethos of the institution impacts the learning experience (Lowe & Gayle 2007). Universities that make an effort to change their culture to become more inclusive of the needs, expectations, and situations of mature-age students will be more inviting and more effective in fostering strong students. Mature-age student workers have conflicting demands on their time, and calls for perspective and attitude adjustment on the part of university staff to see the value, benefits, and challenges of being a student worker will help (Curtis & Shani 2002). Moreover, the findings in this research suggest some mature-age students are not finding balance between study, work, and life, rather that they are making sacrifices in one or more of these areas. Any staff who are frustrated by what may be perceived as a students' lack of dedication to studies should be aware that they are just as likely observing the behaviour of a student who is overworked and overwhelmed. In addition to understanding, mature-age students, and other non-traditional students, need practical support. Munro (2011a, p. 115) argues that the optimistic slogans devised by university marketing teams, such as 'go boldly, dream large', or my own university's recent 'Infinite possibilities', are 'misleading if they are not accompanied by financial incentives and a more inclusive curriculum that acknowledges the study-work challenges facing non-traditional university students'. In particular, financial scholarships and child care (Kember, 1999, p. 122) are two such practical considerations for making the educational ideals of equity more attainable.

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Conclusion

Changes in higher education policy and aims mean the continued growth in Australia of non-traditional students. While governments of countries like Australia seek to increase these non-traditional student graduates, greater attention needs to be drawn to the subjective experiences of the students. This thesis emphasises a sociological understanding of university from the perspective of the working-class and mature-age students who experience it. It is about analysing how personal lives of non-traditional students play out in social spaces of higher education. The in-depth interviews with working-class graduates and the written reflections of mature-age students have allowed discussion of how some non-traditional students encounter the culture of higher education without the level of symbolic and economic resources of many of their peers. This thesis argues that working-class and mature-age students participate in university culture without the required level of inherited symbolic and economic resources, which poses particular difficulties, including with adopting a student identity, deciphering the implicit and explicit expectations for learning, and adapting to the culture of university. This conclusion discusses the key findings and their implications for working-class students, mature-age students, and the universities that aim to understand and support them.

The findings from *chapter one* suggest that the dissonance working-class university students feel may begin much earlier in life. Class relations, those of 'superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality, judgment/shame' (Lawler 1999, p. 5), are often first encountered in the home for people who later experience upward social mobility through university. Sometimes interests such as reading caused them to stand out amongst their family members and peers. Even for those whose parents encouraged their efforts in school, there was an implicit (and sometimes explicitly stated) concern for knowing one's place, or not rising above one's station and therefore one's family. There is tension in this circumstance between aspiring to a different life but feeling this makes one a different type of person to their loved ones. These are some of the hidden injuries of class (Sennett & Cobb 1972), at home. Despite this strain, the interviewees described their earlier, childhood selves as seeking to become who they were meant to be. Feeling different from their families was a significant part of becoming different.

The constraints of a working-class background were often the prompts toward striving to become different. Their circumstantial limitations were motivation to 'escape'. In particular, numerous interviewees talked about the desire to avoid risk. This included the risk of financial insecurity, shame felt by comparing themselves to privileged others, risks to health, and the risk of not being able to pursue one's interests and goals or fulfil one's potential. Despite the constraints, the tension between family members, and the risks involved in coming from working-class families, the interviewees discussed their backgrounds as integral to their achievements. They framed their working-class pasts as a type of inheritance. For some it was an inheritance of resourcefulness, of building something substantial out of little. For others it was a narrative they carried with them of having built upon their parents' unfulfilled intellectual and creative potential, of a responsibility to seek opportunities their parents could not.

The experience of feeling a class-based status distinction between the interviewees and their families produced, in some ways, a divided, or what Bourdieu referred to as 'cleft habitus', a habitus divided against itself (Bourdieu 1999). However, it was apparent in the interviews that a divided habitus was mitigated by efforts to actively transfer the difficulties of family tension into personal, psycho-emotional resources. Bourdieu wrote that the habitus is pliable under certain conditions, insofar it undergoes a continual restructuring through exposure to new circumstances (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). There are indications that the habitus is pliable, and/or that it is complex enough to encapsulate differing socialising influences (Lahire 2011). These findings suggest the value in further research intentionally examining the pliability of the habitus over time (c.f. Atkinson 2012; Friedman 2015). This would help expand the application of Bourdieu's theoretical work on social *reproduction* for explanations of social *change*. In the case of working-class university students, disadvantage was partially a catalyst to stoke aspirations, rather than only an internalised sense of limitations. Though, the strength of the habitus is notable in how difficult the interviewees found it to contend with internalised notions of their own capabilities and legitimacy.

The process of negotiating differing class-cultures that working-class university students undergo begins much earlier than at university. The adaptations, the struggles, the relational tensions, all have origins in the family. As Bourdieu (1996, p. 106) wrote, the break away from origins, which results from inculcation in formal education, is 'simply the last in a long series of infinitesimal breaks, the culmination of innumerable differential deviations that in the end constitute the great shifts in social trajectories'. Understanding working-class family

and community socialisation as heterogeneous can help further insights into the ways class affects families, and how educational trajectories are impacted from early on by family and school practices.

As an addition to class-cultural research, the findings suggest that researching peoples' experiences of social mobility (upward and downward), particularly working-class students' accounts, offers a different view of the way class distinctions are not fixed categories but change over time, as culture does. Biographical accounts of the lived experience of class are a vital way of understanding the inner workings and impacts of class in a particular time and place.

The implications of the findings in *chapter two* are that working-class students have internalised disadvantages to match their external disadvantages in resources. One of the predominant impressions of university that came through in the interviews was a sense of illegitimacy. Habitus dissonance marked the embodied experience of university, with the result that the students felt out of place in body and in mind. The interviewees noted the confidence their peers seemed to exude, and described their memories of themselves at university as, at least partially, socially inept, unworthy, and displaced. This was tied to their differing symbolic capital and their inability to feel they belonged as proper students. They often felt they did not deserve to be at university, despite having achieved adequate or even exceptional university entrance exam grades. This self-*dis*entitlement was born of a shame they felt in not having the 'right' background or resources. They did a substantial amount of emotional work to combat this shame and maintain their efforts despite feeling like outsiders.

The 'inheritors' (Bourdieu & Passeron 1979) of the cultural and symbolic capital legitimised in formal education are perceived not only as legitimate participants but as naturally, intellectually superior. Working-class university students, on the other hand, do not have the advantage of these inherited resources. Rather than view the resulting difficulties as indicative of disadvantage, they view themselves as naturally, intellectually inferior. They think they have an inherent vice, or a defect in their constitution, which takes the form of second-class academic capability. Class-based disadvantages are perceived as, and felt as, personal deficiencies. Because of their diminished sense of academic self-efficacy (Kahu et al. 2015) the interviewees were surprised when they achieved good marks or were commended by their lecturers. This sense of internalised and personalised disadvantage, what Bourdieu called 'symbolic violence', had an impact on their identity and their experience of

university. This sense of having an inherent vice diminished to some degree over time, but it stayed with most of the interviewees throughout their time at university and throughout their careers.

The lack of inherited symbolic and economic resources results for some working-class university students in anxiety and insecurity. The interviewees felt they were behind and on their own to negotiate the academic and bureaucratic systems of higher education. This required much of their psycho-emotional energy. Working-class students do not have the level of entitlement, confidence, and security that come from having higher levels of symbolic and economic resources. This makes dealing with the rigours of higher education particularly challenging for working-class students. The anxiety of feeling inferior and inadequate makes working-class students particularly vulnerable.

The sense of inherent inferiority is also experienced as moral inferiority. To fail to be an industrious, intelligent, autonomous person is to fail to be a 'good' person, a valuable person, in capitalist societies with cultural pillars like aspiration and progress. The *vice* of intellectual inferiority is perceived as a failing of character, or personhood. The hidden injuries of class (Sennett & Cobb 1972) are the damages to self-identity incurred by the working-class and those who, though they have unequal access to resources, are viewed as being of lower worth. Inequalities are perpetuated in such ways, at both the structural and the personal levels. This will continue to be a fruitful and important way of coming to understand working-class university student experiences of university culture.

The unfortunate, likely unintentional, consequence of a separation between 'natural ability' and inherited symbolic resources can be that universities enrol working-class and other non-traditional students, accept their tuition dollars, but do not take responsibility or the opportunity to develop these students' potential.

Chapter three raises doubts about the appropriateness of expectations for 'independent learning' without sufficient supports. The interviewees' stories of university made it evident that their experiences of negotiating the discourses and expectations of higher education were largely solitary efforts. While this may suit students from family backgrounds with higher levels of symbolic and economic resources, the expectation for independent learning makes university particularly difficult for working-class students. The interviewees described feeling overwhelmed by the challenge of negotiating the cross-class-cultural differences they experienced between themselves and the people and culture of university. Many of them felt

they were on their own to figure everything out. These students cannot rely on their families and social networks, or social capital, for advice and support. They also cannot rely on prior knowledge, or cultural capital, for an assumed understanding of what to ask or who to ask it. These things may be taken for granted for some, but pose an additional challenge to working-class students. Academic as well as social integration are problematic, as working-class students may also find negotiating interpersonal dynamics difficult and/or confronting. This all results in a sense of being marginalised, and being left on one's own to decipher the implicit codes and expectations of university.

The interviewees displayed what can be thought of as concerted self-cultivation. The conscious effort required for adapting to 'the rules of the game' of higher education resembles what Lareau (2003) described as the proactive efforts of middle-class parents to cultivate cultural capital, thereby reproducing their class advantages for their children. Working-class university students are on their own to cultivate themselves, that is, to engage in the necessary adjustments and acquisition of knowledge and skill as self-reflexive agents. The interviewees described having done so with some degree of success, but not without challenge, frustration, and cost to their psycho-emotional worlds. This is particularly because much of what needs to be adjusted to is implicit and invisible to the untrained, or uninitiated eye. The culture of university is congruent with the culture of the dominant classes (Bourdieu 1977, 1979). Discerning, learning, and adapting to this culture requires working-class students to become keen observers, and to withstand moments of embarrassment when their backgrounds cause them to stand out in ways they would rather not. The process of adapting also entails personal, moral, and values adjustments. Sometimes it requires working-class students to feel they are sacrificing important parts of their identity, or losing themselves (Reay 2001).

The interviewees found they had to compensate for their lack of cultural capital by adopting greater self-discipline and self-regulation. These are traits many students use for university, but working-class students rely on them even more to negotiate the challenge of learning the tacit and explicit discourses, the bureaucracy, and expectations of university. The interviewees are, in this way, exemplary models for the 'new subject of neo-liberalism' (Leathwood 2006, p. 615); the student who is meant to take responsibility for their own learning, and a 'self unencumbered by domestic responsibility, poverty or self-doubt'. Students with working-class backgrounds perhaps do have to work harder to learn independently at university.

Some students, like the interviewees, manage the transition and successfully negotiate higher education without the required cultural capital, having started from a place of disadvantage. But an assumption that all students are able to do the same means that the culture of university can go unchallenged (Read, Archer & Leathwood 2003). It is conscious work learning the rules of the game of higher education, requiring concerted self-cultivation. The expectation that universities have of students learning independently does not suit all students. No students become independent learners independently. Students from middle and upper-middle class families have a foundation of cultural, social, and economic resources that mean they do not learn independently either. *Inter*dependent learning suggests a more useful starting point for frameworks of student learning.

The findings in *chapter four* suggest the challenges that mature-age students face in negotiating the first-year transition could easily be underestimated, given perceptions of older learners as more motivated, focused, and self-disciplined. Mature-age students are, in fact, vulnerable to anxieties about a return to formal education that includes, among other things, concern about their status as students. They do not know how they will fit in with a predominantly youth-oriented culture and wonder at their ability to find sociality based on mutual interest in study. The mature-age students discussed in this thesis found that their practices in the classroom conflicted with the tacit codes of conduct of the younger, school-leaver students. There were informal sanctions (i.e. sarcasm, knowing glances) that younger students administered to highlight how older students' behaviour in the classroom defied the value of maintaining equity amongst students by way of a distinct division between the social and the scholastic. These implicit reprimands are acts of stigmatisation, aimed at people with attributes considered out of line with the norm, or the dominant expectation (Goffman 1963).

Such moments are uncomfortable for mature-age students, when they are made to feel shame for displays of enthusiasm in the classroom. Their commitment to successfully becoming and being students deepens the potential for shame. Some students modified their behaviour as a result, hiding their enthusiasm, avoiding interaction with lecturers in front of other students, or paring back their classroom participation. The result of these interactions is mature-age students inhabiting stigmatised student roles. Mature-age students contend with thoughts they considered 'annoying' and 'obnoxious', and it impacts their experience by making them think they do not contribute to university culture.

The accounts of school leavers affirm mature-age students' concerns of being the stigmatised other. Their concerns appear to be that overt displays of enthusiasm for learning in the classroom draw distinctions between students, creating a hierarchy amongst students. Too much preparedness, participation in classroom discussion, and familiarity with instructors are all presumed to compromise equality amongst students. The normative values of school-leavers involve a concern with social, inter-personal connection, and mature-age students' practices (which otherwise are praised by lecturers and tutors) are disparaged for their potential to endanger equality. Academic practices and social relations are closely bound together (Lave & Wenger 1998). School leavers appear to view learning in the classroom and social participation as inextricably linked. The younger students' accounts were marked by emotional, exasperated tones, suggesting the importance of the relational logic of classroom equality and the use of stigmatisation to maintain it.

Mature-age students who demonstrate their academic enthusiasm encounter the paradox of exhibiting what the instructor considers an ideal zeal for learning while defying the expectations of the student culture. While some choose to hide their enthusiasm, others are disillusioned with what they perceive to be a culture of scholastic apathy. These mature-age students, although they are stigmatised, may re-interpret this othering as indicative of their own academic maturity. They may view school-leavers' classroom behaviour (i.e. talking during lectures, lack of preparation, and lack of classroom participation) as annoying, distracting, and frustrating. These participants drew on a moralising discourse to re-frame their own scholastic practices as superior, which afforded them a legitimacy as students other than that sanctioned by the normative, school-leaver demographic.

Understanding learning socially, as situated in cultures of learning, adds depth of understanding to the ways students inhabit student identities (Lave & Wenger 1991). Mature-age students negotiate identity as stigmatised learners because they are prone to participating with expressions of enthusiasm and dedication. Understanding how the practices of some students impact the practices of all students brings better understanding of how classroom interpersonal dynamics affect the learning process of all students. The learning culture of universities may continue to be challenged by the presence of mature-age students, perhaps for the better. People undergo a process of identity formation as students, and they are both shaped by the learning culture, and shape the learning culture. Further research should ask: How do mature-age and other non-traditional students experience the learning culture of university? And what impact does it have on their learning? What consequences do

classroom practices have for non-traditional groups of students? What are the positive effects that older students have on the learning culture, and could universities use this knowledge to improve classroom practices?

Chapter five contributes to literature demonstrating specific ways that students' identities and learning are shaped by their experience of belonging. Young mature-age students, those approximately between the ages of early 20s to early 30s, are prone to thinking they are more isolated than other students in university culture. They do not feel they belong as school-leavers (the traditional young student), nor do they identify and belong with 'mature-age' students. Young mature-age students feel isolated at university. This arose partly because they thought their life experiences and circumstances set them apart from the other two demographics. They thought they were too mature (through work, travel, relationships, and other experiences) to relate to school leavers, but also thought they were not old enough to consider themselves 'mature-age'. These students experience university to some extent as misfits, without a place socially. The accounts in the student essays suggest this was a great concern for them, with emotional evocations of their predicament. Such experiences impact the formation of student identities, and the question 'where am I meant to fit in?' appeared to be one of their greatest concerns.

The barrier young mature-age students experience in sociality with school leavers was described as being based on formative life experiences outside of education. The resulting gap in perceived maturity was a hindrance to social connection, even with students only a few years younger than them. They viewed themselves as more serious about their studies and their general attitudes toward education. They felt that, due to their life experiences, their tastes and habits were also different enough to pose a barrier to social interaction. Overall, the 'university experience' was felt to be something for those who had just left high school. This implies that the culture of university has been and continues to be largely determined by and catered to school leavers (Kasworm 2010).

There were equally barriers to social interaction with older mature-age students. Those in their early 20s through early 30s did not readily identify with the label 'mature age', pointing to the disparities that can arise between 'institutional age' and 'experiential age' (Aapola 2002). Their life circumstances may be similar to older mature-age students in terms of extra-curricular commitments and dispositions toward learning. However, they expressed something different to the older students; they expressed a strong desire for sociality at

university, but one based on shared intellectual interests. They were likely to feel that it was their own fault for not being able to connect with other students, that is, that they were isolated because they did not study at the 'right' time. The irony is that they are far from alone, and young mature-age students, as all mature-age students, are a growing demographic in Australia and internationally (Bourgeois et al. 1999; Gale & Parker, 2014).

With increasingly diverse demographics in universities, age is one of numerous factors that need closer consideration for the learning experiences and outcomes students have. Students' own perceptions and experiences of their age, in relation to other students, have a significant impact on how they go through the learning process. Given the socially situated nature of learning, and of student identity formation, Professor Lee and I argue that this would enhance their experience and make them more prepared, better suited to university (or make the university better suited to them). Further orienting the university and its culture toward the needs and interests of older learners sends a message to these students that the institution is for people like them. The culture of universities can better suit the needs and interests of its diverse students. Too much time and energy can be spent trying to figure out where they fit, and this has implications for how students perceive themselves as legitimised members of the learning community.

Chapter six affirms other research findings (Lowe & Gayle 2007; Moreau & Leathwood 2006; Munro 2011) that working while studying is central to many mature-age students' experience of higher education. The findings discussed in this thesis suggest that the tensions arising from trying to balance study, work, and life, have an impact on their learning experience and quality of life. The need to gain the cultural capital of learning in higher education comes into conflict with the need to manage over-full schedules. Managing other commitments, particularly paid work, limits the time spent on campus, in class, and for studying. The experience of the participants in this research is better described as study-work-life *imbalance*. The challenges older students face with development of student identities and with social integration at university are exacerbated by tight constraints on their time. For those with fewer economic resources work was a distraction, but a necessary one. Research has found that, put simply, students' economic resources, or lack thereof, have a strong correlation with retention and performance (Moreau & Leathwood 2006; Munro 2011). Study tends to be the thing that is sacrificed when there is too much to balance.

The emotional challenge of dealing with study-work-life imbalance has the potential to impact students' academic self-efficacy (Kahu et al. 2015). The written accounts of students suggest high levels of frustration with being unable to invest the desired time and energy into their studies. Older learners, as other non-traditional students, are more prone to feeling they are frauds, and they doubt their capabilities and their legitimacy as students (Davies & Williams, 2001; O'Shea 2013). Not having the time to perform to their potential can heighten this worry over their status as students. Rather than balance, the experience of many of the mature-age students in this research was marked by sacrifice. This meant either compromising their quality of study, quality of work, quality of life, or all three. University already 'costs' mature-age students in regards to sacrifices in career opportunities, challenges to their identity, and other risks associated with a return to formal education.

Individual students are responsible for navigating the learning experience, but the culture of the institution largely shapes the learning experience (Lowe & Gayle 2007). Along with better understanding of students' experiences, universities can make efforts to alter their culture to become more inclusive of the needs, expectations, and life circumstances of mature-age students. Efforts like this will make universities more inviting and hospitable to non-traditional students like those of mature-age.

Policies of 'widened access' to higher education have done just that, improving opportunities for non-traditional students to participate in countries like Australia, the U.S. and the U.K. (Waller et al. 2014), while enrolments of such demographics have steadily increased over the past couple decades (Gale & Parker, 2014). Contemporary universities may strive to be more equitable in participating in the widening of access to non-traditional students, but may also operate in ways that undermine these same students by not adequately addressing their disadvantage in resources. Part of the problem comes down to institutional resources. The fiscal constraints of contemporary universities continue to lead to 'lean-and-mean' pedagogies (Blackmore 1997, p. 92). This is the context in which the working-class and mature-age students are participating in increasing numbers. When resources are already tight, staff are likely to see 'underprepared' students as outside of their responsibility (Lawrence 2005). Such a 'sink or swim' approach to diversity, writes Lawrence (2005, p. 245), implies that it is simply the student's responsibility if they fail or do not achieve to their potential. The tendency is to blame them for not adapting and transitioning well, rather than questioning the culture of higher education, a response which adheres to logics of the contemporary, neo-liberalised higher education institution, and entails an expectation that

students, as Leathwood (2006, pp. 614-615) writes, ‘take full responsibility for their own lives and futures as self-reliant, self-managing autonomous individuals, engaging in the “choice” practices of the market economy and providing for themselves free from any dependence on the state’. In such an environment, working-class students are easily pathologised as ‘being deficient: in ability, in not having a “proper” educational background, or in lacking the appropriate aspirations and attitudes’ (Leathwood & O’Connell 2003, p. 599). Universities and governments can help by further seeking to understand the circumstances and needs of non-traditional students, and adjust accordingly in pursuit of the best ways to support them. There remains a gap between ‘neo-liberal, market-driven outcomes’ and the promotion of ‘a rhetoric of diversity’ (Munro 2011a, p. 117).

Considerations for a two-way expectation between the learner and the institution can help ‘bridge socio-cultural incongruity’ (Devlin 2013). Non-traditional learners are less likely to arrive at university with the social, cultural, and economic capital necessary for a smooth transition and for them to reach their full potential. The level of challenge in the curriculum should stay the same (Haggis 2006) but the time and resources invested in working-class and mature-age students increased. With understanding of the experiences of learning within university cultures, like the experiences described in this thesis, universities can seek to bolster the support and efforts toward mentoring for under-resourced, non-traditional students. Many universities already take some measures to support non-traditional students, and any such measures are moves in the right direction. This thesis, and other research like it, demonstrates that working-class and mature-age students are determined to achieve, but are under-resourced and under-represented in their efforts to graduate. They have differential access to inheritable resources of cultural, social, and economic capital. ‘Advancing student equity in the current context’, writes Gale (2011, p. 669), ‘will require new relations between institutions and students which include a more sophisticated appreciation for the diversity of students and their communities, and for what they potentially contribute’. The paradox of higher education, that it challenges as well as reinforces the social order (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990), may remain an unassailable reality of formal education systems. However, universities that recognise the disadvantages non-traditional students have in symbolic and economic capitals, and seek to play a larger role in mitigating those disadvantages, can produce more and stronger graduates. Universities that do that may help tip the balance in the paradox more toward being a vehicle for social change and socio-economic mobility.

Appendix I

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Book Review

Bernard Lahire,
The Plural Actor
Translated by David Fernbach
(Polity Press, Cambridge 2011)
(First published in French as *L'Homme Pluriel*, Armand Colin, 2001)

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Bernard Lahire insists that *The Plural Actor* is not a theoretical text. This rhetorical opening is a presage to his central claim: the trouble with theories of social action is the presumption they can settle matters once and for all. Rather than 'championing a finished point of view', sociologists ought to rely on the results of each new research project, to report more accurately about social life. If some readers consider this self-evident, Lahire demonstrates that many theories of social action *a priori* over-emphasise, for example, either past socialisation or the present context for action. Theory as totalising explanation is quixotic and misleading. The Plural Actor offers sympathetic critiques of social theory in wide use, in addition to promising a methodological programme suited to studying the complex, individualised actor. Lahire proposes that conducting sociological analysis of individual people, doing different things, in different contexts, at different times, is an under-utilised way into the social. He calls it *a sociology at the level of the individual*. The reader may wonder whether such a high-resolution

emphasis on the individual may obscure the social. His method, he argues, is vital *because* of the exalted place of the individual in contemporary society. Individualisation generates a paradox. People are so multi-socialised and experience such varying life-contexts that their own variability may seem like freedom, or seem as though they are self-produced rather than of social origin. Lahire proposes that *a sociology at the level of the individual* is especially well suited to address this paradox and study the social production of the complex individual.

The opening chapters of *The Plural Actor* systematically address how theories of social action err by way of three *a priori* assumptions about the actor. There are those which privilege either: 1) the singleness or the fragmentation of individuals, 2) the weight of the past or the weight of present context on action, and 3) the weight of conscious or unconscious action. They are assumptions which gloss over complex social phenomena.

Much of this section of the book uses Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice as a foil, offering a (supportive) critique. Bourdieu articulated a *unifying principle* of embodied action, as though each actor is a sum of their past, and each new context is a venue for the expression of a unified set of dispositions. However, Lahire argues that rather than a singular, coherent set of dispositions that are applied universally, there is "a more complex mechanism of suspension/application or inhibition/activation of dispositions" (xii). Lahire's own empirical research – i.e. on variations in educational behaviours in primary school, on writing practices, and on classed experiences of reading literature – all serve to illustrate the depths of complexity and insight available when taking seriously the limitations, and possibilities, of a single research endeavour.

The first theoretical presumption that stifles inquiry is that socialisation results in a unified and unifying self – an essentially singular, consistent identity. The *habitus* is, as a coherent set of dispositions, in Bourdieu's words, 'the unification of practices and representations' in each individual. The notion of a *unified habitus* is useful for describing large-scale patterns, writes Lahire, but it lapses into caricature when trying to account for the social production of the individual. Socialising influences are not homogenous, especially in increasingly globalised, diversified societies. The actor is too multi-socialised to retain an always unified and unifying self. The presumption of a unified habitus led Bourdieu to conclude that special cases or exceptions (like the upwardly mobile) experience a divided selfhood, resulting in pathologies and/or split identities (a 'cleft habitus'). But Lahire suggests socialisation in late modernity is

heterogeneous and results in multiple, often contradictory dispositions, without necessarily resulting in pathology or identity disturbance. The heterogeneous habitus is the rule, rather than the exception. Lahire details several of his research projects to illustrate, for example, his work on educational behaviour in primary school. Teachers were asked to position their students according to perceived educational categories. They had no trouble doing so when taking primary classroom tasks into account, but encountered contradictions when asked to consider certain types of situational micro-contexts and interactions. The teachers had difficulty categorising the observable practices and traits of a student after closely observing them in specific multiple contexts. After describing a student, one teacher said, 'One could almost have put down the opposite' (59).

The second presumption is that individuals mobilise their entire past (the habitus) in each new situation. Bourdieu reckoned that in every circumstance, familiar or not, the habitus "carries out a systematic, universal application" (quoting Bourdieu 87). This is founded on Piaget's action schemata, a psychology which supports a self-evident generalized process of transfer. However, Lahire asks, what if parts of the psychological schemes were subdued or disactivated (reflexively or, most often, not) to make way for the formation or activation of other schemes? (80). The present context draws certain possibilities, and inhibits others, what he refers to as "the negative power of context" (56). The degree of transferability of action depends on objective forms of social life, as much as on early socialisation. It is easy to confuse the act or attitude in a relational, particular context, with a person's nature, when "a part – but only a part – of the embodied past experiences is mobilized, summoned up and reawakened by the present situation" (48). To illustrate, Lahire discusses his research on middle-class and working-class appropriating of texts. The dichotomies of aesthetic versus ethical-practical modes of consumption are associated with higher and lower cultural capital, respectively. However, Lahire found that both groups' reading practices contained the aesthetic and the ethical-practical. The closer study of individual practices allowed Lahire a better understanding of modes of appropriation particular to types of reading and types of circumstances.

The Plural Actor may also be seen as a meditation on metaphor; on its utility and its limitations. Lahire's discussion of Bourdieu's use of sport metaphor is an especially illustrative example (and is part of the third main presumption he addresses). Bourdieu's use of the metaphor of the athlete engaged in sport – as representative of the way people embody the habitus – glosses over three suppositions about action. They are that the pre-reflective nature of sport

performance is action 1) with a sense of constant urgency, 2) in perpetual live performance, and 3) requiring continual improvisations. But athletic competition is the culmination of countless hours of practice (thoughtful repetition) with all sorts of reflexive mechanisms, e.g. coaching, video review, study of strategy, etc. Most of what the athlete does is outside of the immediacy of competition. Bourdieu, favouring the sport metaphor, tended to discount the importance of intentionality. Lahire writes that abstractions are necessary "in order to grasp certain social and historical regularities and invariances" (xv), but that the individual experiences the world in a more complex, folded, way. Lahire is by no means in a my-metaphor-is-more-precise-than-yours game, nor does he discount their utility. He means to reflect on how metaphors are put to their best use when mobilised to *describe* research findings rather than *drive* research findings.

The methodology Lahire proposes is not an attempt to answer or surmount the dialectical conundrums about the nature of social action (those are open-ended questions, to be addressed anew in each research outcome). He advocates *a sociology at the level of the individual* as a way to address these questions anew each time. There is a shortage of sociology studying individuals across multiple stages and contexts, including outside the concerns of one area of social life such as family, school, or workplace. Lahire recommends observing the same individual across at least two contexts, considering at least two behaviours, and to be on the lookout for the inconsistencies and incongruities which point toward the diverse social creation and reproduction of the individual. If it is novel perhaps it is because there is a distinct shortage of this type of work. This is Lahire's point: each research object will and must have its own theoretical conclusions, limited to the contexts studied, concerned with variations in practices and perspectives, as well as consistent patterns, in differing contexts. This is to avoid the pitfall whereby a single question/inquiry may lead the researcher to "reinject into their analysis elements that are external to the context being studied" (208). Lahire is careful to qualify that it has nothing to do with the "illusory search for the complex totality of a singular person" – but is about having a basis for comparison of intra-individual differentiation (xiii).

The section on *a sociology at the level of the individual* is slight, in relation to the rest of the book (pages 207 – 210, titled 'New methodological requirements'), but this seems intentional. Lahire does not want to be to prescriptive. Whether the method is entirely new is up for debate, however, it does seem that the call for a deepened understanding of the social production of the individualised actor is timely. Lahire thinks 'generalist' theoretical positions are, in large part, about the theorist's pursuit of prestige. He pitches his own work and methods as "opposite of

the kind of polemical critique" found amongst "theorists of action – even the most lucid of their number – [who] quite seriously defend partial theories as if they were general ones" (211-212). This reader doubts that prestige is always a motivation behind theoretical totalising. But Lahire's point is well taken that ham-fisted generalization obscures the social. It may be especially hazardous to our understanding of the social production of complex individuals.

Why do we need Lahire's book? Because much sociology does take for granted the singleness of the actor, or their multiplicity, or any of the other key suppositions. The Plural Actor poses a challenge to theories of social action which, if addressed, will make them more capable and more relevant as modernity continues to develop. While Lahire adds to the progression of ideas, especially around the dispositional actor, he does not stipulate. It is not a *book of theory*, if this is what one seeks in a book of theory. While reading *The Plural Actor* I was rapt by Lahire's exposition of theory that I use in my own work. Admittedly, I kept waiting for the part where he would explain what to do next. It never came. And in that regard, The Plural Actor is the most useful book of theory I have read in the past couple of years.

Appendix II – Table of Interviewees

PSEUDONYM	AGE	OCCUPATION	GENDER
Adriana	45-50	Lawyer	F
Alexander	40-45	Writer	M
Aleya	40-45	Manager, university	F
Andrew	40-45	Academic	M
Christine	40-45	Academic	F
Erich	50-55	Manager, government	M
Emily	45-50	Academic	F
Francesca	35-40	Manager, social welfare org.	F
Fred	45-50	Doctor	M
Greg	35-40	Academic	M
Jacob	50-55	Academic	M
Jane	65-70	Academic (retired)	F
Joel	45-50	Manager, business	M
Lachlan	55-60	Entrepreneur, business	M
Lucinda	50-55	Academic	F
Marie	40-45	Engineer	F
Maya	30-35	Marketing	M
Natalia	50-55	Academic	F
Rachel	55-60	Academic	F
Rebecca	35-40	Academic	F
Roberto	50-55	Manager, business	M
Samantha	35-40	Academic	F
Saul	65-70	Academic (retired)	M
Sofia	30-35	Lawyer	F
Stephen	65-70	Academic	M
Sylvia	30-35	Manager, non-profit org.	F
Vic	40-45	Doctor	M
Virginia	35-40	Academic	F
William	50-55	Academic	M

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