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"I generally say I am a mum first . . . but I'm studying at uni": The narratives of first-in-family, female caregivers transitioning into an Australian university

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Keywords

mum, am, say, generally, i, but, m, first, studying, australian, uni, narratives, family, female, caregivers, transitioning, into, university

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'I generally say I am a Mum first... but I'm studying at uni': the narratives of first-in-family, female caregivers transitioning into an Australian university.

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Abstract

The university student experience is both evolving and diverse. Increasing numbers of older students are accessing universities worldwide and also, access for student equity groups is a key policy driver in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, United States and others. However, amongst this change and flux, how individuals manage their transition into this environment with reference to new and existing identities is worthy of further exploration. This article draws on two separate but complementary Australian research projects that explored the experiences of students who had all commenced university after a significant gap in learning. The participants that feature in this article are all female caregivers who also identified as being first-in-family to come to university. The article seeks to explore how the women managed this move into this tertiary environment and also the ways in which student and caregiving identities interacted. The article presents narrative vignettes derived from the collective voices of participants, each of which explores key facets of this return to learning.

Key words: First-in-family students; Student caregivers; narrative vignettes; collective stories; gender roles

Introduction

Globally, university environments have undergone profound change with an increasing number of students who are older and returning to education after a significant gap in learning. For example, within the Australian context, the numbers of older students have grown by 25% (2006 -2011) and the average age of an Australian student is now 26 years and 11 months (ACER, 2013). For older students, this return to education is both structured and motivated by work, family, life transitions and social roles (Merriam, 1994), such contributing factors can result in different attitudes to learning when compared to the younger cohort. As Cox and Ebbers (2010) explain:

...adult students bring with them different and multiple experiences, roles and responsibilities than those of traditional age students...experience different transitions...and have a different focus.' (p. 241)

Many of these adult returners are women and in some countries, women outnumber men in higher education institutions (Wakeling & Kyriacou, 2010). In the USA, the number of women attending postsecondary education institutions has grown from 29% in 1947 to 56.8% in 2012 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). In the UK in the period 2010-11, 10% more female students (55%) were enrolled in an undergraduate degree compared to their male counterparts (Ratcliffe, 2013). The most recent statistics from the Australian Centre for

Educational Research (ACER, 2013) similarly reflect this shift in student demographics. Between the years 2006–2011, the number of women in higher education has also grown and in 2011, comprised 57.2 percent of the total university population.

The research outlined in this article sought to explore the experiences of older women returning to university, with particular reference to how the women managed the varying and sometimes competing roles this decision engendered. Drawing on students' stories, the purpose of this article is to examine how this group of women transitioned into the university environment with specific reference to their student and caregiving identities. The research focussed on how gender identities, caregiving roles and learning interact for older female students returning to education. The focus on this particular group is based upon the growing number of female students who are returning to education, particularly in Australia where this study took place.

The article is based upon two research projects that explored the experiences of first generation returners, the focus will be on those women with caregiving responsibilities in recognition that this cohort often has additional pressures to contend with when moving from the domestic to the educational domain. Sandra Acker (1994) argues that educational research should treat women as a discrete group without losing sight '...of the diversity of women and the dangers of generalization' (p. 158). Hence women should not be solely bracketed by gender but instead recognised as unique social beings that are similarly dealing with gendered positioning, such as the role of caregiver. This study adopts a feminist perspective in the sense that one of the main objectives is to define how women '...are understood as competent subjects getting by, creating and surviving within hostile and limiting environments' (Alway, 1995, p. 222). Drawing on two studies occurring at different times, places and spaces also indicates the enduring nature of women's experiences of caregiving and learning.

To effectively explore the transition into university for this group of first year female students, the emotionality of this movement must be recognised. Focusing on the stories that female students told in interviews concerning how they transitioned into and managed their university experience provides one way to explore this field in an embodied sense. Rather

than present individual and decontextualised quotes from the participants, the narrative material is presented collectively in the form of vignettes. Drawing on the work of Richardson (1988, 1990, 1997), these vignettes have been written as ‘collective stories’ with multiple storytellers in recognition of the ‘social bondedness’ that existed between these women (Richardson, 1988, p. 201). In order to frame these vignettes, a description of the research context (i.e the Australian higher education system) will first be presented, followed by an analysis of the scholarly literature in this field. Following the vignettes, a discussion of implications and some recommendations for future research and practice will be provided.

Setting the context: Higher education in Australia

Like other countries, the Australian higher education system has undergone significant changes in recent years particularly with the introduction of participation benchmarks for student equity groups². Based upon The Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), the previous Australian Government (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) established the objective of 40% university participation amongst all 25-34 year olds by 2025. To achieve this goal, a common discourse has emerged around the need to ‘raise aspirations’ amongst individuals, encouraging both young and old to consider post-compulsory schooling as a viable future option. The most recent report on higher education participation (Kemp & Norton, 2014) indicates that participation continues to grow, aided by the introduction of a demand driven system in 2012. This system allows universities to remove existing caps on admission numbers, which had previously been set centrally by DEEWR, and thereby enroll students according to individual institutional capacity. Undoubtedly, this competitive uncapped educational market will result in further increases in admissions as institutions are able to increase the number of offers within degree programs. However, with the predicted decline in the numbers of students who enter university directly from high school over the

² Australian identified equity groups include students from low SES backgrounds, Indigenous students, students with disabilities, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, students from rural or remote regions and women in non-traditional areas of study.

next 10-15 years, many of these new enrollments may well be derived from older age groups (ACER, 2011).

However, the anticipated continuing growth in student numbers accessing university does not necessarily equate to educational success within this environment. Instead, student attrition or dropout in Australian universities consistently hovers around the 18% with some institutions indicating that student attrition regularly exceeds 25% of the whole population (Department of Industry, 2012). First-in-family students are particularly susceptible to this phenomenon, Coates and Ransom (2011) report that 26% of first-in-family students consider leaving university in their first year of study, a figure that increases to 34% for later year students. This pattern is repeated in other countries including the United States (Chen, 2005; Ishitani, 2006) and also Canada (Lehmann, 2009) where statistics on this student cohort are collected systematically.

Much of the existing literature and research in this field focuses on first generation students who have just left school, this is despite the high numbers of older first-in-family students who are accessing higher education. Arguably, this latter cohort has additional complexities to manage in their transition to this educational environment, particularly if they are combining study with family responsibilities. Whilst this study is set in Australia, the experiences of older, first-in-family, female students with caring responsibilities should be explored in more depth and this study offered insight into the lived realities of this group, experiences that are not necessarily bounded by geographical considerations. This article focuses on how the women described the interaction between the home-place and the university with specific reference to caregiving and identity work. The following section provides an overview of relevant literature in this regard.

Literature review

Returning to higher education after a significant gap in learning has been described in the literature as being 'risky' for older learners (Reay, 2003), particularly women and those for whom attending university deviates from the norm. Te Riele (2004) argues that exposure

to risk can be mediated by access to 'social and material resources' (p. 254) so for those students who are first-in-family or from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the perception and possibility of risk is arguably exacerbated. Some of the risks associated with this 'second-chance' journey (Giles, 1990) may include rupture with existing social and family networks (Brine & Waller, 2004; Stone & O'Shea, 2013), the difficulties of managing competing demands (Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Stone, 2008), emotional and financial challenges (Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Hinton-Smith, 2009) as well as the risks associated with managing identity formation (Johnston & Merrill, 2009).

The literature in this field has also indicated the very different levels of risk for older female students compared to men. Cox and Ebbers (2010) identify how the challenges faced by female students are often 'social in nature' (p. 241) derived from the responsibilities of being a caregiver and also, student. Learning is frequently coordinated around the responsibilities of caring for family and the home place; this can be a fragmented experience as the women move between the 'greedy institutions' (Acker, 1983) of family and university. In Edwards' (1990) study on female learners with children, the students experienced disjuncture both inside the institution and also, within the family and community, as '...other mothers did not do the sort of thing they were doing' (Edwards, 1993, p. 144). This return to education was translated and understood in terms of the woman's role as caregiver rather than simply as learner.

Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008) argue that one of the 'key mediators' (p. 623) in the experiences of older students returning to education is the responsibility of caregiving. Whilst the term caregiving is somewhat contested, this article adopts a multi-dimensional understanding of care as:

...a physical and emotional practice, involving a moral orientation...which is located within gendered (and racialised) normative frameworks around obligations and responsibilities, particularly in relation to family. (Alsop et al., 2008, p. 625)

Whilst women do not always conduct caring, this has been characterised as 'feminized work' (Datta, McIlwaine, Evans, Herbert, May, & Wills, 2003) and this assumed responsibility can

be regarded as a gendered disadvantage for female learners. The role of caregiver also impacts upon the identity work conducted by female learners, adding to the complexity of this transition into higher education. As Gouthro (2006) explains:

Women often enter into education with the conflicting goals of wanting to attain a sense of independence and develop a sense of identity that is not determined by relationships with others (i.e. as a wife or mother) without rejecting the importance of these roles in their lives. (p. 11)

Such multiplicities of roles can create contested identities, whereby the student identity is challenging and fraught with difficulties.

Yet the challenging nature of this return to education can also create opportunity, as higher education is a 'space' where individuals can explore alternative identity positions to those available within the social or familial environment. Pascall and Cox's (1993) study on married women who returned to education indicated how participants perceived learning as providing a stronger identity when 'being a housewife failed to perform that function' (p. 76). Hinton-Smith's (2009) participants also experienced this change in a qualitative sense; university provided an embodied experience manifested by dramatic improvements to self-esteem and self-identity. However, the multiple identity positions, both new and existing, did exact emotional return; Hinton-Smith's participants, who were male and female, largely 'felt exhausted by being torn in many directions' (p. 120). This author concluding that it was the role of caregiver that was the salient factor in the depth of emotionality associated with this return rather than this being a gendered experience.

While this type of emotional 'exhaustion' also underscores the challenges that Brine and Waller (2004) described in relation to their female participants, these authors disagree with Hinton-Smith's conclusions; arguing that this return is a gendered experience as obstacles and limitations are greatly exaggerated for women. Becoming a student challenges existing feminine identity positions that embrace the ideologies of (hetero) sexuality, maternalism and domesticity. The learner identity may threaten the mother identity, as it is perceived as 'outside' the ideology of the feminine. George and Maguire (1998) also report

how some of their female students negotiated the mother-student identity as either 'playing down' the maternal or in some cases, refusing it by keeping both selves separate.

Adopting a 'close-up' analysis provides insights into the often invisible undercurrents that exist in women's lives, exploring how this experience is gendered provides further depth to the analysis. Whilst previous studies have included male and female caregivers (Hinton-Smith, 2009; Lovell, 2014; Stone, 2008, amongst others), this article focuses on the intricacies of gender, caregiving and learning, responding to Lovell's (2014) call for studies that explore 'who these parents are and what their needs are to enhance motivation and achieve success' (p. 374) within the higher education domain.

The Studies

This paper draws upon findings from two studies conducted with first-in-family students, both of which were informed by a narrative inquiry approach. The following sections will provide an overview of this methodology before exploring the particular approach to data presentation adopted in this paper. Details about the research design and methods will then be described.

Narrative inquiry and the use of vignettes

Narratives can offer the possibility of embodied presentations of life; assisting understanding of how individuals in all their incongruence and individuality act in their particular social worlds. Ellis and Bochner (2002) suggest that narrative offers the potential for readers to 'enter empathetically into worlds of experience different from their own' and enable a level of self-analysis and identification whereby 'readers become co-performers, examining themselves through the evocative power of the narrative text' (p. 748). Similarly, Polkinghorne (1988) emphasises how 'storied memories' are able to '...retain the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivational meaning connected with it' (p. 11). Such depth can assist in understanding how individuals make sense of existing identities and assist in the construction of new or emerging identities. The narrative vignettes presented in this paper are replete with the personal and by retaining a

narrative or story avoid presenting disembodied data. This is a dynamic approach to narrative analysis where various data elements are coherently presented so that the reader can interpret these experiences in a meaningful way.

Constructing Collective Vignettes

Ely, Vinz, Downing & Auzul (1997) define vignettes as presenting an ‘interpretation of the person, experience, or situation’ (p. 70), but concede that researchers need to be cautious about ‘speaking’ for the participants they are researching. In order to avoid what Ely et al. (1997) define as ‘co-opting’ voice, the vignettes presented in this article borrow from Richardson’s (1997) ‘collective stories’ in that each moves away from the idea of the isolated or unique narrator and instead recognises how individuals are located within broader social and cultural frameworks. As Richardson (1997) explains: ‘I think of similarly situated individuals who may or may not be aware of their life affinities as co-participants in a collective story’ (p. 14). Hence the focus on the collective story is on the narrating of the ‘experiences of the social category’ (p. 32) rather than the individual in isolation thereby providing a means to join ‘separate individuals into a shared consciousness’. (Richardson, 1997, p. 33). The vignettes in this article do differ from Richardson’s collective stories in one sense as each quote is identified by the speaker rather than the multiple voices being presented as one narrator. This was a deliberate choice in order to acknowledge the unique biographies of these women whilst simultaneously identifying the commonalities of experience.

Choosing to present data in this style reflects a desire to enable the reader to enter into the lived experience of the narrators. Framed by multiple voices, the following vignettes were ‘configured’ in order to give unity and meaning to the data. Commencing with a question in mind, I interrogated analytic codes and categorisations to seek material that addressed this question and provided the basis for a story. These are not objective representations but rather constructions; there is no neutrality here, as the data requires interaction between subjects and researchers. Instead, the vignettes are ‘compositions’,

retrospective explanations of 'the happening that is the topic of the inquiry' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 19).

Creating collective vignettes is not a singular process but rather this is recursive, a circular movement between my own self-narrative and the narratives of others, in creating these stories I have drawn upon my own 'narrative compass' (Bresler, 2006, p. 28). This compass reflects my own positioning as a woman who was also first-in-family to attend university. Having studied as a parent of young children, I also understand first-hand the tenacity required to manage the complex and competing demands of family and university. This understanding is further enriched by my knowledge of universities as I have worked in a variety of professional and teaching roles within higher education over the last two decades.

My positioning as a woman, a student, a staff member, a parent, a wife and a daughter undoubtedly influenced what I 'saw' within the data; I came to this study with certain preconceptions some of which were subconsciously hidden. Recognising and highlighting prejudices can provoke deeper analysis and engagement with data, in both studies this process was assisted by keeping a reflective journal and regular memo writing. The journal not only detailed personal reflections and assumptions derived from the research but also the act of writing assisted in refining and disclosing theoretical implications, whilst the memos assisted in capturing observations and insights. In this way, I have adopted an approach to 'bracketing' that is ongoing (Rolls & Relf, 2006) and recursive, as I continually returned to both the journal and the memos throughout the research process.

During the research process, I also endeavoured to destabilise the researcher's privileged position through various research strategies. For example, as a staff member, I recognised the need to avoid assuming a shared understanding of university language or practices. Adopting an open-ended approach to interviewing and positioning participants in the role of expert, provided opportunity for individuals to reconstruct their own experiences unencumbered by interviewer expectations (Seidman, 1998). This approach also assisted in maintaining my curiosity and open-mindedness about the field. In the presentation of the data

my own voice is included alongside the participants, I have not removed myself from the text instead these are co-constructions.

Research design

The two research studies were both conducted with first year students, who identified as first in the family to come to university. Study (A) was conducted with 17 women in 2007 and explored their experiences of transitioning and engaging in the higher education environment. Interview questions included: *'How do you anticipate your life will change now that you are a university student?'*; *'If asked, would you feel comfortable describing yourself as a university student? Why/why not – what other terms would you use to describe yourself?'* Study (B) was conducted in 2013 and sought to build upon the findings of Study (A) with particular reference to how attending university impacted upon the family and community of students. This study recruited 28 participants, both male and female, interviewing them in the first year of undergraduate studies. The questions asked during the interview included: *'How has studying impacted upon your family life?'*; *'Have your relationships with others close to you changed since you started at university?'*; *'How is university spoken about in your household?'*

The participants in Study (A) were recruited via a short presentation at the university commencement ceremony, which marks the official start of the university academic year. Once the official proceedings were completed, students were provided with a flyer and asked to register their interest via email or in-person at the student support services building. There were 23 initial expressions of interest but three were in the second year of studies, two withdrew before commencing their studies and one had a parent with a university degree, leaving the final 17 who participated throughout the year. Study (B) sent an email invitation to first year students who had disclosed on their enrollment form that neither parent had attained university level qualifications, a random selection of 800 students was sent this email invite which led to 63 responses and a total of 28 interviews. While this was a diverse cohort and also derived from two different institutions all were similarly white Anglo-Australian, first-in-family and also, in the first year of university study. The focus on first year students

was deliberate in order to enable comparative reflections on life both before university enrollment and also during the initial stages of attendance.

This article is based upon the interviews conducted with the women with children in both studies (n=23). Table (1) provides an overview of both research projects whilst Table (2) provides the demographic details of the female participants whose stories feature in this article.

Table (1): Overview of Study (A) and Study (B)

	Participants interviewed	Research Design
Study A	17 women All identified as being first-in-family 13 had children	Four interviews conducted throughout the academic year Semi-structured interviews
Study B	28 students (7 males and 21 Females) Identified as first-in-family * 10 female students had children	One interview conducted at the initial stages of the year. Semi-structured interviews

**In interviews, two of the women identified that a partner was currently attending or had attended university given that no other members of the family (parents / sibling/ children) had attended university, I have retained their data.*

Table (2): Details of Participants

Study	Name	Age	Children	Studying	Relationship Status
A	Catherine	44	1	B Nursing	Single (Divorced)
A	Clara	23	1	B Education	Single
A	Heidi	47	3	B Arts	Single (Divorced)
A	Jane	32	3	B Education	Partnered
A	Katie	33	2	B Oral Health	Partnered
A	Kira	38	5	B Psychology	Single (Separated)
A	Linda	32	2	B Education	Single (Divorced)
A	Nicki	33	1	B Education	Single (Separated)
A	Sheila	31	2	B Education	Partnered
A	Stephanie	34	4	Access Course	Partnered
A	Sue	39	2	B Education	Partnered
A	Susie	38	2	B Soc Science	Partnered
A	Vicky	45	3	B Nursing	Partnered
B	Ann	36	2	B Science	Partnered
B	Elaine	36	5	B Commerce	Single (Divorced)
B	Eva	48	2	B Nursing	Single (Widowed)
B	Lena	43	2	B Arts	Single (Divorced)
B	Natalie	43	2	B Arts	Single (Divorced)
B	Nina	36	3	B Arts	Partnered (Partner been to university)
B	Rose	28	2	B Arts	Partnered
B	Sam	44	2	B Arts -Creative	Partnered (Partner been to university)
B	Betty	28	1	B Arts	Partnered

B	Yvonne	45	2	B Arts	Partnered
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The average age of participants was 37 years with most having either 2 or 3 children, a total of ten women were single parents and the majority were either studying an Arts Degree (n = 8) or Education (n=6).

Data Collection

Both studies used semi-structured interviews; Study A conducted a total of 65 interviews, each participant³ engaged in four interviews over the year whilst Study B included 28 interviews, one interview with each participant. The interview data was recorded and transcribed, all the interviews were transcribed by the researcher in Study (A) and each set of interview transcripts formed the basis for the next set of interviews. The findings from Study (A) informed the focus of Study (B), which sought to expand upon emergent themes including how returning to education impacted upon discourses of learning within the household. As mentioned, for the purposes of this article I have drawn only on the narratives of women with children (both partnered and single) in order to provide some coherence to the following vignettes. However, it should be noted that caregiving was not limited to child dependents, many of the women also made reference to looking after elderly parents and relatives.

The two studies occurred in two different locations and were separated by six years, (2007 and 2013 respectively) but the locations and participants shared many commonalities. Firstly, both studies occurred at regional institutions, in Study (A) this was a small campus (student numbers = 3,500) whereas Study (B) was conducted at a larger university site (student numbers = 24,000). Both institutions have large numbers of older students and both have female populations that exceed 50% of the total student cohort. Both are also located in regions that are characterised by educational and economical disadvantage. For example, in Study (A) the catchment area for the university has lower than state averages of employment and also, educational (both school and university) qualifications; statistics indicate that only 9.4% of the population has a bachelor's degree compared to 14.6% for the nearest

³ Except one who left the university in the first semester after the first interview occurred and was not contactable thereafter.

metropolitan area and 16.4% for the state (NSW Regional Labour Force Profiles, 2008). Study (B)'s region has higher rates of unemployment when compared to state and national levels, 6% for the region compared to 5.4% for the state and 5.2% nationally.

Given the institutional and geographic similarities, these two studies while quite separate were also very complementary enabling analysis of data across two discrete sites. This complementary nature was further enriched as Study (B) built upon emergent themes in Study (A); enabling interviews to focus on specific areas that had emerged from the previous study. The following section outlines the approach taken to data analysis, both data sets were analysed separately and then combined to provide rich deep description.

Data Analysis

Whilst both studies did not set out to explicitly explore identity formation, the semi-structured nature of the interviews and inductively framed analysis, enabled conceptual categories to emerge from the data. The data shaped and defined the interpretative framework rather than being driven by preconceived ideas or theories. This was an iterative process, informed by a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Interview material from both studies was imported into NVivo (10) and the initial stage of analysis involved line-by-line analysis so that thematic categories emerged inductively from the data. Drawing upon the query function in NVivo (10) enabled connections to be made between data sets and across categories. These codes and categories also enabled exploration of specific areas of interests and this was complemented by a narrative analysis, which particularly focused on stories related to coming to university as well as narratives that explored facets of this experience. This approach recognised that events are 'enacted in storied moments of time and space' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 25) and while these stories are personal they also reflect wider social conditions.

These codes and categorisations were also 'interrogated' with various conceptual lenses, as the data was not perceived as indicating one absolute truth but rather as continually

evolving. Thus, true data saturation never occurred instead there was always something additional that could be gleaned as data was approached from multiple angles. Some of the lenses applied to the data sets included concepts related to cultural and social capitals; identity and gender roles; social stratification and transformation. Triangulating data from two different sources combined with the application of different conceptual lenses also provided a means to test the rigour and validity of the findings but always recognising that this research is limited by its focus on small numbers of students as well as historical and cultural specificity.

Collective vignettes of female caregivers attending university

The following collective vignettes highlight participants' constructions of their own social realities, noting how 'the narrative text refuses the impulse to abstract and explain, stressing the journey over the destination, and thus eclipses the scientific illusion of control and mastery' (Ellis & Bochner, 2002, p. 744). Similar to Mishler (1986), the participants in both studies provided storied responses to the questions that were asked in interviews, these stories were further encouraged by invitations to elaborate or explore areas not initially anticipated by the interview schedule.

Including multiple voices distills an essence, which does not assume that there is only one perspective or lived reality but instead recognises the multiplicity of experience. These collective vignettes recognise what Van Manen (2011) terms as the 'vocatio' of text in a phenomenological sense, which is the powerful nature of the written word to 'speak' to us:

The aim of the vocatio is to let things "speak" or be "heard" by bringing them into nearness through the vocative power of language. (Van Manen, 2011, para.1)

The vignettes combine various voices into a 'unified' narrative (Richardson, 1997, p. 21) reflecting stories told during interviews. While not all the women feature in the presented vignettes, many expressed similar contours of life. Drawing upon 'multiple voices and direct quotations' (Richardson, 1988, p. 205) expresses a duality whereby participants both speak

for themselves and also for the researcher to ‘speak of and for them’ (Richardson, 1988, p. 205). Each vignette will be presented consecutively followed by discussion and conclusions.

Vignette (1): Returning university: Reactions, reasons and realities

The decision to go to university is generally one that is influenced by personal ambitions and goals as well as the perspectives and opinions of others. Rose, who was married with two children described how she had ‘...always wanted to go to university; didn’t think I could do it straight out of school. I now have a husband and my life is kind of set now...It’s time for me to do what I want to do now.’ For Rose this decision is very much defined as a personal life goal but not all the women considered their entitlement to university in quite the same sense. For some, university offered the opportunity to provide a much more stable economic future for both themselves and their children, this was particularly the case for the sole parents many of whom were making financial sacrifices to attend university at this stage in their life. Clara, a single parent of a young child, was concerned that her daughter would not be disadvantaged by this decision to return: ‘[I’m] just trying to make sure that she is not, what’s the word, disadvantaged in the school just her uniform and the types of things that you have to have I don’t want her not to have those and feel like she is different and out of place...’ For a number of the women this decision was foreshadowed by feelings of guilt and also, deeply held uncertainty about whether they deserved to be there. Yvonne, a mother of two, described herself as a ‘fraud’ and admitted to feeling that ‘I’m not good enough to be here. I don’t have the brains to be here’. Similarly, Jane explained how ‘...sometimes I feel a bit inferior to the other people in the way that they write and use good words but I suppose I can always look them up in a dictionary (laughs)...’.

There is a sense of fragility in some of these women’s stories, the decision to come to university has had deeply felt repercussions. In some cases, this decision was kept hidden, a secret not to be shared with others for fear of negative reactions, such trepidation voiced perhaps due to the fledging nature of this learning identity. Keeping silent protects us from others who might not be supportive. For Natalie, it the expectation of ‘judgement’ that made her reluctant to discuss her return to university, she had not ‘told many people at all; I tend to

not tell people much at all anymore', when asked about this silence, she simply stated: "It's judgment I think. It's always that judgment..."

Nicki, a sole parent who had recently separated from an emotionally abusive partner, also reflected upon the silence and secrecy of this return to education, firstly explaining how her 'husband does not know' she continued by musing how she 'will be curious to find out what he says when I actually tell him, he's the one that I am a bit nervous about.' Her fears about his reaction seem related to the fact that she had placed their young son in childcare in order to attend university as she explained: 'he will probably use the five days in daycare against me... he's the only one I can think of that I might get a negative response from – maybe that's why I haven't said anything to him cos I don't want to hear that negative.'

Whilst Nicki adopted silence as a means to preempt the possibility of negative reactions, Sue's discussions with her husband revealed how he 'was more anti-me coming to uni, ya know worried about the workload, the pressure, how it'd affect our house and stuff like that'. Stephanie also described how her husband was 'initially very reluctant' about the possibility of her attending university and being able to fit 'the study in with work and family'; once she has proved herself able to fit 'it all in and getting them all to work together, then he's quite happy now to let me go ahead and do that so.' The importance of the women balancing the university work and household duties was echoed in many of these stories. Betty explained how her partner: 'wasn't sure because it did take a lot of time up so he was sort of "Oh yes, oh no, oh yes". I don't know; it takes a lot of time up and I have work as well and I've got a seven year old'. Betty's move from hairdressing and bar work into university had placed a great deal of strain on this relationship: 'we're sort of off and on at the moment'.

Such reactions are partially the result of the clearly defined social and gender roles that these women were expected to adopt. This stratification limited personal horizons and marked this decision to attend university as not only different to deeply embedded gender norms but also, a possible threat to expected life course. Expectations around role behaviour were often deeply entrenched in family and community. Lena, a sole parent with two children,

described how when she was growing up ‘it was basically almost taught that university was only for those that were really smart, extremely smart’. This boundary setting did not cease in her youth as ‘people have actually turned around and some actually said a few years ago: “You’ll never go to university”. Same when they’d turn around and say “You’ll never own a house”. Sorry, I’m at uni and I own a house’. Similarly, when asked to reflect upon early experiences of learning, Sam struggles to find words to describe just how unobtainable university seemed in her youth: ‘I lived a very sort of [pause] well, having five brothers, a very male-dominated [pause] my father was very [pause] he didn’t have any expectations of me going to university or encouraging me’. The gender stratifications in Nina’s family were also unambiguous, the men were ‘...all trades and all us girls were always just taught that our place is in the home, that’s where we should be because university isn’t for people like us’.

For these women, moving into this learning environment provoked a range of reactions from others. This was often construed as a transgression, a movement beyond perceived boundaries. These reactions were not simply based upon the financial or relational repercussions of this decision but also deeply embedded perceptions of place, role and status. As caregivers, the women were largely expected to manage both the demands of home and university in congruence, a further dimension in their journey to becoming a student.

Vignette (2): Managing the movement between home and university

Each of these women reflected upon a range of strategies they had adopted in order to manage the competing responsibilities of being a student and a caregiver; this required deliberate and planned strategies in order to maintain equilibrium in both domains. Demarcating time and space provided one way to minimize disruption and enable productivity, as Rose explained: ‘When I’m here at uni, I try and use that day the best I can to get as much as I can get done ... be as productive as I can otherwise when you get home it’s a bit hard to concentrate.’ This is a difficult ‘balancing act’ that has high emotional stakes as the women describe their attempts to limit the impact on family, for Elaine she had to simply learn to ‘fit it all in and manage it or it was just going to all fall apart... You either can do it or

you can't'. Maintaining boundaries between home and university can be very problematic, for Yvonne the decision to avoid 'opening books' on the access weekends with her children had high 'costs', resulting in increased pressure during the week.

Attending university also required making sacrifices, not only missing out on social activities but also the neglect of more fundamental activities, often related to the care of children. Nina's three sons are 'taking a backseat' and 'they don't get as much attention from mum as what they did' which means that she is 'not sure how their schooling is going at the moment'. Similarly, Ann described how her children have realized '...that I'm not always there. That's hard for them because I have always been there...I've always done everything for them and now they've had to walk themselves to school and get themselves home from school and they're really feeling it'. Whilst Katie's children 'are suffering a little bit today [laughs] we had the washing in the dryer this morning but they'll live'.

The management of competing roles and also, the perceived need to limit impact on home life exaggerated the emotional toll of attending university. Yvonne described her experience of being a student as 'horrible, absolutely horrible', explaining how she suffered from anxiety as '...your life is not your own' when attempting 'to manage home life and uni life and trying to be organized'. Similarly, Sam reflected upon how she has become 'angrier. I'm more anxious because I've always got something on the back of my mind. Like I know that I've got two 750 word essays due next week so I know that I've got to do those and I get frustrated when I've got to do the washing up, I get frustrated when, you know, these every day chores I have to do. People turn around to me and say "Just live in a dirty house. It's okay", and I said "No, I can't live that way. I can't live that way. I can't live with dirty floors". I love walking around on a floor when there's no sand on the floor'.

Stephanie, a mother of five children, described how the pressures of managing a household and also university studies led her to consider whether she could 'get in a car and drive off and not come back' but continues by admitting that 'reality kicks in that you can't just get up and run away every time something gets tough.' Multiple demands were encountered by all the women and these provoked a range of responses, some strategic, some

emotional and some appeared to be 'chaotic'. Ann worked nights, is a parent to two teenage boys and is undertaking studies in Psychology, she outlined how she 'work[s] four nights a week so it's come home from uni, get ready for work and off I go. I'm still cooking dinner in between so it's pretty chaotic'. Nina explained how '...we don't have fresh cakes anymore. We have packets of chips instead' and while her fellow learners were going out for a drink she was 'going to clean the house because it hasn't got done for a while. I haven't had a quilt on my bed for three days'. Similarly, Eva described how returning to learning 'impacts dinnertime and things. If I've got a lot on, it's toast but I'm always aware of just what we eat and when we eat and then I know when baked dinners are due'. As caregivers and university students, managing the various parts of life was not only complex but also required emotionally charged renegotiations in relation to self and others.

Discussion

These two vignettes are not transparent texts and only offer a partial view of this reality, albeit one that is created from a multiplicity of voices, each producing a slightly different perspective on what is there. By drawing on multiple voices in each vignette the intention is to present the 'experiences of a social category' rather than simply retell the story of one individual (Richardson, 1990, p. 25). Crossan, Field, Gallacher & Merrill (2003) suggest that 'micro-level studies can illuminate the anxieties and tensions experienced by many adults...' (p. 55) and arguably the use of vignettes has the potential to expose the nuances of the experience of returning to education for the women involved. The concept of risk is replete in these women's words, risks not only perceived by the women themselves but also identified by partners, family members and friends. These women had to rely on their own self-motivation and efficacy as they navigated pathways into the university environment

The first vignette describes the reactions that these students received in relation to this decision to attend university. These reactions varied and much of them reflect what Mercer (2007) indicates may be the reality for older students returning to education; being that this shift represents a 'non-normative transition' (p. 30), occurring at a different time in

the life course then what is generally anticipated or planned. Mercer (2007) suggests that this non-normative nature means that there may be limited or absent family and social support. For Nikki and Natalie, silence is used as a means to manage the possibility of negative reactions from others, whilst Sue and Stephanie describe their partners' expectations of clear boundaries between the home and university. Such invisible and unchallenged constraints obviously impact upon how these women manage this transition into university particularly as this relates to managing the identities of student and caregiver.

Limited support from others may also translate into a greater reliance on the individual as a 'motivator, facilitator and regulator' (Mercer, 2007, p. 30); suggesting a greater role played by the self, compared to that of younger students. Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody (2001) identify how their working class female participants were inscribed differently by 'social and psychic economies, modes of regulation, discourses and bodily performances' (p. 138). Higher education was not an assumed destiny and represented a deviation to the expected life course. However, Walkerdine et al. (2001) suggest that this context effectively increased the necessary internal motivation to persist, arguing how their participants did not have any 'structural reasons [for] why they should succeed and therefore ...rely on their own inner resources' (p. 162). Certainly, for the older women in this study, the decision to attend university required substantial motivation not only during studies but also prior to enrollment. As the women's words reflect, they bear the primary responsibility for making this work, the tacit permission of partners relying on their ability to maintain a 'balance', which actually meant the need to guarantee little intrusion or interruption within the domestic space.

The second vignette focuses on how the participants in this study managed this 'balance', revealing how some separate home and university to ensure equilibrium. Not surprisingly, this was a delicate process, requiring a diversity of strategies. The role of student is one that requires time for self and so sits uneasily with that of caregiver, which relies on giving time for others. The women's stories are replete with descriptions of hidden work, both emotional and physical, that this return to learning required.

In both vignettes, the theme of ‘male as breadwinner, female as homemaker’ (Smith 1996, p. 68) remains dominant; the gendered nature of roles ascribed from an early age is clearly defined. Some of the women reflected upon their study activities in terms of ‘guilt’ indicative of what Feree (1990) terms the ‘gendering of housework’ (p. 876), which naturalizes women’s primacy within the home. As Feree (1990) explains: ‘Since housework supposedly flows out of her “natural desire” to care for her family, a woman may feel guilty about every unmet “need”’ (p. 876). This expectation is echoed by Britton and Baxter (1999) and Acker (2012), the latter reminding us that the home place remains the ‘ideological domain of the women’ (p. 218), an environment where the female role is primarily to nurture children and others.

Feminist writers have shifted focus from regarding the continued subordination of women as largely resting upon sex roles and socialization and instead recognising the powerful nature of social stratification by gender (Feree, 1990). The term gender is no longer simply about the study of sex roles or women but has become a study of the ‘patterning of difference and domination through distinctions between women and men that is integral to many societal processes’ (Acker, 1992, p. 565). Acker’s concept of ‘gendered institutions’ is useful when considering some of the hidden obstacles faced by the older female caregivers in this study. Universities, like other institutions, are not gender neutral but instead ascribe roles and identity positions that are based upon deeply embedded assumptions about men and women as well as masculinity and femininity. For example, like the concept of the worker, the student role remains reductive, largely based upon the ideal of a self that is not distracted or defined by ‘domestic responsibilities, poverty or self doubt’ (Leathwood, 2006, p. 615). The ideal of the independent learner is celebrated in neo-liberal educational discourses; the expectation is that individuals will move into and out of education in an efficient and timely manner.

For women who are returning to university after a significant gap in learning and who are carers for the family such positionality is not possible. Instead, learning is necessarily punctuated by interruptions, distractions and the additional responsibilities so clearly

articulated by these women. Identities like ‘worker’ and ‘student’ rely upon abstraction, these concepts are disembodied and fail to acknowledge that both roles are ‘deeply gendered and bodied’ (Acker, 1990, p. 150). The taken for granted nature of these constructions simply maintains hegemonic power structures, perpetuating beliefs and values that do not challenge power inequity. The women in this study were largely expected to conform to the hegemonic roles embedded within university structures and expectations. As Drayton and Prins (2009) point out, the power of hegemony is in the ‘construction of identities, as taken for granted beliefs and norms shape the possibilities we imagine for ourselves, the scripts and roles available to us, our daily interactions’ (p. 114). Institutions of education would appear to remain key actors in ‘promulgating dominant ideologies’ that seek to ‘privilege efficiency and marketability at the expense of social justice’ (Drayton & Prins, 2009, p. 113). These ideologies promote gender stratification by perpetuating norms that in turn require complex management of existing identities and practices in relation to academic activities.

There is a clear need to problematise the gendered nature of both care and learning in order to avoid assumptions that failure to successfully transition to higher education is due to personal reasons rather than linked to structures beyond the control of the individual. The vignettes presented in this article indicate how these women co-existed in a range of realities and the lack of coherence between the various spaces they inhabited. The article has pointed to the gendered nature of these constructs, which are both complex and contradictory. Such understanding supports the need to move beyond ‘one dimensional’ understandings of gender and hierarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 829), recognising the pluralistic nature of femininity. How adult and higher education can assist in countervailing notions of hegemony remains underexplored but for the women in this study, this transition to university unfolded a range of new perspectives and demands that did assist in exposing the contested nature of these domains and partially ruptured gendered roles.

Higher education institutions can then be regarded as important agents of change but this change remains limited if institutions continue to be places and spaces defined by gendered constructs. The identity positions that women occupy both prior to and during

university attendance do not necessarily conform to those available within the higher education environment. In other words, these students are unable to enact the student role in the ways expected by university discourses. The findings in this article point to the need for institutions to not only broaden understandings and definitions of what 'being a student' means but to actively challenge gendered identity positions. This can begin with recognition of the embodied student, someone with external pressures and responsibilities. On a practical level, providing flexible and accessible childcare is requisite as is the option for flexible entry and exit points during study. Many caregivers will engage in interrupted learning and so this pattern should be normalised and indeed anticipated for this cohort. Other required changes include involving extended family in the learning environment and also, recognition of the wealth of skills and knowledges that women arrive with rather than a subtle insistence that maternal and caring attributes remain 'outside the organisation's doors' (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 183).

However, equally important is the need to engage in meaningful conversation with caregivers in order to identify what the ongoing pressures and considerations are for this group. The continuing growth of this student population means that regular and substantive discussions need to be held between learners and institutions that seek to expose the gendered nature of this return to study. Both research projects, while small scale, point to the deeply contested nature of this field and somewhat invisible 'challenges' faced by this group, particularly as this relates to identity work. Female caregivers are significantly represented in student populations across the globe, yet insight into the dilemmas and obstacles regularly encountered by these individuals remains noticeably absent. As the stories in this article clearly indicated, these women all have voices but there remains little opportunity or inclination for their stories to be foregrounded and celebrated.

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