# Diverse pathways into higher education: Using students′ stories to identify transformative experiences

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*This paper is based on findings from the first phase of a longitudinal project examining how a group of students from diverse backgrounds succeed in higher education. The concept of perspective transformation is used to explore students' stories about factors that influenced them on their journey to university, including socio-economic background, family difficulties, gender, the effect of being first in family to enter higher education, migration, location and experiences of schooling. The paper argues that, for some participants, the decision to enrol was not primarily the effect of perspective transformation, but rather the result of other aspects of their lives. Finally, we comment on the value of narrative inquiry for revealing participants' experiences and, potentially, for supporting the process of transformation.*

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the stories of a group of students from diverse backgrounds about their pathways into higher education. Participants include students from low socio-economic groups, non-English-speaking and migrant backgrounds, regional and remote areas, as well as students with a medical condition, or who are first in their family to enter university. The paper draws on findings from the first stage of a longitudinal research project which aims to provide insight into how these students succeed. In this three-stage project, on-campus and off-campus students at the commencement of their course discuss their pathways into higher education. Then, while their studies are in progress, the students comment on how they are managing. Finally, they reflect on their experiences at course completion (between two and four years after enrolment, depending on study mode and individual study patterns). The project, undertaken at an Australian university, adapts the research design of a similar project in the United Kingdom (Kirk 2006).

We use the lens of 'perspective transformation' (Mezirow 1978) to examine the students' pathways into higher education and identify whether their enrolment was primarily the result of transformative experiences, or other aspects of their lives.  The project was guided by a number of related theoretical perspectives, including critical theory (Brookfield 2005), experiential learning (Kolb 1984) and participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggert 2005). However, the concept of perspective transformation offers potential for examining whether or not the decision to enrol was the result of a fundamental shift in perspective. This analysis will allow subsequent comparison with any perspective shifts that appear to be related to the study experience.

In the following sections, we outline the evolution of aspects of Mezirow's theory that are relevant to this examination, and explain the role of narrative inquiry in accessing evidence of perspective transformation. We then describe our research design and analyse

the students' stories about their pathways into higher education to identify whether or not their enrolment appeared to result predominantly from perspective transformation. Finally, we discuss the outcomes of this analysis, suggesting that there is evidence of transformative experiences on the pathways to higher education of some, but not all, of the participants. We note the transformative potential of narrative inquiry itself.

## Perspective transformation

Although Mezirow (1978) focused on the personal transformation of 'everyday life', his work was underpinned by critical theory. Subsequently, he related the three basic human interests (technical, practical and emancipatory) identified by Habermas (1971) to three domains of learning (instrumental, communicative and emancipatory) (Mezirow 1981, 1991). The emancipatory aspect of transformative learning occurs when individuals change their frames of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds. Of the three types of reflection (content, process and premise) that he introduced in 1991, it is premise reflection that facilitates profound, emancipatory change. He originally saw perspective transformation as involving ten phases beginning with a single 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow 1981), but has since acknowledged that it could be a gradual, cumulative process (Mezirow 2000). Others (Dirkx 2000, Taylor 2000) have supported this view. Cranton (2002: 64) explains the 'elegantly simple' nature of Mezirow's central idea: if through some event an individual becomes aware of holding a limited or distorted view and 'critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning of the world.'

Collard and Law (1989) noted conceptual problems in Mezirow's theory as Habermas abandoned the idea that knowledge is grounded in human interest and developed his theory of communicative action. They argued that Mezirow uncritically assimilated Habermas's theoretical shift into his own theories. Mezirow (1989) disputed this, noting that he had changed his view about emancipatory learning but that this was irrespective of Habermas's position. Following this change, he regarded emancipatory learning as a process that involves critical reflection and applies to both instrumental and communicative learning, rather than seeing it as a third domain of learning. Emphasis on the importance of the communicative domain has remained central to Mezirow's view of perspective transformation, even as other aspects of his theory have developed. It is in the communicative domain that problematic ideas, values, beliefs and feelings are identified, the assumptions on which they are based are critically examined, their justification through rational discourse is tested, and decisions from the resulting consensus are made (Mezirow 1995). Similarly, although he has moved away from emphasising the three types of reflection (Cranton 2006), premise reflection continues to underpin the idea of critical reflection.

In his ongoing refinement of the theory, Mezirow (2000) conceptualised a frame of reference as comprising six dimensions of habits of mind (sociolinguistic, moral-ethical, epistemic, philosophical, psychological and aesthetic), each expressed as a point of view and each comprising a cluster of meaning schemes. Changes to a frame of reference involving transformation of habits of mind and points of view usually occur through critical reflection and discourse. He comments that '[t]esting the validity of a transformed frame of reference in communicative learning requires critical-dialectical discourse' (Mezirow 2003: 61), referring to discourse as dialogue involving a (rational) assessment of beliefs, feelings and values. Kitchenham (2008) provides a useful review of the evolution of Mezirow's theory.

The contributions of others have generated discussion on many aspects of transformative learning theory. They include: keeping critical pedagogy central (Brookfield 2003); acknowledging the roles of emotion and imagination in constructing meaning, along with the conscious, rational and self-reflexive practices associated with Mezirow's approach (Dirkx 2001); and the need to operate at a mature level of cognitive functioning for transformative learning to occur (Merriam 2004). The importance of other ways of knowing (beyond rational knowing) had also been acknowledged in several empirical studies reviewed by Taylor (1997), along with the importance of context, the varying nature of the catalyst of perspective transformation (which may not always involve a disorientating dilemma) and the role of relationships. Acknowledging both Mezirow's rational approach and the extrarational approach of others who regard transformation as extending beyond cognitive ways of knowing, Cranton (2006: 77) discusses whether rational and extrarational transformation can occur suddenly and dramatically, gradually over time or as a developmental process, concluding that 'from the perspective of the person experiencing transformation, it is more often a gradual accumulation of ordinary experiences that leads to a deep shift in thinking, a shift that may only become clear when it is over'. Taylor (2007), in critically reviewing further empirical research on transformative learning theory from 1999 to 2005, noted the challenge for longitudinal studies of separating what is related to transformative learning and what is related to normal development or external factors. He again noted recognition of the importance of context in perspective transformation and the role of relationships.

In this paper, we consider that participants demonstrate transformative experiences if their decision to enrol resulted from a change in frames of reference based on critical reflection and discourse as defined by Mezirow, or from extrarational processes. Where transformation occurs, we consider whether it was primarily the result of a disorienting dilemma or gradual change. When

serendipitous events influence pathways to higher education (e.g. McGivney 2006, O'Shea 2007, Stone 2008), we regard their effects as transformative if they appear to result in a re-examination of habits of mind that transform points of view.

## Research design

### The role of students' stories

Listening to students' stories provides insights into their lives (O'Shea 2007, Daniels 2008). Narrative inquiry as a research method underpins this project. It is both the method and phenomena of study (Clandinin & Connolly 2000), capable of producing 'richly-detailed expositions of life as lived' which offer 'insight[s] that befit the complexity of human lives' (Josselson 2006: 4).

Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) note that, while the defining feature of narrative inquiry is the study of experience as it is lived, other commonplaces include attention to temporality, sociality and place. An important dimension of sociality is the relationship between participant and inquirer. Movement away from the researcher-researched relationship to a more relational view is central to narrative inquiry (Pinnegar & Danes 2007). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) refer to the storying and restorying that occurs as researchers engage with participants' stories, resulting in a mutually constructed account of inquiry. Listening to and engaging with students' voices is an integral aspect of emancipatory research (Corbett 1998), particularly when their experiences and perceptions may be markedly different from their teachers. Trahar (2008: 260) notes that a narrative interview 'may bear resemblance to broader definitions of semi-structured and unstructured interviews or it may be viewed as a collaborative activity, one in which the researcher shares the impact on her/him of the stories being told.' In this project, our aim was to engage with participants and hear their voices so that meanings could

be co-constructed from their own words to gain insights into their lives and histories.

Taylor (1997, 2007) commented on the predominance of qualitative research designs in studies on perspective transformation, which have become more sophisticated through the use of longitudinal designs and other methods. Baumgartner (2002: 56) used narrative inquiry in a longitudinal study of perspective transformation in people living with HIV/AIDS, noting the need to make sense of a developmental process over time, rather than through a single (often retrospective) snapshot. Brooks and Clark (2001) suggested that narrative is useful for theorising transformative learning because: it moves from past to future; it spans the psychological, social, cultural and historical dimensions in content and form; and it includes cognitive, affective, spiritual and somatic dimensions. In this paper we use narrative inquiry to identify retrospectively whether transformation has occurred, so that we can also use it subsequently to compare evidence of perspective transformation as students complete their studies.

## Procedure

We invited students entering the Bachelor of Social Work degree in 2006 to participate if they came to university via diverse pathways such as those noted earlier, or if they considered themselves as 'non-traditional' university students for another reason.

Participation involved three semi-structured individual interviews and two group meetings during their course to explore factors that contributed to their success in higher education and produce a 'life and learning story' for each student. This paper refers to the first part of these stories. Interview questions, focusing on how students succeed, were adapted to the Australian and institutional context from those used in the original study in the United Kingdom. Sixteen students (15 female and one male) joined the study and completed the first interview. Subsequently, two female students withdrew from

the course. Consequently, the following results refer to 14 students who have now either successfully completed the course or are progressing toward completion.

The first interview took place soon after the course commenced. Participants were asked about their experiences of primary and secondary school, what brought them into higher education, and their university entry qualifications. They explained their aspirations as they grew up, their sources of support and role models, and the expectations of significant people in their lives. Participants also commented on the obstacles they had faced, whether other family members had attended university, and provided other information about their higher education pathway that they considered relevant.

Interviews were audio-taped and the transcriptions verified by each participant. We then analysed the transcripts to identify common themes and points of difference between participants' accounts. The overall aim of the study (how students succeed) directed the identification of themes which focused primarily on evidence of barriers to, and enablers of, success. Discourse analysis, as derived from Stubbs (1982) which concerns spoken and written language use beyond the level of sentence, was used in conjunction with content analysis (Crotty 1998) to identify the major themes in relation to the study aim.

Thus, narrative inquiry as both the method and phenomena of study, supported by discourse and content analysis, guided us through the processes of interviewing, verification and transcript analysis, towards sharing the meanings that emerged from the contexts of the students' lives. Later in the project, the life and learning stories will provide the final representation of their lived experiences. Although perspective transformation was not specifically used in the design of the study, it is applied to our analysis so that it can be considered as a factor in informing our conclusions about how students succeed.

## Pathways into higher education

This section highlights influences that helped participants overcome obstacles on their higher education pathways. In the next section we identify whether their enrolment predominantly resulted from perspective transformation, or other factors. Factors affecting participants are presented in relation to:

- family, socio-economic context and attitude to education
- school experiences
- expectations of others, sources of support and role models
- personal characteristics, including self-concept
- experiences which led to higher education.

Table 1 introduces the participants (using pseudonyms of their choice) and summarises some factors that affected them. School experiences and self-concept as a learner are classified as positive, neutral or negative, identifying dominant aspects where possible.

Table 1:  *Some factors affecting participants' pathways into higher education*

| Participants | Socio-economic | Family difficulties | Gender | First in family | Migration | Rural/ remote or regional factors | Primary School | Secondary School | Self concept as learner |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | Positive (+), neutral (o), negative (-) | | |
| Alex Carole | X | X | X | X | X | | + | + | o |
| Anita | | X | | | X | | o | + | + |
| Bettina | X | X | X | X | X | | + | o/+ | + |
| Harriet | X | X | X | X | X | X | + | - | + |
| Lam | | X | X | X | X | | + | +/- | o |
| Lillian | X | X | X | X | | | o | - | - |
| Marie | X | X | X | | X | | +/- | - | - |
| Mealmaker | X | X | X | | | X | - | o/+ | - |
| Miranda | X | X | X | X | | X | +/- | + | + |
| Rochelle | X | | X | X | | X | + | - | - |
| Sesh | X | X | X | X | X | X | + | + | + |
| Shannon | X | | | | | X | + | +/- | + |
| Virginia | X | X | X | | X | | + | - | o |
| Zelin | | | X | X | X | X | + | - | + |

## Family, socio-economic context and attitude to education

Whilst the family and socio-economic context presented barriers for most participants, families frequently made efforts to provide educational support. For Bettina, Harriet, Miranda and Rochelle,

support was tempered by limited guidance related to their parents' own educational backgrounds. Harriet stated:

> I went to one high school which was public, and not suitable for me, and then they paid for me to go to a private school … but … nothing specific was ever requested of me. Or suggested. And I really missed having some sort of direction or guidance, because I really didn't get that from anywhere.

Later, she became aware of her father's sense of academic inferiority as a truck driver who was 'just as lost as I was' in matters relating to higher education. Shannon was also left to make his own decisions because 'that was our family dynamics' but was influenced by his mother who, at 35, 'decided to go to university to be a teacher.'

For three students who came to Australia directly from education systems overseas, there was family emphasis on further study. Anita had a Masters degree in her home country and was influenced by her single mother telling her: 'If I didn't have a degree and be a teacher, how could I manage right now?' Similarly, Lam and Zelin were both supported by their parents through competitive school systems before coming to Australia.

Higher education was also in the family discourse of two participants from South Africa, though there were barriers to achieving it. Alex Carole's grandfather encouraged her to become a nurse, but on her acceptance, did not want her to leave home. His subsequent death resulted in the family's emigration to Australia. No one in Virginia's parents' family had been to university but 'it certainly wasn't out of my consciousness'. Rather, her father's alcoholism, her parents' divorce, and her mother's inability to pay, prevented her enrolment when she completed high school.

The migrant experiences of parents impacted differently for other participants. Marie's parents were from Europe and her mother supported education as a route to freedom for women. Her father was

an engineer who 'kept getting retrenched'. Later, with his alcoholism and early death, she became 'the person who was "dumped on" in the family'. Sesh's mother, from a migrant background, supported a traditional role for women. Sesh grew up in rural Australia 'where you're expected to get married and have kids and become a farmer's wife.' Nevertheless, her parents pressured her to succeed at high school, which she did, but two failed attempts at university followed.

In contrast, Lillian did not appear to have any supportive factors to counteract the lack of a close relationship with her parents, an alcoholic father, and a socio-economic context where university was never discussed. Similarly, Mealmaker's memories of her family life are mostly negative, with constant arguments 'every night' during high school and 'the noise levels when I was trying to study' providing no support.

To summarise, most participants indicated evidence of educational support from their families, though for a number of them it was tempered by limited guidance, or by family or socio-economic issues that adversely impacted on their education.

## School experiences

As indicated by Table 1, most participants had positive experiences at primary school and some at secondary school. Potentially solid foundations for later academic experiences seemed to exist for many of them.

Amongst those who conveyed positive school experiences, Harriet stated:

> I remember my primary school days as being wonderful… I remember feeling very unfettered. And very free. And it was a bit like a wonderland where adults were only incidental … I always did really well, and had absolutely no problems academically …

Miranda and Shannon attended multiple primary schools but both did well. Sesh, too, attended a number of schools. While she was not an outstanding student, she had 'no real stress' at primary school. Her secondary school experiences were coloured by her parents' separation and school provided social support. She achieved academic success because she 'put the effort in' and 'everyone said: "You have to go to uni".'

A number of other participants regarded themselves as average students but had some positive school experiences. Alex Carole was not 'overly zealous' and 'excelled in some subjects more than others.' Bettina 'loved' both primary and high school and expected to go to university because 'our generation do'. Rochelle was 'bit of a daydreamer' who loved animals. Her parents sent her to boarding school in Year 12, which she 'loved', although she 'didn't do any work'. Virginia, although not a 'great achiever' at primary school, 'had a lot of fun'. She responded when her mother told her to 'pull her socks up' during high school, and wanted to go to university. However, she hated high school, largely because of the problems at home which affected the academic achievements of both her and her brother. Anita, Lam and Zelin valued their school friendships despite competitive school environments, though Anita's primary school experience was constrained because her mother was the headmistress.

Lillian and Mealmaker again provide a contrast, joined by Marie whose school experiences were mostly negative. Lillian was lonely at high school and hurt by the rejection of a former friend. She 'flip-flopped in and out of groups' but enjoyed gymnastics and the social club. She does not remember any career guidance and left school in Year 11. Mealmaker was always 'getting into trouble' at primary school. Secondary school 'was good' but her friends 'got me into trouble'. She started to harm herself in Year 12. Although 'never in class', she passed and was interested in disability work. Marie could

not speak English when she started school and was very unhappy at her Catholic primary school, but was happier after moving to a state school in Grade 3. However, at secondary school she and her siblings experienced 'an extreme amount of racism' and she 'hated high school'.

To summarise, most participants had positive school experiences, especially at primary school. Secondary school experiences were less positive, frequently because of adverse family circumstances. This is illustrated by the stories of several participants (Harriet, Lillian, Marie, Mealmaker, Miranda, Rochelle and Shannon) who either left school or had disruptive experiences in Year 11.

### Expectations of others, sources of support and role models

All participants experienced some positive influences from the expectations of others, provision of support, or the existence of role models.

Influences were often from family members. Harriet's mother (a nurse) was a role model, as was Shannon's mother: 'My thinking was that if my Mum could go to uni at 35 and now she's a principal working in the Department, then I could do it at 27 or 28.' Miranda had several positive family influences, despite obstacles in coming from 'a long line of solo parents'. Her mother always expected she 'would end up somewhere' and was a role model, undertaking voluntary work after a mental breakdown, and always ready to 'move on and to try something new'. Her Nanna  was a stable figure who thought 'I could run the world if I wanted to' and her aunt, a career-oriented woman who worked in technical and further education: 'Let me see that women can do anything ... you just need to be determined enough.' Although Lillian did not have supportive influences when she was young, her second husband encouraged her to study.

Several participants with migrant backgrounds experienced positive expectations about education, though this did not always apply to

girls. Alex Carole's grandfather encouraged her to become a nurse although 'girls weren't encouraged to have higher aspirations'. Anita's mother was supportive, encouraging her to be ambitious but flexible. Lam's father was also supportive, although he wanted her to study business, but her mother thought getting a 'good, wealthy husband' was more important. Marie's European parents expected her to go to university. Though Sesh's mother thought that education was more important for boys, both parents expected her to do well at high school. Virginia's brother was a role model at school and later when undertaking tertiary study by correspondence. She is supported now by her husband and children. Zelin is from a Chinese one-child family. Her father wanted her to study 'very, very hard' and was willing to support her to PhD level, though her mother thought a Masters degree was sufficient for a girl.

The school environment was also important in developing expectations and providing sources of support or role models. Bettina's English Literature teacher told her that she would be 'a good writer'.  Harriet admired her teachers 'from afar'. Lillian's sports teacher was a mentor who wanted her to go to teacher's college and study physical education. Mealmaker's teacher  helped her in Year 11, inviting her home, while another teacher took her out of class and helped with her school work. Sesh's Physics and Maths teacher was a 'massive support'.

Other sources of inspiration included friends and influential public figures. Although Mealmaker's mother had 'given up on me', a friend's mother was a source of support in Year 12. For Rochelle, leaving her home town and living at a city university residence while studying a TAFE course, friends she made there made a difference:

> … I come from a town where everyone becomes a tradesman… my brother's a tradesman, my Dad's a tradesman. Everyone's a tradesman… so I never really thought of education. But then, being among people my own age … they inspired me. They just

made me feel I could do it.  I could actually walk into a uni. Because it's terrifying that stuff.

Lillian gained support from another mother in her mothers' group, while Virginia was influenced by people like Nelson Mandela, who did not take traditional pathways and became successful because they knew more about life.

To summarise, participants experienced positive influences in terms of expectations, provision of support or role models from families, the school environment, friends or others, though family support for some female students from migrant backgrounds was less evident.

### Personal characteristics, including self-concept

Participants conveyed a mixture of determination and self-doubt in relation to education, the latter often resulting from lack of guidance. However, half indicated positive self-concepts as learners (Table 1) and several expressed the conviction that their current enrolment was right for them. For example:

> I'm really passionate about the course that I'm doing! And I know that without a doubt, I'm ready to make a difference (Alex Carole).

> I'm absolutely certain that this is … it (Bettina).

Miranda's independence and positive self-concept developed early, her role in the family making her stable and giving her a sense of obligation ('I was the next in line … when my Mum was out of action'). She felt that 'the expectation that I was smart … went a long way in getting me here because I believed them.' Virginia, valuing the maturity resulting from life's experiences, commented that 'sometimes we're not ready for certain things at certain times in our life. Maybe I would have been a really crap social worker at 21.'  However, she had a sense of social justice from an early age, was never afraid to express her views, and wanted to be a social worker since her first attempt to study social work in her twenties.

Anita also became confident and determined early ('I was lucky because I was so determined'). Similarly, Zelin did not usually experience self-doubt, in choosing her course in Beijing and later deciding to move to Australia, though when commencing university in Beijing she felt 'not good enough' compared with other students with better English-speaking skills. Lam did not consider herself smart but gradually developed independence and, with conflict at home and her brother mentally ill, confidently make the decision to come to Australia ('I get more independent and I think I know what I want').

In contrast, Harriet and Rochelle were much more affected by self-doubt. Harriet was 'completely lost in my early twenties'. Rochelle was very open to the influence of others. She originally wanted to be a vet and began an environmental science course but 'pulled out', commenting: 'I don't know why I decided I wanted study … I never thought I was bright …' Lillian and Marie experienced substantial identity problems as young people. Lillian felt that 'most of my identity was created through other people … I wasn't able to grow an identity from within myself.' However, following early financial independence, she gradually developed 'mental fortitude', 'self-determination' and the ability to 'survive', though not considering herself 'bright'. Marie had 'no concept of myself', as the carer in the family who was 'sidelined too often'. Now, at 49, following a serious illness she states:

> … all my life I've been led along by the nose and given in to what other people wanted. And this is the first time I've said: 'No, this is what I want to do! And this is what I'm going to do!' And no one's going to stop me from doing it. And this is who I am.

Mealmaker's personal characteristics reflect her difficult journey to university. Whatever she did 'was never good enough' and though affected by family difficulties, mental illness and chronic physical health problems, she comments: 'I want to have a degree. I want to prove myself.'

Sesh had no ambitions when young but her high school success led to positive feedback and a positive self-concept as a learner. After her two initial unsuccessful attempts at university, where 'I was supposed to achieve', she gradually developed sufficient self-determination to override her family's influence: 'I don't really care … what they think … it's pure determination now.' Shannon also cannot remember having any ambitions when young but knew that he was 'a people person', who could influence people and situations, and was confident in his learning ability.

To summarise, half of the participants appeared to have always been confident and determined with positive self-concepts as learners, but the others had to overcome considerable self-doubt, and a number of 'false starts', often well into adulthood, before they demonstrated the personal characteristics that allowed them to surmount the family, socio-economic and other difficulties that had affected them.

### Experiences which led to higher education

A combination of life circumstances (involving gradual change or a personal life crisis), personal characteristics and external influences led participants to their current enrolment. In several cases, external factors included the impact of a serendipitous event.

Anita, Lam and Zelin followed traditional routes to university in their home countries. Anita was supported by her single mother, but it was a 'very, very good professor at uni' that led her to Australia to research Aboriginal people and eventually to her current course. Lam became interested in social work as a teenager due to her brother's mental illness. Her growing independence allowed her to overcome conflicts with her father about career options and come to Australia. Working in an elderly daycare centre in the Chinese community then reinforced her desire to study social work. Similarly, Zelin made the independent decision to study social work in Australia, recognising this as a valuable profession, still new in China.

Significant illnesses impacted on the decision to study of three participants. Mealmaker overcame mental and physical problems to pursue her goal of having a degree and proving herself. Marie's illness prompted her to take her life into her own hands and assert herself. Alex Carole's health crisis resulted in her encounter with an 'inspirational social worker', which led her to think: 'I can do something better. I can do something good.'

Bettina, Sesh and Rochelle were also influenced by serendipitous encounters. Bettina was working overseas as a social work assistant when 'my boss said I was just made for this sort of work', leading to her application for enrolment. Similarly, Sesh was working at a European childcare centre when her boss said: 'We're creating a position for you in custody disputes … you're the best person we've got that doesn't cause arguments.' Rochelle, while searching for life direction, was influenced by an 'inspirational' university staff member who said: 'Oh, you should study something'. Subsequent mentoring at university led to her current enrolment.

Participants influenced by a series of life experiences included Shannon who attended university after finishing school but dropped out when he became a parent in his second year. He began work in a timber mill, took on occupational health and safety and training roles, moving to a supported employment facility (a timber mill where people with disabilities worked) and becoming interested in disadvantage. This led to a job establishing an agency for people with disabilities. At an inter-agency training day, social workers suggested 'perhaps I should think about doing social work.' He comments that: 'I guess if I didn't have children, I probably wouldn't have been driven to set myself up.' Virginia took even longer, having married and had three children and emigrated to Ireland and then Australia. However, she 'always knew that I wanted to do it', and though unable to complete the social work course she began in her twenties, her family's situation has now made it possible. Lillian also had a long

journey into social work and her family circumstances have made it 'the right time for me'. Having worked since she was 15, she realised as she grew older that 'you needed an education to have ...autonomy.' After her second marriage at 40, and the birth of her daughter at 42, it was 'now or never'.

Harriet's pathway was characterised by 'crises' during three previous enrolments. She made a 'conscious decision' to return to study later, becoming aware of social work when she enrolled in her first degree. Miranda gradually accumulated qualifications leading to her current degree. Contributing influences included abuse and neglect of her sister's child when Miranda was a teenager which resulted in the child being removed, and some personal assessment at 15 or 16 ('I started to look at my life and look at my friends and think mine was really different to theirs'). Another important influence was encouragement by a Salvation Army Officer at the job network to apply for a government job. This was unrelated to anything she had previously contemplated and eventually led her to social work.

To summarise, the enrolment of participants was the result of personal characteristics (pre-existing or evolving) that allowed them to overcome adverse circumstances or to take advantage of influences or events that now made it possible.

## Discussion

Determining the extent to which the pathways to higher education of these students were influenced by transformative experiences involves distinguishing between perspective transformation, as proposed by Mezirow and others, and experiences which do not actually involve transformation. Table 2 summarises the outcomes of our analysis of evidence of perspective transformation from the students' stories which we explain in the discussion that follows.

Table 2:   *The role of perspective transformation in influencing participants' pathways to higher education*

| Evidence of perspective transformation | No conclusive evidence of perspective transformation |
|---|---|
| Health crisis provoked a disorienting dilemma (Alex Carole and Marie) | Followed traditional routes to university in their home countries (Anita, Lam and Zelin) |
| Comments by others provoked a disorienting dilemma (Bettina and Sesh) | Disorienting influences occurred prior to adulthood (Lam and Miranda) |
| Gradual transformation of psychological habits of mind (Harriet, Lillian, Rochelle and Shannon) | Enrolment made possible by circumstances but the result of a long interest (Mealmaker and Virginia) |

Evidence of perspective transformation is revealed in the stories of Alex Carole, Bettina, Harriet, Lillian, Marie, Rochelle, Sesh and Shannon, in each case resulting from transformation of psychological habits of mind. Alex Carole's and Marie's health crises suggest the effect of a disorientating dilemma, causing them to reconceptualise their future and allowing Marie to overcome her perceived lack of a self-concept. The comments made by their overseas employers similarly affected Bettina and Sesh. For Sesh, the transformative impact is evident in her new determination to break free from her family. However, Lillian's story reflects a gradual transformation of psychological habits of mind. With no ambition to study until she was about 30, she 'needed to do a lot of identity work' to achieve the autonomy she sought. Changes in circumstances supported her enrolment. Harriet, Shannon and Rochelle also indicate gradual development of habits of mind to envisage themselves as social workers. Shannon and Rochelle both responded to serendipitous encounters. Shannon's path was partly driven by his family circumstances while changes in Rochelle's self-concept appear to be based on emotional reactions, rather than critical reflection.

In contrast, there is no conclusive evidence of perspective transformation in the stories told by Anita, Lam, Mealmaker,

Miranda, Virginia and Zelin.  Anita and Zelin developed habits of mind from an early age that did not require a change in perspective for them to enter higher education. Following traditional routes to university, they were arguably least affected by transformative experiences, although continuing their education in Australia was not originally anticipated. The professor who influenced Anita did not result in a change of perspective, but rather encouraged her to follow her existing interests in a particular way.  Zelin discovered social work as a career option but did not indicate a major change in perspective driven by critical reflection or other powerful internal changes. Lam followed a similar traditional route to university and although influenced by her brother's mental illness and the emergence of sufficient independence to break free from her father's authority, these changes occurred prior to adulthood. Similarly, Miranda was primarily influenced by pre-adult factors, though the impact of the Salvation Army Officer may indicate a transformative experience if it occurred in adulthood. A long interest in social justice and social work led to Virginia's enrolment, supported by her current family circumstances. Mealmaker also had a long interest in disability (and a need to prove herself), and her enrolment resulted primarily from overcoming the barriers she faced. Thus, with the possible exception of Miranda, the enrolment of these students does not seem to be primarily the result of re-examination of habits of mind that transform points of view as a feature of perspective transformation in adulthood.

## Conclusion

This paper has identified the role of perspective transformation in influencing the pathways to higher education of a group of students from diverse backgrounds. Conclusions have been drawn from the stories participants told during the first phase of a longitudinal research project, which follows their progress from enrolment to success. Key factors that influenced them on their journeys to

university included socio-economic background, family difficulties, gender, the effect of being first in family to enter higher education, migration, location and experiences of schooling. Conclusions have been informed by aspects of Mezirow's theory (including recent developments and those that have their origins in early explanations of the theory), along with other contributions that have broadened understandings of perspective transformation.

Evidence from the first phase of the project suggests that, for some participants, the decision to enrol was not primarily the effect of perspective transformation, but rather the result of other aspects of their lives. Where transformative experiences occur, some changes are gradual and some are triggered by a disorienting dilemma. Transformative experiences all involve a change in psychological habits of mind and usually do not appear to have involved discourse as a form of dialogue involving rational assessment of beliefs, feelings and values. The focus is more on personal change than exploration of its social dimensions, although the latter are often evident from the family context.

The role of narrative inquiry has been important in nurturing discourse, allowing participants to articulate their experiences through their stories and 'offer a perspective about their perspective, an essential condition for transformative learning' (Mezirow 2003: 61). By encouraging participants to reflect on, explore and share their stories, narrative inquiry provides a means of developing their understanding of themselves, uncovering meanings through dialogue with interviewers. The tools of discourse and content analysis were used to identify themes in relation to the study aims. This study suggests the potential for narrative  approaches to foster students' critical reflection during their course of study, potentially leading to greater evidence of transformation of other dimensions of habits of mind (sociolinguistic, moral-ethical, epistemic, philosophical

and aesthetic), especially if learning is embedded in a context that supports the establishment of relationships which facilitate discourse.

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