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Hancock, A.

Author post-print (accepted) deposited in CURVE June 2014

Original citation & hyperlink:

Hancock, A. (2012) 'Careers as voyages of self-discovery': why men return to education. *Studies in Continuing Education*, volume 34 (2): 191-206.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2011.609164>

Publisher statement: This is an electronic version of an article published in *Studies in Continuing Education*, 34 (2), pp. 191-206. *Studies in Continuing Education* is available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0158037X.2011.609164#.U43KXUpwaDY>.

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‘Careers as voyages of self-discovery’: why men return to education.

Abstract

This article critically examines the career development of a number of male adult returners to further education and explores the factors that influenced their career decision-making. It also explores the specific reasons why these men returned to education and in so doing connects with the article published in this journal by Scanlon in 2008. The paper argues that men’s decision to return to education is best understood as the outcome of prior career development/learning. Although reference is made to a number of theories of career choice the main focus is Hodkinson and colleagues’ Careership theory.

Introduction

‘While there have been studies of women in further and higher education...a corresponding attention has not been given to men, although it is a nascent and developing area’ (Woodin and Burke, 2008, p.19)

This paper attempts to expand our knowledge of why men return to study by reference to life story interview data with 11 men on an access course at an FE college in the East Midland region of England. The paper also connects with many of the points raised by Scanlon in this journal in 2008. According to Simpson (2005) there is a dearth of literature on why men enter non-traditional careers. Although not the specific focus of this paper, it needs to be stated that my cohort intended to enter non-traditional male careers such as occupational therapy and this will also be examined later.

Before I outline some pertinent literature I wish to provide some brief details about my cohort prior to returning to education. All the men underachieved at school and seven of the eleven men came from traditional working class backgrounds. Liam, who was 28 at the time of his interview, was born in a small mining village. He worked in a number of jobs and on government training schemes prior to returning to education with the aim of training to be an occupational therapist. Dave spent his entire career as a miner until made redundant. In his early thirties he deciding that he wanted to try and become a teacher.

Martin was the son of a Royal Air Force technician and moved from base to base during his childhood. After leaving school he worked as a shop manager and roofer before falling off a roof and seriously damaging his back. He subsequently did not work for seven years before returning to education at the age of 28 with the hope of becoming an occupational therapist.

Peter, Kevin and Darren hoped that the access course would enable them to train as social workers. They had contrasting childhoods: Peter grew up in a large East Midlands city; Darren was born on a small farm; whilst Kevin was born in a mining village. Peter was 25 at the time of his interview and spent three years in the army before undertaking a number of casual jobs prior to returning to education. Kevin worked as a bricklayer before returning to education at the age of 29 after deciding he

did not want to become 'an old bricklayer.' Darren spent 10 years in the army before becoming a long distance lorry driver and subsequently owning a lorry business with seven vehicles. An accident that resulted in the third party's death led to him not only relinquishing the business but also suffering a number of years of depression before, at the age of 43, he felt well enough to return to education.

Craig, who was born in a small mining village, worked at a dry cleaner's immediately after leaving school before becoming a butcher. After a brief spell at a local factory - 'I've never earned so much money [...] but I hated it...I think nights are meant for sleeping' – he returned to butchery and owned his own butcher's shop for several years. However, in his thirties he secured a job as a residential social worker, thoroughly enjoying the work before deciding to return to education at the age of 47 to try and become a fully qualified social worker.

Of the four middle class men, Mark was born in southern England and worked for his father's retail business until securing a number of different jobs in his twenties. At 33 he decided to return to education with the aim of becoming a social worker. Daniel was the youngest man interviewed, and worked in both a pub and an office before returning to college in his early twenties to try and become a teacher.

Richard, like Craig is dyslexic, and this affected his education. However, after leaving school he managed to secure an apprenticeship as an electrician. He enjoyed this work until he became disillusioned with working away from home so often. In his early thirties he decided that he wanted to train as a social worker and enrolled on the college access course. Finally, John was born in the USA and worked in his father's construction business before moving to England in his early twenties and securing work as a carpet fitter. At 39 he decided return to education with an initial idea of social work before eventually deciding on occupational therapy.

I now turn to what the literature on male returners says both about why men do not return to education and, conversely, why some do. I then explore whether mainstream career literature can illuminate why men return to education. The literature suggests that there are a number of factors which influence why working class men do not return to education. First, they do not perceive it to be for men like themselves (Marks et al, 2003; Archer et al, 2001) which is therefore influenced by social class (Scott, 1995; Reay, 2001; Archer and Leatherwood, 2003; Burke, 2006). Second, Higher Education does not offer immediate financial security or bestow on working class males the role of breadwinner (Archer et al 2001, Marks et al, 2003) which is seen as traditionally important to working class males (Bernard, 1995). Third, working class males traditionally viewed work as 'hard graft' (Willis, 1977) something university education and related careers challenge. Fourth, men do not always perceive long term benefits (Archer et al, 2001). Fifth, the experience of student life is seen as unattractive (Archer et al, 2001, Gorard et al (2001). In addition, there have been claims that men consider 'participation as incompatible with notions of working class masculinity' (Archer & Leatherwood 2003, p.120).

Why men return to education is equally complex (Boshier, 2006) and for this reason I only focus on more recent literature here. Scanlon (2008, p.28).found that the men in her cohort returned to education for the following reasons: to become a role model; to placate a parent; as an aid to finding employment; renegotiating learner identities; 'fulfilling dreams'. In this paper I present support for Scanlon's last three propositions but

found no evidence that my cohort were influenced by the first two. Additional reasons for men entering education are 'an education in itself' or to make a 'contribution to society' (Reay. *et al*, 2002, p.7-8). However, many of these explanations explain the return to education by reference to more immediate factors rather than also taking account of cumulative career learning which extends over many years. This paper, therefore, argues that men's decisions to return to education need to be contextualised by reference to the career/life development of the individual; by doing so one can further understand why some men do not return to education.

Career literature

Most of the well known career theorists explain career choice from a psychological perspective (e.g. Super, 1963, Krumboltz *et al*, 1976, Holland, 1985, Lent *et al*, 1994) and in so doing give insights into the process of choosing a career. For example, Super argues that 'in expressing a vocational preference a person puts into occupational terminology his idea of the sort of person he is' (1963a, p.1). Whilst to Holland (1985) the decision maker matches their personality to similarly conceived work environments, other authors, writing from a social learning perspective, focus on such factors as self-efficacy, motivation and goals (e.g. Lent *et al*, 1994). Developmental writers, such as Ginzberg *et al* (1951) and Super (1957, 1963), point to there being distinct stages to career decision making and 'in its classic formulation, therefore, developmentalism saw the developing individual as eventually coming to *the* (original emphasis) decision' (Killeen, 1996).

Conversely, the sociological literature on career choice discusses the constraints that affect individual choice, whether they be: the effects of social class (Banks *et al.*, 1992; Furlong and Biggart, 1999; Blustein *et al.*, 2002); culture (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996); opportunities available to the school leaver (K. Roberts, 1977; Ashton, 1993; Furlong and Cartmel, 1995; Furlong *et al.*, 1996); social networks (Granovetter 1973); parental involvement in career decisions (Werts and Watley, 1972); social space (Ball *et al*, 2000); or peer group membership (Willis, 1977; contributors in Bates and Riseborough, 1993).

The most recent attempt to explain career decision making from a sociological perspective is Hodkinson and colleagues' (1996, 1997, 2006) Careership theory which was developed originally out of an early 1990s study of youth training credits. Underpinning the then Conservative government's training credits scheme was a belief that young people could be helped to make technically rational career decisions. However, the way that the young people in their study actually made career decisions is described by Hodkinson *et al.* as pragmatically rational rather than technically rational (see Hodkinson *et al*, 1996). Pragmatically rational career decision-making is influenced by a person's culture, class and gender and they use Bourdieu's well-known concept of *habitus* to explain how a person's background becomes internalised and ultimately affects career choice. Bourdieu describes the habitus as:

'A system of cognitive and motivating structures [producing] a world of already realised ends, procedures to follow, paths to take' (p.53); 'the internalisation of externality' (p.55); 'it is embodied history internalised as a second nature and so forgotten as history [...] a spontaneity without consciousness or will.' (p.56)

Habitus influences the formation of an individual's 'horizons for action' – a concept that will be used extensively in this paper - which are similar to Ken Roberts' (1977) notion of opportunity structures:

'No one can choose a placement that does not exist or for which they would not be considered. Horizons for action, therefore, are partly determined by external opportunities in the training markets. Equally, no one can choose a placement that they do not perceive as suitable or appropriate for themselves. Therefore, horizons are also formed by their own subjective perceptions.' (Hodkinson *et al*, 1996, p.3)

Hodkinson *et al* also use Bourdieu's notion of *field* to explain the external influences on careers, such as the availability of training places on government training schemes. Indeed interaction with the *field* is a central tenet of Hodkinson *et al*'s position.

However, Hodkinson *et al* recognise that careers have a developmental aspect to them and that one's identity and career ideas can change through living different types of daily routine and via turning points, including the under-theorised effects of chance encounters (Chen, 2005, Hancock, 2009). Many of my cohort were affected by such events. More recently Hodkinson and colleagues have reworked this part of their theory to outline the process of career learning which also draws on Bourdieu: 'it entailed developing and increasing their social and cultural capital in relation to the targeted field... this also entailed learning more about their existing dispositions and abilities...(2006, p. 42).

In the general developmental literature a number of authors have focused on how people change over time (Sugarman, 1986) and some of these ideas are useful explanatory tools for this paper. Sugarman outlines some common features of life-span developmental psychology:

'First, it assumes that the potential for development extends throughout the life span. Secondly, it maintained that there is no single specific route that that development must or should take. Thirdly, development occurs on a number of different fronts.' (1986, p.2)

One of these 'fronts' is a career and the importance of a career in giving a structure to men's life is exemplified by the title of Levinson's 1984 article: 'The Career is in the Life Structure, the Life Structure is in the Career'. The theories of Gould (1972), Sheehy (1976), and Levinson (1978, 1984, 1986), all suggest that there are some common features to the life-course. Sheehy calls these 'predictable passages'. Gould, in describing his results, in effect summarises the position of these theories: 'a description of a sequence of process fluctuations that defines the posturing of the self to its inner and outer world over time' (p.531). Although the timing of stages differs in the various models, there is some similarity: for example, periods within Levinson's and Gould's models often last for around seven years.

None of the above career theories specifically account for why some men choose to enter non-traditional careers such as social work, physiotherapy and occupational therapy. Lease (2003) suggests that a combination of factors influence men's decisions to enter non-traditional careers, including: social attitudes; educational aspirations; and class - flagging up the fact that a number of discrete factors can affect career decision-

making. Later in life my cohort also possessed specific goals which seem important in motivating career decision-making (Lent et al., 1994): for example, security for their family.

Lemkau (1984, Hayes (1989) and Jome and Tokar (1998) note that men who enter non-traditional work have less adherence to traditionally masculine roles and have more liberal attitudes to those roles; which is supported by some of the comments made by my research participants above. In addition, Lease suggests that non-traditional males place less emphasis on achieving status than traditional males, placing greater value on aspects such as 'altruism' and 'social outlets' (2003, p.254) as indeed a number of my cohort alluded to. Galbraith (1992) found that men in non traditional careers had often had previous careers and were married, which the majority of my cohort were.

In this paper I draw on some of the above literature to explain why my cohort returned to education. Seven of my cohort can be described as working class; four as middle class. The commonality between the men is that they all underachieved at school which naturally circumscribed the range of jobs available to them which can partly explain why three of the middle class men in my cohort entered non-traditional middle class male employment rather than stay on at school as middle class boys often do (Ball, 2003): for example, Richard became an electrician, Daniel worked in a bar and John worked as a joiner for his father's company. My cohort drew my attention to five interrelated factors that affected their educational experiences: learning difficulties, teachers, peers, motivation, and disaffection. I say more about their early career decision-making later. Analysis of my data suggests that returning to education can be seen as the result of lifelong learning and which change a person's 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson et al, 1996) which include knowledge of FE opportunities.

Methodology

Given the lack of literature on male career development my research question was to explore male career development with the following specific objectives.

1. To explore the dynamics of male career development
2. To explore the nature of career transition points
3. To examine the place of career in men's lives
4. To investigate the effect of masculine identity on men's careers.

I felt that a life story approach may offer the best way of capturing my cohort's career stories which reflects the recent 'narrative turn' in social science research (Heikkinen *et al.*, 2000; Heikkinen, 2002). However, I also recognised that the term narrative is open to different interpretations: 'It is a loose frame of reference, the only common character of which is that attention is paid to narratives as a producer and transmitter of knowledge' (Heikkinen, 2002, p.11). Nevertheless, within the last two decades a 'narrative' approach has been used by a number of authors in both education and careers research (Measor, 1985; Cochran, 1990; Kelchterman, 1993; Woods, 1993; Heikinnen *et al*, 2000).

There is also a long history of the use of narratives, or 'life story/life history', in the social sciences (Bertaux, 1981; Plummer, 1983; Denzin, 1989; Graham, 1984; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). One of the strengths of the life story 'could be said to be its ability to represent subjectively meaningful experiences through time' (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995, p.29). In addition, it 'allows a person to narrate the story of his or her life in all its

dimensions' (Slim et al., 1998). I attempted, through the use of semi-structured interviews, to allow my interviewees to tell their life stories in detail, since 'to represent a career would particularly involve representing stories people construct about themselves and their projects' (Cochran, 1990, p.73). I conducted one interview with each man in a college of further education: the longest interview was nearly three hours and the shortest 50 minutes, with a mean average of about one and a half hours. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The data was analysed thematically.

As memories of the past, narratives are shaped by a number of factors such as: the interviewee's ability to recall events; the context of the interview; the need to reduce cognitive dissonance etc. Furthermore, to authors writing from a social constructionist perspective narrative data is particularly problematic: for example 'the view that life stories reflect reality or empirical truth is simplistic and misconceived' (Roberts, 2002, p.7). Stories are therefore often seen by social constructionists as representation of the past rather than the truth of the past and some authors talk about 'truths' rather 'the truth'.

Whatever methodological position one holds, the narrative interview is clearly a collaborative process between interviewer and interviewee (Roberts, 2002) and the fact that I was a male researcher with a background as a careers adviser may have affected the nature of the interviews (Padfield and Proctor, 1996).

Because I recognise that different readers will have their own view on the claims made in this article, I offer the following as reasonable ways of judging my accounts of my participants' careers. First, do the claims I make seem plausible given current knowledge? I help the reader in making this judgement by reference to multi-disciplinary research, which can also be seen as a form of triangulation (Denzin, 1978). Second, through the use of quotations, I make sure that my interviewees' stories are heard in the first person and thus the reader has direct access to some of the evidence on which I base my analysis. Third, Schwandt (1994, p.130) offers an additional way of judging interpretivist claims: '[interpretive accounts] should be judged on the pragmatic grounds of whether they are useful, fitting, generative of further inquiry and so forth.'

Early career choice

It is useful to begin by outlining how and why my interviewees chose their first jobs as this provides the necessary context for their later career decision-making, including their return to college. There were a number of factors that influenced why my cohort chose their early jobs: for example, parental influence; opportunity structure (Roberts, 1976) and horizons for action (Hodkinson *et al*, 1995); poor educational attainment; geography; 'socio-scapes' (Ball et al, 2000); chance and turning points (Hodkinson *et al*, 1996). However, underachievement at school was perhaps the greatest limiting factor on their career opportunities and the main commonality amongst my cohort.

Craig; 'I mean I didn't know the world at the time so I just didn't know what I wanted to do [had thought of] airline pilot...but I think I realised it was a bit too hard...and I looked at the merchant navy...The minimum qualifications were something like 4 CSE grade 3 and I knew in myself that I wouldn't get it.'

Most of my cohort's early career decisions were made in a pragmatically rational manner (Hodkinson *et al*, 1996) within their horizons for action. However, the main driving force

behind their early careers was the desire to work to earn money which allowed them to become a breadwinner (Bernard, 1995) and adopt an adult masculine identity (Roberts, 1977, Tolson, 1977).

Kevin: 'At 16, priority was to get a job, didn't matter what job, but to be in work.'

Martin: 'At that time all I wanted to do was leave school and earn some money.'

Craig: 'The males sort of expected to earn money, be the breadwinner [...] as a man you'd go to work.'

Liam: 'The fact that I was doing something you know and money was coming in.'

These quotes also highlight the fact that being in work rather than being unemployed was important to these men. Blustein *et al.* (2002, p.320) note that for some lower social economic status groups notions of career choice are redundant since they simply 'work to ensure their economic survival.'

Most of the men made reference to the influence of career stereotyping (Gottfredson, 1981; Walker and Baker, 1993; Watts, 1996; Furlong and Biggart, 1999; Fevre 2000; Blanchard and Lichtenberg, 2003). For example, Kevin, who was brought up in a large ex-mining village in the early 1970s, and became a bricklayer, stated, 'you worked on the building sites like your dad, or you went down pit, like your dad'. However, he qualified this statement by saying, 'I don't know if it was the same in [city] but round here there was a boom in bricklaying', suggesting that he was also responding to the 'opportunity structure' (Roberts, 1977), as well as the surrounding culture's hegemonic masculinity. Elsewhere in the interview Kevin expressed a very stereotypical view of careers when describing what females did in his area:

'I think they went in the textile industry, machinists, that was the main thing...but it weren't a laddish thing to do then was it?... but most of the girls went on to machining ...or secretaries.'

Many of the identity theorists (e. g. Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980, 1987) suggest that identity is still being defined during the late teens and it may be that many young people are not fully self-aware at the point they make career decisions. The developmental literature points to the fact that changes can occur over time whilst Hodkinson and colleagues (2006) see changes taking place via learning experiences and also turning points (Hodkinson et al, 1996) and it is these changes that the next section addresses.

Later career choice: careers as voyages of self-discovery

In this section I outline the main factors that influenced my cohort's decision to return to college. The men identified specific influences on their decisions to return to education such as wanting to fulfil a dream and the influence of family. However, I feel that their decision to go to college can best be understood as part of their career development as the following quote exemplifies:

Peter: 'I actually said to my mum, "it's almost been like a *voyage of self-discovery* like, the last few years, particularly since I left the army".

Many of my cohort's decisions to return to education can only be explained as part of their career development which included increasing awareness of themselves, their place in the world and career opportunities; thus overcoming some of the limitations they possessed as young men. The following quotes illuminate the effect of the passing of time and new experiences had on my cohort. David and Richard explained how they gained knowledge of new career opportunities:

Daniel: 'I've had a good time to collect my thoughts; nail down what I want to do...it's been a gradual process.'

Richard: 'I think I always wanted to do social work, but I didn't know what social work was. I always wanted to work with people and empower them...and just help them with their lives' but I didn't now that came under the umbrella social work.'

Both Craig's and Peter's stories demonstrate how contact with other people can facilitate increased knowledge of career opportunities:

Craig: 'I assumed that social workers must do a lot of writing...so I went down and told this bloke, "I must tell you I'm no good with writing" ... "Well I'm not bothered about your writing, I just want you to be able to look after young people." So I said I've got lots of enthusiasm - I mean I used to do climbing, sailing, potholing - I'd got these skills that got me the job.'

Peter: 'I'd been working with these young people and they were very challenging in their behaviour - and one day one of the teachers came up to me and said "you know you work really well with these young people", and she said "you've got a real kind of rapport with them" - and didn't realise - it was just my natural way of working with them and that. So I eventually thought this is something I could be suited to...and you know it was something for the first time that had actually interested me.'

It is important to reiterate that the career development/learning (Hodkinson *et al*, 2006) that took place was an ongoing process and Kevin explained how his career learning even continued into his access course:

Kevin: 'It's a minefield really...and having done this year and carried on being a volunteer...I just decided that social work probably weren't for me. The thing is it's really demanding I think and just...I'd got good intentions when I started cos I thought, yeah, I want to be a social worker, but over the past eight months probably thought, well it's not me...'

Remarks about changes in identity were a common feature of my interviews and the following interviewees outline some of the changes they noted in themselves over time:

Richard: 'Looking back, being an electrician was one the best things that could have happened to me: it took me away from a learning environment, it built me up as mature, responsible, confident...it developed me. And then

Growing older

A number of men highlighted the effect that growing older had on their career decision-making, which resonates with some of the developmental models outlined earlier. Liam became acutely aware at about age 27 that 'time was running out' and that if he was to change careers it had to be soon.

'...around September time I felt I'd had enough of this [...] time was getting on...I was mid-twenties thinking something's got to be done [...] it was a point of no return, like do or die, make-or-break time, it was time to do something.'

A similar point was also made by Richard: 'I was getting older, nearing 30, I was aware I needed to make a change.' Gould (1972), Levinson *et al.* (1978) and Levinson (1984, 1986) see the late 20s as a time when men reappraise their lives. Ornstein *et al.*'s (1989, p.126) study found that intention to leave work was greater in this stage than in subsequent periods.

Fulfilling dreams

A number of men saw the return to education and/or different careers as a way of 'fulfilling dreams' (see also Scanlon, 2008). For example, Peter felt strongly that he wanted to make some sort of impact through work:

'I want to do something with my life. I don't want to be old and grey and look back and say what the hell did I do [...] probably one day I'll get married, have a family and that...but to me that would be normal...it's like leaving my mark it's...for me it would be through my work.'

Richard explained how getting a degree was so important to him: 'I've not said this, but a degree's something I've really desired to get since my early 20s, cos it's something I've got to...it's like a dragon I've got to slay.'

Family

Family played an important factor in some of my cohort's early career decision-making and family continued to influence their later career decision-making, albeit in different ways: family often acted in a supportive capacity rather than as proximate influence on their choice of employment. In addition, the men's decisions to return to college were usually based on a desire for a stable and financially secure career to protect their family's future:

Richard: 'Once you've got a family and you've got children, they're your main responsibility.'

He went on to explain how his family had become more central to his career decision-making over time:

'It [electrical work] was really good...used to be a really good laugh with the blokes and I used to work all over the country, but continually working away from home I began to get a bit fed up with it, and I thought, well I don't want to be doing this all my life [...] I saw people in their 50s doing that and I thought I don't want to be there, I don't want to be away from my family and that.

Martin stated that 'I don't want a job just to earn money any more, which probably at the time I didn't look for a job for what I could get out of it in terms of satisfying me, which is what I'm looking for now [...] plus sort of looking towards having a family.'

Mark outlined how he also decided to change career due to financial concerns for his family: 'You know you're never going to progress on that kind of money... so I wanted primarily some kind of work where you were looking to secure your future...afford a good pension and help the kids.' Darren also pointed to the role of family in decision to leave the army: 'I came out to get married cos I don't believe in married life in the army.'

Responding to the *zeitgeist*, in the 1970s Super (1981) introduced into his theorising a new concept - a career rainbow. Super used this concept to illustrate how different roles (e.g. father) become important at different times and in different theatres (e.g. home, work) of life. Moreover, the interaction between different roles, such as worker, homemaker or parent, changes over time. Thus the salience of father and husband/partner gained prominence as my cohort grew older and affected their career decision-making.

The above suggests that there were some specific factors that influenced my cohort's decision to return to education; although not all factors affected each man or had the same degree of influence. These factors can also be seen as an important part of my cohort's career development and the individual factors gained salience for different men at different times in their lives.

Discussion

The data presented in this paper suggests that the relationship between identity and choice of work is complex. However, what does stand out is the fact that all those interviewed acknowledged that their sense of identity changed over time.

A significant factor on my cohort's early career decision making was the influence of the local opportunity structure (Roberts, 1977) and their limited horizons for action (Hodkinson et al 1995) combined with other factors such as family tradition and low school grades. A number of men also alluded to a change in identity. Erikson (1968) famously argued that between the ages of 14 and 20 young people experience a period of identity crisis, whilst Marcia's (1980, 1987) and Waterman's (1982) findings suggest that some young people are likely to have unclear identities well into their 20s. Furthermore, Osterman (1989) claims that between the ages of 18-25 young people from working class families are in a period of 'moratorium' whereby they focus less on their career and more on social activities. During this time 'conscious planning' may not occur and impulsive responses to career opportunities may prevail.

Hodkinson and colleagues (1996, 1997, 2006) careeship theory provides a useful explanation of my cohort's career choice in that it not only focuses on specific structural

factors affecting career choice at 16 but also offers the possibility of change to an individual's habitus and horizons for action over time, through living different types of daily routine and via turning points, and chance encounters. Many of my cohort were affected by such events. Colley *et al.* argue that the habitus is 'enduring and durable, but not eternal' (2002, p.6). Moreover, Bourdieu states that the habitus can change 'by the effect of a social trajectory leading to conditions of living different to initial ones' (1990, p.116). Many of my cohort had lived in different 'locales' (Giddens, 1984) and experienced new living conditions. Indeed all the men interviewed by me had moved from their birth place to other settlements, sometimes many miles away; and in the case of John, to another country.

Giddens argues that in the late-modern world 'the self becomes a reflexive project' (1991, p.32) and a 'trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future' (ibid, p.75). Individuals 'monitor' their action, which leads to the 'recursive ordering of social practices' (1984, p3) – we are both affected by social structures, yet also influence them in turn. The self is created through contact with the modern world and our choice of lifestyle and work is part of this lifestyle as it affords new 'life chances' (1991, p.82). Furthermore, through the 'freeing up' of time and space (via transport, media etc.) we are all able to draw on new 'reservoirs of choice' (Giddens, 1984). Class cultures may also no longer be so visible in the lives of people who inhabit different 'locales'.

Equally the nature of late modernity seems to allow for a more fluid and complex masculine identity as described by Cashmore and Parker (2003) in their exploration of the influence of footballer David Beckham on male identity.

'He is "new man" (nurturer, romantic, compassionate partner), and "new lad"/"dad lad" (soccer hero, fashionable father, conspicuous consumer) [...] whilst still demonstrating vestiges of "old industrial man" (loyal, dedicated, stoic, breadwinning).' (ibid, p.225)

This 'new man' is more in touch with his feminine side and happily undertakes domestic tasks. And, as Segal (1990) points out, men who have children generally enjoy the experience, and some even adopt the role of house-husband as a result of this - as was indicated by a number of my cohort. Burke (2006, p.731) states that her cohort's aspirations were 'produced through their masculine identifications and intricate re/negotiations with others, in relation to changing trans/national discursive fields.'

Thus older adults who have experienced different career learning experiences may possess different identities later in life that allow them to make non-traditional career choices and embark on an appropriate access course. It may also be these adults engage in the type of regulative thought that the social learning theorist Albert Bandura argues allows for the expression of agency:

'I have already examined how the exercise of personal agency is achieved through reflective and regulative thought, the skills at one's command [...] through their capacity to manipulate symbols and to engage in reflective thought, people can generate novel ideas and innovative actions that transcend their past experiences.' (Bandura, 1989, p.1182)

Hatcher (1998), in exploring the relative impact of culture and class on educational choices, offers a similar explanation as to how working-class young people may overcome their habitus:

'The implication is that for working class children, young people and parents, the ability to enter into conscious strategic thinking and action is the means for overcoming the social reproduction of habitus.' (p.21)

Finally, attention needs to be drawn to the fact that my cohort also benefited from the expansion of further education access provision and were thus able to take advantage of adult returner courses, which are part of the *field* in which career decision-making takes place (Hodkinson et al (1995).

Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined a number of specific reasons why my cohort returned to education. However, I argue that these reasons are a product of their career development/learning and without this context many, if not all, would have never returned to college at the specific time they did.

It is reasonable to suggest that during their early lives my cohort were affected by their culture and general environment to produce a habitus, and/or vocational habitus, which, for some, incorporated traditional views of work and masculinity and this restricted their horizons for action. Their choices were also limited by their school grades.

As structural and cultural changes took effect - such as the decline in traditional 'male' work opportunities and the increasing prominence of the role of 'new man' - combined with new life experiences, many of my cohort were able to rework their sense of identity, in varying degrees. What is particularly noticeable is the fact that most of the men I interviewed indicated that identities are open to change, something that they came to realise as they grew older. The men also developed much broader horizons for action which allowed them to aspire to new careers which would also meet some of their immediate concerns such as providing security for their family.

I argue, therefore, that more immediate influences on men's decisions to return to college need to be seen as the end product of career development/learning which explains why many working class men never return to education even if they are, for example, made redundant. The relationship between these background contextual factors/experiences and more proximate factors is an area for further study and one which the narrative/life story approach adopted in this study seems apposite.

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