

# Exploring the processes of self-development encountered by adult returners to higher education: A lifespan psychology perspective

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*Evidence indicates that non-traditional adult returners describe returning to education as a period of self-development and growth. However, lifespan psychology perspectives also show that successful growth and change involves periods of conflict. This paper will explore both the nature of self-development and conflicts experienced by a sample of first generation adult returners from an area of high deprivation. Twenty participants were interviewed at different stages of their higher education courses. A grounded theory approach identified conflicts between 'fear of failure and academic success', 'the home and University environment' and the 'juggling of multiple roles'. Educational experiences also seemed to mediate self-development, labelled 're-negotiating the self'. Lifespan perspectives (e.g. Hendry & Kloep's 2002 developmental change model) are utilised to illustrate how these seemingly positive and negative aspects interact. Such an approach can enhance our understanding of the issues such students face, together with the strategies used to overcome them in order to facilitate self-growth and development.*

**Keywords:** adult returners; growth; self-development; conflicts; lifespan psychology.

## Background

**T**HIS PAPER was originally presented at the symposium convened by the Division of Teachers and Researchers of Psychology at the 2009 British Psychological Society's Annual Conference. In the *Book of Abstracts* the symposium's theme of 'Widening Participation in Psychology' widening participation was described in the following way:

Widening Participation (WP) policies include those that reduce bias in access and participation and those that promote the inclusion and success of under-represented groups (e.g. those with low income, gender or age groups) (p.32).

The research to be discussed ticks many of those WP boxes. Participants were the first generation to enter higher education, and drawn from a region of the South Wales Valleys characterised by multiple deprivation (as measured by the Welsh Assembly Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2000).

Both unitary authorities within this location were ranked as having higher than average levels of educational deprivation within this index, and represented low participation neighbourhoods. The selection criteria were also determined by age, with all participants being over 21 at their time of entry to higher education (referred to as adult returners in this piece of work), and having the entrance qualification of an access course.

At policy level access education was one of the key WP initiatives to emerge in the late 1980s. Fuelled largely by concerns about a projected demographic decline in school leavers, the Government published its White paper *Higher Education: Meeting the challenge* (DES, 1987) outlining a number of reforms, one of which was a nationally recognised alternative entrance qualification for non-traditional students. Aimed largely at mature students, and meeting the needs of specific groups who were under represented in higher education (Davies & Parry, 1993)

access courses were designated as ‘the third route’ into higher education in this document. More than two decades later access courses remain an important entrance route for those without traditional qualifications.

Their emphasis on adult learners means that such courses also fit a definition of life long learning in the literal sense of the word. More recent policy makers seem to have focused on under-represented groups between the ages of 18 to 30 in what Fuller and Patton (2006) view as a fixation to achieve the target of half of the population in this age group experiencing higher education by 2010. Participation rates are also presently worked out based on percentages of the population in this age group entering higher education in any given year. Older learners it seems are in danger of being overlooked by the contemporary WP agenda, yet as Gorard et al.’s (2006) review of widening participation flagged up inequalities continue to exist across the life course. Access populations are likely to offer opportunities to research the over 30s in a climate where the rhetoric of widening participation seems to have shifted its gaze to younger populations.

Moving from policy to psychology the paper offers a reflection of two previously published articles (Mercer & Saunders, 2004; Mercer, 2007). Both focussed on the idea that personal growth, change and self-development may be an integral part of the transition into and through higher education for adult learners. The concept of the self adhered to here is as a dynamic and reflexive system (Hoyle et al., 1999) which is open to change and re-negotiation. This is personified by the experiential approach which contends that individual growth and development can occur throughout the life-course. The experiential view of the self embraces the idea that a fundamental feature of human experience is the ability to reflect on and experience our personal worlds. Its focus is on the *subjective experience* of self, which Stevens (1996, p.149) refers to as ‘first person experience (i.e. what you,

I or any other person is aware of) and the *process* of being aware’. Here I would like to discuss these findings further, by illustrating how approaches from lifespan psychology may be particularly useful for exploring the processes involved in negotiating such transitions.

### **To learn is to change**

It seems to be a robust finding within the education literature that non-traditional adult returners describe returning to education as changing them. This is often viewed as a period of profound self-development and growth; the reasons for which appear multi faceted. For example, Walters (2000) suggests that *motivation* for learning amongst older students may be associated with an aim to change some aspect of the self. Burke (2002) similarly contends that such students have a desire for self-discovery. Other authors, however, have commented on the change that ensues as a *consequence* of the experience; for instance Adams (1993) uses the term ‘transformative’ to describe the self-development that was seen as a major outcome for mature women returning to higher education; whilst Bowl (2003) described an enhanced sense of self as one of the perceived gains of higher education amongst a cohort of working class and ethnic minority adults. Reported changes in identity were mediated by the sense of belonging experienced by non-traditional students on an ‘access’ course type programme run in a University (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007); and Pritchard and Roberts (2006) identified an increase in self-esteem and confidence as a key benefit derived from the academic successes achieved amongst mature students. It is worth noting that research in informal education settings also echoes such ideas. For example, Prins, Willso Tosso and Schaft (2009) conducted qualitative research with economically deprived women on adult education and family literacy courses. Participants reported that such environments facilitated self-discovery and development.

All of the above illustrate the positive impact which education can have in a wider sense than a purely academic one. Such accounts make for compelling reading, and certainly highlight aspects of the experience which should be both acknowledged and celebrated, however they can become over simplified. By this I refer to the temptation, and inherent danger, of focussing exclusively on the positive aspects of self-development, whilst ignoring the challenges, struggles and losses which were also part of the growth process. Even the field of positive psychology acknowledges that nobody is happy all the time, that subjective well being is a mixture of both positive affect and negative affect and that whilst profound personal growth may occur during adulthood, it is often preceded by adversity or trauma. Thus I would argue that a psychological account which can embrace these contrasting aspects of change could enhance our understanding of the processes of growth. This can then be applied in this instance, to the context of higher education.

### **Psychological accounts of growth during adulthood.**

Drawing from the perspective of lifespan psychology, theorists posit the idea that some kind of 'crisis' or 'conflict' is an integral part of change. For example, Erikson's (1980) classic model of psychosocial growth was based around the idea that conflicts have to be negotiated and resolved at each stage of development in order to facilitate successful progression to the next one. Handel (1987) in a study of individuals' self-perceptions of change and continuity across adulthood found that those who perceived themselves as having changed only minimally also reported that they were exposed to fewer critical life events and experiences than those who reported many self-perceived changes. Based on the evidence highlighted earlier indicating that re-entering education can also represent a period of self-perceived change for adult returners, it seems acceptable to expect that this transition will also have an element of conflict or crisis involved.

A more contemporary lifespan account, Hendry and Kloep's (2002) model of developmental change, uses the theme of life course *challenges*. Parallels can be drawn between the term 'challenge' and 'conflict', something which Kloep (2008, p.3) acknowledges when discussing their work: 'Not dissimilar from developmental theorists before us we state that individuals need to meet a task, a challenge, a conflict that disturbs their equilibrium, and that by coping with this crisis they will develop.' However, whilst Erikson mapped out the specific nature of the conflicts which were deemed to be characteristic of each stage of the life course, Hendry and Kloep reject the linear stage approach for being dichotomous (one is either at a specific stage or not) and too static. Instead they contend that how individuals cope with challenges will be linked to the resources they have, rather than the stage of life they are at. Potential resources are grouped into the following categories: biological dispositions (e.g. personality, intelligence), social resources (e.g. trust/attachment, quality and size of network), skills in various domains (e.g. social skills, learning skills), self-efficacy (e.g. realistic self efficacy appraisals, experience with success), structural resources (e.g. class, family, gender) all of which are seen as interacting with each other, rather than functioning in isolation. Each of us is viewed as having our own individual pool of resources.

Throughout our life course we will be faced with a number of challenges (the number and nature of which will vary from person to person). In order to negotiate these we will have to draw from the various resources in our pool. The kind and amount of resources in our pool will determine whether the challenge is successfully coped with and development occurs or not. A challenge is described as 'any new task an individual meets that just matches or slightly exceeds his or her current resources (Hendry & Kloep, 2002, p.28),' thus successfully negotiating a task might strengthen our resources in the long run, for example,

a returning adult student may have low self-efficacy in relation to their academic abilities, but academic success in the first year of a degree may enhance their efficacy, and consequently the resource. Conversely, being unsuccessful may drain the resource pool, in this example lowering self-efficacy even further.

With this as a backdrop the aims of this paper are to take a lifespan psychology perspective to focus on the process of change experienced by adult returners to education. Specific emphasis will be placed on the nature of the conflicts, challenges and perceived change of sense of self experienced. This will be followed by a discussion of why development of this kind might be so salient for participants from such groups.

### **Method**

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants who were over 21 years of age at time of entry, from a specific geographical region, and had returned to full-time education via an access course. Participants had all gone to the same new University, but had completed their Access courses in one of three further education colleges. Twenty adult returners took part at differing stages of their academic careers. Ages ranged from 26 to 62 with the majority being in their 30s. Four participants were male.

A cross-sectional design was employed, and data collected using semi-structured interviews. Five different interviewees participated at the following stages of their degrees: end of their first year of study, end of second year, on completion of the degree and six to eight months after graduation. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis was conducted using a social constructionist version of grounded theory (Charmaz, 1990).

### **Findings**

The findings reported here relate to two of the higher order categories identified within the project as a whole: 'Conflict' and 'Re-

negotiation of the self'. As highlighted in the background section previous publications explore the themes in more detail (c.f. Mercer & Saunders (2004) for conflict, and Mercer (2007) for the re-negotiation of the self). What follows are condensed extracts from these data, which were selected to illustrate the areas most pertinent to the application of a lifespan account. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

### **The conflict between fear of failure and academic success**

It became evident that academic success had a profound effect on all participants. They typically began their courses with a fear that they might not be able to cope. Having been away from education for a while they were prone to question whether they still had the ability. Nigel made the following reflections about his concerns at the start of the course:

*after so long can you write an essay?  
And ... the embarrassment if you can't  
(38-years-old, end of third year).*

Added to this was a further source of anxiety. Participants were concerned that they would be compared to other students straight from school who they perceived to be equipped with superior academic skills. Charlie made the following reflections about the anxiety he felt before the end of year exams:

*But those exams are creeping closer and closer.  
Can I do it? Can I remember things? Can I put  
them down in the allocated time? Can I? Can  
I? We know the kids can because they've passed  
their 'A' levels (26-years-old, end of first  
year).*

This illustrates how vulnerable adults may feel when they return. Joanne had achieved formal qualifications at school in the form of 'O' levels, but as she pointed out this did not stop her from questioning her ability:

*because you know 16 years ago was a long time  
from when I left school, and um,  
I went to grammar school, so the potential was  
there, but because you never fulfil that  
potential you really don't know' (36-years-  
old, end of second year).*

Other participants had not been successful academically during compulsory schooling, for instance two had failed the 11+, another had been in the remedial class (and was only diagnosed as dyslexic when she reached University). Experiences such as these, not surprisingly, left a legacy of self doubt.

So it appeared that although participants had passed an Access course anxiety about academic success remained a salient feature of their initial transition into higher education. However, by tracking students' experiences at different stages of their degrees it was possible to observe how this conflict became less pronounced. By the time participants were interviewed at the end of the second year they appeared more confident and secure about their own ability. It seemed that academic success brought with it self-belief. The following responses were given by participants talking about the most positive part of returning to education for them:

*self-gratification ... um success yeah.*  
(Natalie, 31-years-old, end of second year)

Matthew stated that he'd gained:

*self-confidence and belief in myself on an academic level.* (43-years-old, end of third year)

From a researchers' perspective it could be observed that by the end of the second year a shift in the ownership of learning had taken place. The language of the first year student was very different from that of the second and third years. Discourses ceased to centre around feedback, what 'they' (the tutors) expected, and whether they would be able to pass the exams. Instead, participants focused more on what they perceived themselves as being capable of:

*I know my own ability. I don't see myself as an A person, but I do see myself as capable of getting B's if I do the work. If I don't get them it's because I haven't done the work, and I do know that.* (Marie, 37-years-old, end of second year)

Thus it appeared that academic success and progression aided resolution of this conflict. Passing assignments and examinations

worked to dispel the academic doubts encountered. Interestingly, the group of students who were initially revered for their academic ability 'the youngsters' also turned out to be a source of confidence. In interacting with younger students many participants recognised that they were more confident than them in some areas of academic study, such as contributing orally in seminars.

A link between academic progression and a sense of self-development can be observed here. The two did not appear to be distinct areas. Participants talked with enthusiasm about how their confidence had increased not only academically, but also socially. They spoke, for instance, about overcoming their feelings of intimidation when confronted (both on campus and off) with professionals, and being able to speak in situations where previously they would have felt very daunted and probably said nothing. Powerful language was used to describe the way they felt, such as generally 'happier', 'more secure' and 'complete'. Returning to education led participants to have a very different perspective on themselves. They relayed with enthusiasm accounts about perceived changes to their sense of self. One conclusion which was reached from this research, therefore, was that some kind of re-negotiation of the self occurred through educational development.

### **Re-negotiating the self**

This formed a key category in the findings, from which 'transforming the self personally' evolved. This comprised two subcategories, the first of which was 'increased confidence and awareness', which picked up on the idea that academic success impacted on the way participants perceived themselves. For example, Matthew described such changes as the most positive aspect of returning to education for him:

*Oh self-confidence ... and especially in my social skills in interacting with people, and that, much, much more articulate.*  
(43-years-old, end of third year)

Confidence was a term which 19 of the participants used in their narratives. It was not a term which I included in any of my questions. It became evident that the perceived changes were not just about gaining new academic knowledge and skills, (which were also discussed) but about a widening of perspective more generally. This was an extremely salient part of their experiences. I asked if they had expected this to happen. Some reflected that they had not:

*No I don't think you can expect that sort of change.* (Carys, 42-years-old, end of first year)

*No, I just thought that I was me and that was it.* (Charlie, 26-years-old, end of first year)

Thus in such instances, it could be argued that a different sense of self was an outcome of academic development. This had not been predicted.

For others there appeared to be a conscious desire for personal change, which represented a strong motivation for returning to an educational environment. Here, a central role was reclaiming a part of the self that had not been developed earlier in the lifespan (often due to other commitments or previously negative educational experiences). Thus 'resolving the past' was the second subcategory identified within this process of renegotiation.

For Sharon it was a matter of timing. Family responsibilities had taken priority:

*I could have done what I'm doing 10, 15 years ago, if I didn't have to do what I did, cos I knew I always wanted to do it, it was finding the right time. Once the kids went to school that was it like.*

Participants within this category expressed strong intrinsic motivations for returning. Sharon continued:

*it comes back to doing something for yourself doesn't it? Um ... it was just something for myself I think. Something that I knew I could do and you know wanted to do it.* (31-years-old, end of first year).

It was as if, for some, part of their self was missing. They were able to develop this via their experiences of education:

*Oh yeah, yeah I've gained a lot of confidence, um ... I've just changed yeah. Yeah I feel like the person I should have felt before. I just feel normal now.* (Karen, 38-years-old, end of third year)

This was also evident in the narratives of Deborah, a mother of seven:

*I did go through a patch where I, I suppose I'd been so bogged down with doing the chores of looking after a house and home, that I kind of lost my identity for a while, and I think that I have re-found myself, you know?* (53-years-old, six to eight months after graduation)

A further aspect of this category emerged from discussions with individuals who had encountered negative experiences of compulsory education. For them there were very strong intrinsic motivations to resolve demons from the past. As previously stated Delith had been in the remedial class in school. For her returning education was about proving she was not still what she described as 'bottom of the heap'. Intense personal motivations were expressed:

*Yeah, this is all me, me, me you see. People think I'm out to prove other things, but it's not. This is a personal thing for me and people don't really see that side of it. This is a battle between me and myself sort of thing. That's what it comes down to, and I think that's the only thing that's keeping me going.*

In another part of the interview she stated that her academic achievements in higher education had given her:

*Confidence, oh confidence, lots of self-confidence, yeah. I spent years looking at people and thinking they were up there, but I can jump over their heads now, and I'm looking at them now. It's really changed, a complete circle.* (31-years-old, end of second year)

This was particularly poignant also for the two participants who had attended secondary modern schools. Having retired neither needed a degree for career purposes, rather for personal reasons.

Densil remembered vividly being told in school that he was 'a failure' because he had not passed the 11+. This was one of the reasons he decided later in life, when he had the time and opportunity, to return to study:

*I had a big chip on my shoulder, that's why I wanted to do it.*

Interviewer: *So the reason you returned to full-time education was to prove to yourself?*

*Yes, mmm, to prove I could do it.*

For him there was a dissonance between the fact that he had been labelled an academic failure and his own belief that he was capable of academic achievements. Over six months after graduation, he described the experience as:

*Oh the best thing that ever happened to me.*

*Oh it's been brilliant, I've got the chip off my shoulder. (58-years-old, six to eight months after graduation)*

Carl had a similar story to tell. This was his response when asked about his sources of motivation:

*I failed the 11+, right, this is back in 1950 odd round about that area, now if you fail that you don't get a second chance, right, so I was condemned ... so that was my motivation, that I found I could achieve educational standards ... no matter what age I was. (62-years-old, end of first year)*

These participants' stories illustrate how returning education allowed them to prove themselves and reclaim something that had been missing from, and affecting their sense of self for many years previously. In doing so, they appeared to have resolved issues from the past.

Evidence of this nature provides powerful support for the notion of self discovery and growth identified in the introduction. However, the same sample of students also talked of the struggles they encountered. In keeping with the notion that conflict and growth are not antithetical the final part of the data considered here returns to the higher order category of 'conflict'. A discussion of the ways participants sought to negotiate or resolve the challenges these conflicts presented them with is also included.

## **The conflict between the home environment and the University environment**

As already established, participants lived in areas characterised by low participation in higher education. Typically they represented the first generation within their family to pursue a degree. Although some made reference to friends or siblings who were, or had participated, many participants felt other members of their community were not able share their experiences. Such lack of understanding seemed a common source of conflict:

*I would say that from the culture I come from the majority don't actually understand ... neighbours and that like. I did have one person comment to me 'You go to college now do you?' and she said 'Well it's something to do in the day.' So I think from that point of view it's very difficult ... to explain to people what you're doing and why you're doing it. In a working class area, they just see it that you're filling in time. (Joanne, 36-years-old, end of second year)*

*My wife used to go shopping in town and they'd say 'Where is he?' and she'd say 'Oh he's doing a course'. 'Why?' 'Why at his age?' 'Waste of time'. It's a ... I think it's a major problem in places like [names local town] it's getting over to people the importance of education. (Densil, 58-years-old, six to eight months after graduation)*

This seeming inability to appreciate the purpose of re entering education left participants feeling frustrated, and at times isolated. This was particularly hurtful when those in roles typically associated with social support, such as friends and family, demeaned the experience:

*It's almost as if it's my hobby or something, like. My parents said 'There's a nice little job going as a lollipop lady.' They even offered to help with the kids if I took it. But I have never been offered any help when I come down here. And when someone says that to you, you realise that they have no understanding of what you are doing what so ever. They don't even ask if I've passed my exams. (Delith, 31-years-old, end of second year).*

In some cases, the inability to empathise with the new situation placed considerable strain on relationships. Two partnerships had broken up during the course of this study and one couple separated for a period, but had got back together. Julie described her partner as feeling 'quite threatened' by what she was doing. She felt that her changing outlook presented challenges to their relationship, eventually resulting in dissolution of their partnership:

*And I think he resented the fact ... cos he went to grammar school as well, he could have already done this if he wanted to. (Julie, 39-years-old, end of third year)*

Strategies to cope with the lack of understanding, and at times support, that participants were faced with were identified from their narratives. Because many found that members of their home community neither understood what they were doing or why, it became easier to not talk about University life. Essentially they adopted what I described as a 'dual identity' where they attempted to keep college and home environments separate and distinct:

*they [friends] do never ask me about it, and I don't like to say. I don't want them to think I'm different. It's the area isn't it? (Sharon, 31-years-old, end of first year)*

A more extreme example came from the following participant who initially had even lied about what she was doing:

*I think people have got more accepting as time has gone by, because they've got used to seeing me walking down to catch the train with my bag of books, you know and it's 'Oh you're still at it then?' and 'We'll see you in [the local paper]', but I don't think that they realise the implications of what a BA or BSc is. In fact, when I started Access I told people I was doing a typing course, because I just felt that they wouldn't understand, you know 'why would she want to do that?' (Julie, 39-years-old, end of third year)*

These quotations illustrate that many participants felt uncomfortable talking about their new role. Consequently developing a 'dual identity', choosing not to speak about it

to others, or not even admit to what they were doing, was seen as a practical solution. Others took this one step further by actively seeking out individuals with similar perspectives on the value of education. This resulted in changing social networks evolving over time, representing a second way of resolving this particular conflict:

*My social circle has changed. Everything has changed. I don't have the same friends, so I don't know what they are thinking any more. I don't ask their opinion. I don't want to find out. My life has really changed, my circles have changed, so I'm mostly bothering now with people who have already got degrees, or are like myself studying, do you know what I mean? So it's gone now, it's past. It really has gone.*

*(Delith, 31-years-old, end of second year)*

It is evident for some that changing social networks was not simply due to a lack of understanding by others. The individuals themselves were experiencing a different sense of self which was impacting on their relationships:

*I just get bored with people now, that's the only thing. I get bored with, with some of my other friends.*

Acknowledging change also involved acknowledging some negative points. Karen continued:

*although they say 'Oh you won't talk like me soon' you know? 'I'll be thick.' And I say 'No' you know 'it's not like that', but you still yearn for that conversation that you heard in uni.*

*(Karen, 38-years-old, end of second year)*

Similarly, Marie found that she was not interested in some of the people she had previously interacted with:

*I find I've got less patience with some people and I think Marie, you're being a snob now (laughs). I mean I used to sit and drink with them, you know and think it was brilliant, and now you can't stand spending two minutes with them, and I think [surname] you're a snob!(laughs). All of a sudden you see them as the village idiot, and I think yeah, well I'm the village snob. (37-years-old, end of second year)*



The changing dynamics of their social lives were clearly not just attributable to others not understanding their choice to attend University; the participants themselves, due to the changes in outlook they were experiencing, were agents in this. This illustrates that the observed changes involved losses as well as gains. In this instance, the loss of some pre-existing friendships. Coburn (2000), based on research with female students in a similar geographical region, found that participants were often faced with a stark choice between continued education and the survival of their wider relationships, something that was also observed in the present research. Not all relationships survived the degree course. However, new ones were formed and participants were able to draw on the resources described above to negotiate the dissonance between those who didn't understand their choices, and their own sense of changing identity.

### **The conflict caused by juggling multiple roles**

Participants described managing multiple roles as the most stressful part of University life. Understandably, parental responsibilities placed considerable demands on their time, thus they had to adjust to fitting preparation and work for University around an already busy family schedule. Some participants were also engaged in part-time employment.

Not all adult returners will have children, although over three-quarters of the sample in this study did. Even those who did not, or at least none living at home, had other roles which they felt impinged on their time. Of course, younger students often have other commitments too, and since the introduction of fee paying are more likely to be engaged in employment to support the cost of studying in higher education. Lansdown (2009) found that employment was a financial reality for her cohort of younger students from working class backgrounds, which left them juggling roles also. However, it is likely that older students will have more established and longer term roles and

commitments than traditional aged students. These could range from mortgage repayments to caring for elderly parents.

Lack of time and the pressures felt from juggling multiple roles were expressed across the cohort. Densil used a circus metaphor to exemplify this:

*I was like, you know, the fella in the circus juggling plates. (58-year-old male, six to eight months after graduation)*

Guilt was often expressed when discussing this conflict:

*it's the selfish thing that you are doing this degree. Nobody sees that you're doing it for their benefit. You are doing this for you, it's a guilt thing, and you try to write an essay for the next morning, and they [the children] won't go to bed before nine, it's sod's law. But you have to do that essay, and do it then. You've got no choice. (Karen, 38-years-old, end of third year)*

The guilt also became heightened if, as discussed previously, those at home did not understand the purpose of the chosen pathway:

*I have felt really guilty, and also to myself, 'you're kidding yourself', you know like? Yeah guilt does come into it, and especially when people say 'well the kids, what about this? What about that?' Nobody cares about you. What ever you want goes out of the window. (Natalie, 31-years-old, end of second year)*

However, there did seem to be ways of coping with such pressures. By the later stages of the degree, many participants, whilst admitting that it was hard, appeared to have accommodated studying into their daily routines. As this participant who had just completed her degree pointed out:

*Yes it did get easier, and as the children get older they are not so dependant. (Julie, 39-years-old, end of third year)*

She described how her children became accustomed to her University routine and helped her with the childcare of the youngest child. As a lone parent this facilitated her being able to attend classes. Although she expressed guilt and found it a struggle, the

situation was by no means entirely negative. She also described her return to education as contributing to her children becoming more 'independent' and 'self sufficient at times'.

One way of alleviating the dissonance between feeling guilty and pursuing a higher education course seemed to be highlighting the benefits for the children also. Julie described 'being a role model for the children' as her main source of motivation. Although some participants were aware that others (even family members) saw them as selfish for investing so much time in a college course, an appreciation of the gains for the children were expressed:

*And I just think I'm setting a really good example for my kids at the moment, cos they see there's more out there for them too. (Delith, 31-years-old, end of second year)*

Deborah, meanwhile, felt that being a student herself enhanced her relationship with her children:

*Well they [the children] say that they can communicate more with me, that they've found that I'm more open to things because I've been in the learning condition myself and that I'm more sympathetic now towards the younger ones that were at school at the time, you know and get on better. We actually do our homework together! (53-years-old, six to eight months after graduation)*

In areas of low participation, with the lack of community support previously identified, such influences can be viewed as vital in raising the educational aspirations of the next generation. Whilst participants' reasons for returning to education were often based on strong individual motives and desires the outcomes and gains can potentially be inter-generational.

A source of resolution of this conflict was to structure time management routines around family life. Many interviewees spoke of employing strategies which served to keep everyone else in the home happy. A commonly reported one was to work after the children were in bed or within school hours. Whilst working through the night was not ideal, it was practical:

*I have to work through the night and not the day, cos I've got two young children and I have no choice. (Claire, 28-years-old, end of first year)*

*Well I try to take my time away. I either work during the day when the kids are at school or I work in the evenings, after they've gone to bed, and um, I try and do it only so many evenings a week, when I know nobody else is about. Otherwise I think, well [husband's name] been working, he'll want five minutes with me. (Natalie, 32-years-old, end of second year)*

Natalie contended that by doing this she assuaged any guilt on her part.

Individuals were often faced with the challenge of finding a balance between ensuring their own academic progression and maintaining other, often pre-established, roles and responsibilities. The narratives offered above indicate that it was possible to resolve the dissonance, but that guilt may be a part of the process and very adept time management strategies need to be activated. As with the previous conflict, the successful resolution may also involve the understanding of those at home and a shift in their routine.

## **Discussion**

The first aim of this research was to consider the nature of the conflicts, challenges and perceived change of sense of self experienced amongst a group of adult returners. These have been identified in the findings section. Discussion will now turn to lifespan psychology as a framework for interpretation.

The ways in which participants negotiated the conflicts between home and University life and the multiple, at times competing, roles illustrated the type of resources they drew upon. These may be mapped onto Hendry and Kloep's (2002) developmental change model in the following way: to give a brief example, it can be seen that whilst structural resources such as family and community were not always available there was the option to develop further resources by drawing from different sources such a

new network of friends, therefore, the social resources identified in this model. In another area of resources, self-efficacy, the academic successes achieved impacted hugely on self belief, facilitating progression across the degree. One can appreciate how some resources would be strengthened whilst others were depleted. This model accounted, therefore, for loss as well as gains, and provided a useful framework to accommodate both the positive and negative aspects of participants' trajectories.

The profound changes to sense of self reported by this cohort were intriguing. Before starting the research I had not expected this to be such a salient aspect of the experience and observed the enthusiasm and passion with which they relayed their feelings. The final aim of the paper, therefore, is to discuss why this might have been such an important part of the transition for them.

Using concepts which originally arose from very structured age and stage accounts of the life course I would like to suggest that for widening access students entering higher education represents a *non*-normative shift. Hendry and Kloep (2002, p.42) define a normative shift as 'common for most individuals in certain social or cultural settings, and often related to age and maturational shifts.' Normative shifts are predictable, expected and to a large extent part of a social cultural socialisation process (Neugarten, 1968). In essence such a shift could be viewed as a cultural expectation about the type of tasks we might be involved in a certain stages of the life course. Thus (ignoring for a moment the changes in participation patterns which have occurred in higher education) for a stereotypical 'traditional' HE student who comes from a middle class background, has progressed from school with 'A' levels or maybe taken a gap year to travel, the transition to higher education would be normative. Peers of similar age and backgrounds would be likely to be engaging in the same transition. It would be the expected next stage in their life course after leaving school.

For participants in the present study, however, this was not the case. The findings poignantly illustrate that this was not expected of them. Added to this their age made the shift what Hendry and Kloep (2002) define as 'off-time', i.e. occurring at a different time in the lifespan from most other people. Examples of such shifts in British society could be getting married for the first time at 70 years of age, or having a child at 12. These shifts can be stigmatising, there are likely to be an absence of role models and the possibility of clashing with other life transitions (all of which can be evidenced in the findings of the present study). Consequently Hendry and Kloep (2002) suggest that off-time non-normative transitions are very different and present more challenges to the individual. Off-time non-normative shifts are viewed as harder to cope with as individuals often have less support and society is less prepared to cope with them. Without such support networks the individual is required to look to resources within oneself to orient this transition in the first place and deal with the challenges it presents. From the accounts given this occurred amongst the cohort in this study. For them a profound change in their sense of self appeared to facilitate both their academic progression and self-perceived development as an individual. For some the self was a motivator of change in the first place, for others it was an unexpected, but much appreciated part of the process. I would like to conclude, therefore, that for these participants the self was the mediator of their successful transitions into and through higher education.

Before ending, though, a few cautions need to be raised about how this work should be interpreted. The conflicts outlined were particular to a specific group, and even within this group differences occurred. No attempts are being made to suggest that change and development only occurs amongst adult returners or students from non-traditional backgrounds. However, it is likely that *the nature* of the conflicts

encountered would be different to those of a school leaver with formal qualifications coming from a community of high participation in higher education. A model such as developmental change could be used to explore the types of challenges pertinent to such individuals.

This qualitative approach was able to provide in depth accounts of the experiences of the participants and identify some of the commonalities as well as being sensitive enough to account for some differences. It is idiographic in nature, therefore no claims are being made that findings can be generalised to all who might be categorised as a 'widening participation' population. However, it is likely that some of the accounts expressed here will resonate with those given in other studies; For instance, as identified in the introduction, there appears to be a robust literature supporting the idea of changing sense of self amongst cohorts of adult returners. This research concurs with this.

It is vital to highlight that participants were ones who were succeeding and progressing at the various stages of their academic trajectories. For them the transition was primarily a positive one. The narratives of those who do not progress and the challenges that they might have encountered are likely to tell a very different story. Quinn et al. (2005) note that there is a higher probability of withdrawal from UK universities amongst students representing the low-ranked classes (as defined by occupational status). This is another reality of widening access which also needs also to be acknowledged and the underlying contributory factors identified.

There may be other ways in which this data could have been analysed. The focus on individual self-growth represents a very individualistic account. A sociologist, for instance, may well take a more structural account of widening access. Analysis of the conflict between home and University environments could have been rooted in discussions of class and social capital. Many of the comments made by participants addressed Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) themes of educational inequality associated with social and cultural capital within higher education, where differing levels of skill and confidence exist for social encounters between middle-class academics and working class students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

The target audience of this publication, though, are teachers and researchers of psychology, hence an account which offers a psychological perspective of human development is coupled with a way of enhancing our understanding of the lived experiences of those with whom we might interact in the teaching environment. For me, conducting the research certainly altered my perspective. This Special Issue of the publication is dedicated to non-traditional entry students, and will have been extremely successful if it has also widened readers' awareness of some of the issues to be considered when attempting to embrace the widening participation agenda within our psychology departments.

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