'This is the plan': mature women's vocational education choices and decisions about Honours degrees.

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Abstract

This paper discusses a piece of qualitative research that explored the narratives of a group of mature women when they discussed influences on their post-16 educational decisions. This encompasses their initial vocational education and training (VET) and their choice to study higher education (HE) programmes in England. The research draws on Nancy Fraser's dual-perspectival notion of social justice to analyse how gender may have affected their educational choices. The research also explores some of the tension experienced in feminist research practice. Data collection was undertaken primarily via semi-structured individual interviews with six female Foundation degree graduates who decided to study an Honours top-up degree. In addition, a research journal was also used to explore a feminist standpoint approach and the research relationships. A thematic analysis of the data found that gender plays a crucial and complicated role in vocational choices. The findings also highlight that although VET is not a second choice, the low pay and misrecognition of 'pink collar' work leads the women into HE study. HE is used to gain credibility and employment security. The research concludes that top-up degrees offer the women individualised solutions to the low status and economic precarity vocational education provides.

Keywords: mature women; gender; vocational education and training; foundation degree; top-up degree; Fraser.

Introduction

The experiences of mature women students and the challenges they face when studying higher education (HE) have been documented by a number of scholars (Penketh and Goddard 2008; Butcher 2015: Morgan 2015; Smith, 2017, 2018), but there is less focus on what influenced their educational choices when they left school and later when they decided to study an HE programme. As a teacher educator in a further education college (FEC) in the

north of England which specialises in vocational higher education (HE) programmes, I teach many mature women with vocational backgrounds who embark on Foundation degrees and decide to top up to Honours degrees. This research aims to understand what influenced their decision to enter vocational education and training (VET) and why they subsequently decided to study degrees. The aim is to shift away from individualised discussions of gendered occupational choices (Millen 1997; Skeggs 1997; Beck, Fuller, and Unwin 2006; Niemeyer and Colley 2015) and explore gender as an organising principle in the lived experiences of Foundation degree graduate women. As the meritocratic nature of the widening participation discourse often silences discussion of structural inequalities (Burke 2012), I take a narrative approach in which women's voices take a central role. I argue that institutional devaluation of women with VET backgrounds and their attempts to gain status and a greater share of resources can be best understood using Nancy Fraser's (2003) dual perspective theory of social justice: recognition and redistribution. The research also explores some of the tensions and limits of reflexivity when a feminist standpoint epistemology underpins data collection and analysis.

The paper begins with a discussion of Foundation and top-up Honours degrees. I explore the relevance and positioning of widening participation discourse and how this is framed in neoliberal societies. The paper then turns to a discussion of Nancy Fraser's (2003) conceptualisation of social justice and argues that this offers a useful framework to analyse the influences on the decisions about post-16 education made by the research participants in a neoliberal era. I then explain my research methods in the light of feminist standpoint epistemology. The second part of the paper discusses the findings. I conclude that the low status and pay of vocational education and training at all levels is highly gendered and leads many women to pursue top-up degrees in order to combat misrecognition and as a form of employment security.

Foundation degrees and top up degrees

The women in this study are graduates of FEC-based Foundation degrees. These degrees, which focus on a particular job or profession, were introduced into the English higher education landscape in 2001. They combine academic knowledge with technical skills and always contain an element of work-based learning. The aims of Foundation degrees are twofold: to provide learners with the higher skills and knowledge required by employers, and to widen participation in higher education (QAA 2015). Foundation degrees are framed accessibly to appeal to a broader range of students than those traditionally associated with HE, for example part-time and mature learners who are already in employment. Unlike traditional undergraduate degrees, there are no formal entry requirements and vocational experience is valued (UCAS 2019). Although some UK universities offer Foundation degrees, they are mainly taught in FECs which specialise in vocational education. The degrees cover a wide range of subjects which are often tailored to the needs of regional industries, for example agriculture, rail engineering and hospitality.

All Foundation degrees have an identified progression route onto an Honours degree programme. This is a route all the participants in this study decided to take. The vocationally-focused Foundation degree is awarded for 240 credits at levels 4 and 5; this is the equivalent of the first two years of a traditional Honours degree. As Honours degrees comprise 360 credits in total, the students on a top-up programme study the additional 120 credits at level 6. The equivalence in credits and level to the final year of a traditional Honours degree is also found in the more traditional academic assessment methods used on top-up programmes. There is less emphasis on work-based learning than on a Foundation degree and more on longer essays and dissertations (Penketh and Goddard 2008).

Over the past decade, a fairly small body of empirical research into the experiences of mature female students on Foundation and top-up degrees has emerged. It is notable that, like

this paper, much of this research has been undertaken by insider researchers (Shafi and Rose 2014; Smith, 2017, 2018). Researchers in this field have found some Foundation degree graduates do not perceive their qualifications as real degrees (Fenge 2011). This coupled with the failure of Foundation degrees to bolster some female graduates' incomes (Woolhouse, Dunne, and Goddard 2009; Robinson 2012), may be a reason why some women decide to progress to top-up degrees; however, extant research focused on this specific group examines their transitional experiences (Penketh and Goddard 2008; Morgan 2015) rather than their motivations. This paper aims to fill that gap.

Contextualising Widening Participation

Debates about widening participation are relevant to this research as they focus on inclusion for disadvantaged groups who have traditionally been excluded from HE. The participants in this research differ from the 'normative construction' (Penketh and Goddard 2008, 317) of an HE student as they are former mature students with VET backgrounds. There is only one Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) widening participation key performance indicator regarding mature students: the percentage of entrants who have no previous HE qualification and come from a low-participation neighbourhood. Robinson (2012) shows categorisations such as these are oversimplified and unhelpful. They do not take into account pressures such as paid work and family responsibilities which put part-time, mature students at considerable risk of non-completion (Butcher 2015). Moreover, their HE participation has declined dramatically by 61% since 2010 (HEFCE 2017). Vocational Foundation degree and 'other undergraduate' enrolments also halved between 2011 and 2014 (HESA 2018), making this another group whose HE participation looks threatened. HESA's (2019) widening participation key performance indicator for mature students appears reductive in the light of these considerations. In fact, all the women in this study should be considered disadvantaged

students as they were mature students, their mode of study was mostly part-time and their first degrees were vocational.

Although Foundation degrees have increased HE access from a wider sector of society, including mature and part-time students (HEFCE 2017), the student diversity sought in widening participation policy is not found on these programmes. Foundation degree enrolments are highly gendered: 50% more women enrol on Foundation degrees than men (HESA 2018). Enrolments also tend to split into gendered subject choices (Woolhouse, Dunne, and Goddard 2009; Smith 2017), for example male students are uncommon on the subjects studied by the research participants: education, beauty therapy, childhood studies and health and social care programmes. Vocational HE programmes tend not to appeal to middle-class applicants with the notable exceptions of high-status law and medicine degrees. In contrast, Foundation degrees recruit well from students in low-participation postcodes whose families have no previous HE experience (Fenge 2012; Robinson 2012). The hierarchical divide in English education between the working-class vocational route and middle-class academic route is nowhere more emphasised than in this stratified system of HE.

Neoliberal values pervade widening participation policy, operating at both an individualised and national level (Burke 2013). Although HE policy routinely emphasises the private, economic rewards of HE, the differential returns for graduates based on their subject area, age, gender and class are rarely acknowledged (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). Woolhouse, Dunne, and Goddard (2009) found that two thirds of the Foundation degree graduate women in their study experienced work intensification with no additional remuneration. Most mature graduates risk making a loss on their investment in HE according to Egerton and Parry (2001).

HE has been repurposed in neoliberal discourses as a means of restoring national competitiveness in a globalised economy (Archer 2003; Burke 2012). A number of more economically developed countries, such as the USA, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, have expanded lower-tier vocational higher education with just this aim (Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Graf, 2017; Smith, 2017). The same trend in less economically developed countries, such as Kenya and Malaysia, is celebrated by the World Bank (2019) which argues that a technologically advanced world economy needs highly skilled workers. An emphasis on future employability in English vocational HE has become a central concern and is inscribed in the validation of qualifications:

> *Foundation degrees… are intended to equip learners with the skills and knowledge*
> *relevant to employment, so satisfying the needs of employees and employers.* (QAA,
> 2015)

Employers are therefore invited to contribute to the design of Foundation degrees. That employers are well placed to determine the content and assessment of HE degrees is questionable (Gibbs 2002). Nonetheless, in Foundation degree discourses, local economies' requirements are accorded high priority. Despite this external emphasis, as I shall show, HE has a transformative effect on the lives of some women who have experienced economic marginalisation and disrespect linked to their vocational backgrounds.

Conceptualising social justice

Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (Woolhouse, Dunne, and Goddard 2009; Fenge 2011; Morgan 2015; Smith 2017, 2018) has been widely used to make sense of the experiences of female, mature students in vocational HE. This research takes a different approach and uses the critical theory of Nancy Fraser (2003) to explore the educational choices of a group of women with VET backgrounds who have experienced economic marginalisation in the form of low pay, and disrespect in the form of stereotyping and gendered violence. Her conceptual

framework is more fitting because she does not subordinate gender to class as a structuring principle, an accusation that some feminists have levelled at Bourdieu's work (Lovell 2004: Hughes and Blaxter, 2007). Fraser's two-dimensional approach to social justice integrates injustices rooted in both the economic system and status order of neoliberal capitalist society. As gender is a 'hybrid category' (Fraser 2003, 19) which is a compound of class and status, an analytical perspective which is able to identify injustices in the connected fields of distribution and recognition is needed.

The first dimension of Fraser's (2003) conception of social justice is distribution, which focuses on redressing injustices which are based in the economic structure of society. As former 'pink collar' (20) workers, the women in this study earned little in female-dominated vocational occupations. This leads to gender-based economic marginalisation. Whilst the distributive paradigm corresponds broadly to notions of social class, Fraser importantly differentiates her use of the term from traditional Marxist theory, broadening it to include the category of gender:

> *I do not conceive class as a relation to the means of production. In my conception, class is an order of objective subordination derived from economic arrangements.*
> (49)

> The second dimension of her conception is recognition, which is a relational theory:
> *When…institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction, then we should speak of misrecognition and status subordination.* (Fraser 2003, 29)

This intersubjective conceptualisation is important because it shifts the focus away from individualised understandings of gender-based injustices, such as domestic violence or the trivialisation of women's work. Fraser does not deny status subordination can cause psychic

damage, but she argues that the wrongs lie in the denial of people's full status in society rather than in the presence of harmful psychological effects.

Her dual-perspectival theory is highly relevant as it enables the injustices endured by low-paid women to be seen as occurring in both the distribution and recognition domains. If low-paid work such as beauty therapy and childcare is devalued because it is coded as women's work, an approach is needed which 'redresses the cultural devaluation of the "feminine" precisely *within* the economy' (Fraser 2003, 66).

At the core of her framework is the normative notion of 'parity of participation' (Fraser 2003, 36) which means all actors have the possibility to equally engage with society and the public democratic sphere. Economic dependence and material inequality deny some people participatory parity. Institutionalised value patterns that deny social esteem to some groups of people also obstruct participatory parity. Below I explore the decisions and experiences of the women in my study to analyse whether these constitute claims for justice in the distributive and recognition paradigms. However, first I will discuss my research design, starting with feminist standpoint epistemology which underpins my methods.

Participants and Methods

Method

My research starts from the experiences of the women who volunteered to share them with me, as masculinist research approaches which claim objectivity have frequently occluded these (Millen 1997). Women's voices are situated in relation to varying forms and levels of power (Ramazanoğlu 2002). As these forces determine whose voices can be heard, feminist standpoint theorists argue that epistemology is inherently political:

> *Women's lives provide better places from which to start asking questions about a social order that tolerates and in so many ways respects even values highly the bad conditions for women's lives.* (Harding 1997, 60)

This research is underpinned by this theory of knowledge and guided by two questions. How did mature women experience choice as young women entering vocational education and training? What influences their decisions to study Foundation and top-up Honours degrees? Six women who had completed Foundation degrees volunteered to take part in-depth, semi-structured interviews. I recorded and transcribed the data. As I collected data and interpreted them, I kept a research journal to detail my emerging understanding and some of the conflicts I experienced as I attempted to make sense of our different positions. I include some extracts as another form of data.

Participants

I asked colleagues for help to identify potential participants within and outside my FEC, but this meant I could not stipulate subject areas or modes of study. The respondents all had links to FECs in the north east of England as either employees or students.

 [Table 1 here]

A tension for feminist researchers is balancing women's voices with making knowledge claims. Skeggs shows that reflexivity is used as a tool to acknowledge the different interests and power levels of the researcher and the subjects of knowledge. This is crucial as a feminist researcher's critical and theoretical stance can lead to interpretations that bring researchers into conflict with their subjects. For example, the female scientists in Millen's (1997 4.7) research:

> *seemed to be actively resistant to any framing of their experience which transcended*
> *individual variation and circumstances, and included a consciousness of the*
> *structural/ systematic nature of sexual oppression.*

My participants had their own perspectives and did not necessarily ascribe the same importance to gender or interpret its effects in the same way that I did. Although Letherby (2003) argues that it is valid for the researcher to claim superior knowledge to her subjects, I

align myself with Skeggs (1997), acknowledging my knowledge is situated in an academic framework whereas theirs is in a different context. This does not imply a hierarchical relationship; rather it is an admission of difference.

Another difference between me and the participants concerns my position as a researcher and my knowledge of academic norms. I obtained ethical clearances from my workplace and my university which were based on guarantees of anonymity following the British Educational Research Association's (BERA 2018) code of practice. I emailed each woman information about how their data would be used, their rights to request and to withdraw these. At the start of each interview, I asked participants to sign a consent form, discussing the use of pseudonyms with them. At this stage, four of the six women either signalled they did not care whether their identity was concealed, or explained that they were proud of their achievements and wanted to be named. I began to question whether I would deny them their voices if I used pseudonyms against their wishes; however, I also felt concerned that they might make this decision without fully comprehending the consequences of waiving anonymity. I did not want to prioritise my use of their voices in the name of epistemology at the expense of their potential embarrassment if I shared their narrative data within the wider FEC community of which we are all a part (Moosa 2013). Equally, I did not want to claim to be the only 'legitimate knower' (Skeggs 1997, 35) and decide on their behalf, so I decided to seek further written consent from each woman about the use of her first name (King, Horrocks, and Brooks 2019). The women all consented in writing to the use of a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

My analysis of the data was a twofold process. Initially, I was guided by my research questions and I coded each transcript looking for influences on VET and HE decisions. I then used Nancy Fraser's concept of social justice as an analytical tool to make sense of the

transcripts and to 'identify impediments to participatory parity' (Lovell 2007, 82). This critical analysis reduced the data to four major interpretative themes in relation to the research aims. The data are conceptualised in relation to the participants' experiences of distribution and recognition.

The analysis of the data was a feminist interpretation in its use of Fraser's framework with its emphasis on the class-like dimension of gender. I also attempted to uncover and be accountable for my assumptions and interpretations (Ramazanoğlu 2002). There are difficulties and limits to reflexivity in data analysis (Mauthner and Doucet 2003) and I wanted to draw attention to these and to the influences which shaped my understanding of the qualitative data I collected. For this reason, extracts from my research journal are also analysed alongside the interview data to critically examine my own standpoint.

Findings

The analysis and discussion below reveal the complicated role of gender in the politics of distribution and recognition. Women from VET backgrounds experience injustices of maldistribution because the classed aspect of gender ensures 'pink collar' jobs are low paid. This injustice is sustained by gender-based misrecognition. Credibility eludes female vocational practitioners, but parity of participation is not assured with the achievement of a Foundation degree. Women's claims for redistribution and recognition are more likely with an Honours degree than a vocational degree. Four major themes are discussed in the next part of the paper.

Understanding gendered VET choices as a distribution issue

The issue of distribution affected many of the women's mothers whose experiences of low-paid, unskilled jobs steered many of their daughters into choosing a VET route: 'She always wanted to do more. She said, "I still work for minimum wage. Don't do what I did."'(Eva). Most of the women did not want to be 'confined by undesirable or poorly paid work' (Fraser

2003, 13). The interviewees maintain that their choices were personal, but they also understand how the gendered segregation of labour influenced these. Their access and choice of routes was circumscribed by the normative construction of gender in vocational work which researchers (Niemeyer and Colley 2015; Haasler and Gottschall 2015) argue reinforces the division between male and female vocational trades:

> *If I wasn't a woman, I probably wouldn't have gone through the beauty therapy route. I don't know what I would have... maybes go down the same as my dad and my brother doing a trade.* (Roisin)

Although people who work in female-dominated trades earn lower wages and have lower status (Skeggs 1997; Taylor, Hamm, and Raykov 2015), the sense that it is gender that structures this unequal social arrangement is not shared by all the participants. When I attempt to probe Caitlyn on whether gender played a part in boys' and girls' decision-making at school, she maintains: 'I think it was even. The same opportunities were available to everyone'. I noted in my journal afterwards: 'felt quite disappointed if I'm honest that she didn't feel it had anything to do with her educational choices'.

A tension in my own position surfaces here: although Caitlyn's rejection of gender as a factor does not align with my preferred critical theory perspective, I did not offer an opposing view. Her notion of opportunity emphasises equality and the freedom to choose. Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser (2019) argue this is a hallmark of liberal feminism which steadfastly refuses to accept that socio-economic factors constrain freedom of choice for the majority of women. I am aware that this reading discredits her subjectivity and that a more dialogic approach to interpretation might have produced a different understanding. Yet questioning Caitlyn's interpretation might have unbalanced further the power differential between interviewer and interviewee. As a researcher, I have to accept that it is necessary to make sense of her experience using explanatory theoretical constructs, but that all

'interpretations have different place, values, functions, appropriateness and purposes'
(Skeggs 1997, 31).

Understanding VET choice as a recognition issue

Although VET and academic courses are often presented as having parity of esteem,
'students and families all know this is nonsense' (Department for Education 2011, 8). The
division between the two educational routes is class-based and hierarchical; few people in
England expect successful academic, middle-class children to choose vocational courses.

English research on VET points out that working-class girls who are unsuccessful at
school are often consigned to vocational education (Colley 2006; Vincent and Braun 2013).
However, the narratives run counter to Skeggs' (1997, 57) assertion: 'to put it bluntly, there
is very little else for them to do but go to college' as most of the women began high-status A-
level courses and Eva abandoned her first degree to travel. These women consciously
rejected further academic study because, like the respondents interviewed in Taylor, Hamm
and Raykov's (2015) study, they had ambitions to enter specific vocational fields: 'I saw
something on TV when I was young about a makeup artist working on a photo shoot. I loved
the idea of doing that' (Caitlyn).

That the women's vocational careers were planned rather than reactions to academic
failure was a powerful corrective to my misconceptions as these extracts from my journal
illustrate: 'I had assumptions about it [VET] being a 2nd choice for [Caitlyn] which it
resolutely was not… Again, no sense that she [Eva] was pushed into her career- it was a
choice!'. When I analyse these thoughts, I am conscious of a number of influences. Like
many people who work in an academic field, my conventional education led me to believe
this is path that others would take if they could. Related to this viewpoint are past
conversations I have had with some of my own HE students who have expressed regret
because they felt university was denied to them when they were young. This is a common

position for mature students (Fenge 2011; Robinson 2012; Shafi and Rose 2014). I have also been influenced by the autobiographical accounts of working-class academics such as Bev Skeggs (1997) and Diane Reay (2017) whose narratives are shot through with a guilty relief that they escaped the vocational fates of their female schoolmates. My assumption that VET was a second choice for the participants was wrong; they rejected academic routes as young women in order to pursue VET.

Unlike the other women, Niamh felt excluded from A-level study, the most prestigious form of post-16 education in England. As a girl who did not fit the normative category of a studious, academic pupil, the hurt she felt still stings years later:

> *I hated authority, hated school. It was rubbish. It didn't do anything for me and I kind of just stumbled my way through the latter stages of secondary education… so it was almost like, 'Right, schooling is done for you. You weren't very good at it. You can go off and do vocational stuff now.'*

However, an individualised understanding of her experience is inadequate as this is an example of an institutionalised misrecognition. Social relations which deem middle-class educational choices more worthy of esteem (Reay 2017) result in the status subordination working-class young people.

Addressing distributive issues through HE study

For most of the women, the decision to study for a Foundation degree had a strong economic dimension. There are frequent references to their low pay in the narratives:

> Sally: *And when you say 'bettering yourself", was it because you talked about being bored? Was it about earning more money?*
>
> Eva: *It was about earning more money. Absolutely! I think, you know, you don't go into beauty for the money.*

Other research confirms that many women who study top-up degrees are motivated instrumentally because the expected boost in salary following a vocational degree in a

female-dominated field does not happen (Penketh and Goddard 2008; Woolhouse, Dunne, and Goddard 2009). The potential transformation offered by HE to socially disadvantaged students is risky because there is no certainty that social and economic rewards will follow (Archer 2003); however, the participants in this research took strategic decisions to enter HE as they believed the financial rewards would make their investment worthwhile:

> *It was a business management top-up and I just thought if I do want to open up my own salon or if I want to go down a different route then that is going to open more doors…instead of having an Foundation degree [in beauty therapy] you would have BA Hons.* (Roisin)

Their Foundation degrees give most of the participants access to jobs in FECs, where taken for granted benefits such as maternity leave and a regular salary are highly valued; however, employment security is of concern to them. This affects workers throughout the world as the neoliberal era has ushered in more forms of non-standard work such as temporary contracts and marginal part-time work (International Labour Organisation 2019). Some participants initially lectured in FECs on insecure hourly-paid contracts. Nonetheless, achieving Foundation degrees allows the women an escape from the precarity of their former vocational workplaces:

> *When I had the [eldest children]…I had to pretty much go back to work straight away, whereas with [youngest child] I had what I would describe as a proper job. So I had a proper maternity leave. It was good.* (Niamh)

The participants conclude that a top-up degree offers greater employment security than the Foundation degree alone. There is also a strong perception that it will grant them access to more interesting work: 'I think it's opened certain paths that maybe weren't there before like teaching in HE' (Eva) and higher management roles:

> *I knew that if I wanted to progress in my career I needed a degree. That was the top and bottom of it… if I wanted to move into management I was going to have to have a degree.* (Niamh)

In widening participation literature, mature students as a social group are often constructed as having an instrumental orientation to HE (Gilchrist, Philips, and Ross 2003), but it is important to frame this in their lived experiences of economic hardship. Some participants recall their childhoods when parents struggled to pay for food shopping and bills. Others view HE study as a means to escape personal financial pressures:

> *I remember sitting down to my husband one day and saying, 'Right, in three years, I'm gonna be a teacher, we're gonna be moving out of this house, we're gonna own our own property. This is the plan.'* (Niamh)

Although some of the women perceive their gender to be the factor which led them into low-paid work, all of them believe they had a working-class background and equate this with levels of pay. Their definitions are grounded in terms of the economic ordering of society, for example, they talk about their parents' jobs. Whilst they expressed no desires to change either their gender or their social class, most wanted to improve their financial positions and this underpinned their HE decisions. Despite most participants having middle-class jobs in education, most of them still identified as working-class. These perceptions align with a recent British Survey Attitudes Survey (2016) which found that 47% of those in professional and managerial occupations see themselves as working-class. Yet the data also reveal the women's tentativeness around social class identification:

> *Roisin came back into the room after the interview to double check her understanding of working-class was 'right'.* (Journal entry)
>
> *I'm not massively up on classes, but I would say would probably working-class.*
>
> (Niamh)

As I did not offer a definition and stayed silent about my own social class background, I may have reinforced the sense I had access to an authoritative, academic discourse which I was withholding. This reinforced our different positions. I was uncertain about my decision not to share more information with the participants, but I wanted their perspectives rather than reflections of mine:

> *Links to me and my mum who felt her lack of education held her back and impressed on me it was the road to a better job. Could've picked up on this but not my story. Not sure how much to 'join in'?* (Journal entry)

Sinead is a full-time student and she also conceives of HE as a way to avoid financial difficulty in the future. She is a domestic abuse survivor and she situates her ex-partner's abusive behaviour in his lack of respect for women, a quintessential form of gender-based misrecognition according to Fraser (2003). Sinead also endured the injustice of maldistibution and could not support herself as a single mother on benefits without help from her parents. HE for her represents a subjective dismantling of androcentric notions, which deem women as less intellectually capable and a means to cast off financial dependency: 'The academic side came from wanting that independence and sort of being able to rely on me… sometimes it's seen as like a little bit of a man's thing.' (Sinead)

Addressing recognition issues through HE study

The women I interviewed decided to study for a Foundation degree because they had expertise in their specialist area. They were all optimistic that Foundation degrees would allow them to move into more stimulating jobs, and for Sinead and Orla it was also seen as a potential escape from some of the perceived limitations of motherhood. The women's decision to study was often a confirmation of their professional status, but unlike the women studying vocational degrees in research by Andrew (2015) and Smith (2018), their intention was to move into new workplaces.

The beauty therapists in this study all believe credibility had eluded them because their skills and intelligence were routinely disparaged by wider society: 'it's seen as an industry where you don't have to have a brain' (Roisin). Disrespectful stereotyping of women's work often takes place in androcentric cultures and the denigration of their skills is an entrenched form of gender-based misrecognition. Rather than interpreting such disrespect as individualised harms, Fraser's (2003) concept of status subordination is useful. The decision to study a Foundation degree can be understood as an individual response to overcome what amounts to institutionalised disrespect. Coupled with the economic injustice suffered by many women working in vocational areas, this is a prime example of gender's class-like and status-like dimensions. The female graduates need to actively claim participatory parity in the spheres of the economy and the status order. Therefore armed with Foundation degrees, they set about claiming new identities and equality in social institutions:

> *Some of the teachers that taught me teach my kids now, so I'm not ashamed to say*
> *occasionally I wear my [college staff] lanyard when I go into the parents' evenings.*
> (Niamh)

Sinead also experiences the transformative power of participatory parity when she attends a domestic abuse conference as an HE student:

> *You had a whole room of people representing services and then just me… it was nice*
> *to sit on the table because they would talk to me like an equal. Not all the time did*
> *they know that I was a service user, but when they did know, that didn't change.*

Sinead's decision to study allows her to shed a stigmatised female identity and claim a respected one: a student whose opinions are valued. For her HE is a form of recovery from the experience of gendered domestic violence. As a single parent, reliant on state benefits, her economic condition reinforced her low self-esteem. The injustices of domestic abuse

reverberated in the domains of recognition and distribution, but HE study offers a form of redress.

From the perspective of the participants, Foundation degrees are poorly understood by their families and friends. Students themselves often believe these are not real degrees (Woolhouse, Dunne, and Goddard 2009; Fenge 2011; Robinson 2012). Whilst the participants find this amusing and frustrating, it compounds the status subordination they have already experienced in their vocational careers. Despite specialising in vocational HE and Foundation degree tuition, FECs are also understood to be stratified institutions in which workplace respect is conditional on gaining an Honours degree:

> *Some of my peers are a little bit more responsive to ideas, you know beforehand I think there was a little bit of a glass ceiling in that if you don't have an [Honours] degre*e…*I think it can be a little bit elitist sometimes.* (Niamh)

The women harbour high hopes that their top-up degree will deliver participatory parity at work and in wider society, which has been withheld because of the class-like nature of gender in society. For them, status and pay go hand in hand, as conceptualised in Fraser's (2003) normative framework for social justice.

Discussion

The findings presented in this paper outline how women from VET backgrounds use HE to secure credibility and higher rates of pay and employment security. Fraser's contention that it is the class-like dimension of gender which ensures women are paid at a lower rate than men illuminates their decision-making. The findings and analysis highlight that although as young people their entry into VET was experienced as a positive choice, subsequent dissatisfaction with the lack of respect and concurrent low pay led them, as mature women, to study for Foundation degrees. Evidence from the Low Pay Commission (2019) shows that the female-dominated vocations represented in this study: beauty therapy, childcare and

retailing are indeed amongst the five lowest paid employment sectors in the UK. The gender-based structuring of society ensures these skilled women are economically subordinate to skilled male workers. This study suggests that gendered vocational experiences are a major influential factor in the decision to enter HE as a mature student. Whilst other research attests to the instrumental motivation of vocational HE students (Archer 2003; Penketh and Goddard 2008; Woolhouse, Dunne, and Goddard 2009), the use of Fraser's feminist critical theory contextualises this as part of the women's earlier lived experiences of economic disadvantage.

The findings also reveal the negative economic consequences which arise from the intersection of women's caring responsibilities and vocational careers, supporting Fraser's contention that gender should be viewed as having a class-like dimension. 'Pink-collar' work can be precarious and routine paid maternity leave is not necessarily guaranteed. Working in childcare settings can be a positive, enjoyable career choice allowing women to fit paid work around their family responsibilities, but this 'choice' is rewarded by low pay (Colley 2006; Andrew 2015; Low Pay Commission 2019). The mothers in this study also bear the costs of their caring work in terms of reduced earnings. Fraser (1997, 62) argues neoliberal capitalism benefits from its 'free-riding' on women's unpaid and low paid labour. Returning to study on a Foundation degree is a means to counter this gender-specific type of distributive injustice and for many of the women, the decision to embark on an HE course is framed in terms of their future earnings.

Choice is a contested concept in feminist research (Letherby 2003). Whilst most of the respondents did have a choice between post-16 academic and VET routes, the consequence of choosing a VET route was the same as having no choice. Dominant middle-class educational attitudes ensure VET lacks esteem, so in effect choosing a vocational career cements the misrecognition attached to working-class identity (Reay 2017). This is the result

of social relations which deem academic courses more worthy of esteem than their vocational counterparts. An institutionalised culture in which girls who do not study 'A' levels are seen as inferior students prevails in post-16 education in England (Skeggs 1997; Colley 2006), whilst the most marginalised adult education courses are those which are predominantly studied by women and girls (Wright 2011). Fraser's (2003) theory of the status model of misrecognition is valuable as it allows this injustice to be analysed at a structural level and to move beyond individualised understandings of choice and stigma.

The misrecognition of vocational education extends to Foundation degrees. Their lower status in the hierarchy of HE was not initially evident to the women, but as other researchers have found, it gradually became apparent to all of them (Robinson 2012; Smith 2017). Moreover, although their Foundations degrees enhanced the incomes of all but Sinead, the full-time student, it did not necessarily deliver employment security. Better employment prospects for Foundation degree graduates are promoted by FECs when marketing these programmes, and whilst this is the case for the employed women, many of them were initially employed in FECs on temporary and hourly paid contracts. As they previously experienced insecurity in their vocational careers, increasing their qualification level with a top-up degree helps them gain permanent contracts. They understand that redistribution will not happen without the respect and higher status that they hope an Honours degree will confer. The strength of Fraser's (2003) dual framework when applied to gender injustice is its emphasis on the intimate links between harms of misrecognition and harms of maldistribution: 'In short, *no redistribution without recognition'* (Fraser 2003, 67).

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the post-16 educational decisions made by a small group of mature women who entered HE from VET backgrounds. By focusing on their lived experiences, I was able to address how their choices were affected by gender-based economic

marginalisation and status subordination. The reflexivity in the data analysis also foregrounds the tensions which surface in feminist standpoint epistemology. I suggest that Nancy Fraser's (2003) dual-perspectival concept of social justice which focuses on the co-imbrication of the recognition and distribution domains can be used to analyse the influences on the women's decisions. Low-pay, unpaid reproductive labour, the cultural devaluation of 'pink-collar' jobs and gendered domestic violence all contribute to these women's decisions to study Foundation degrees. However, I agree with Woolhouse, Dunne, and Goddard (2009) that Foundation degrees may not fulfil the widening participation promise of recognition and redistribution. In this light, the decisions to study on top-up Honours degrees may be seen as individualised attempts to reverse the social inequalities they continue to experience.

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Table 1. Characteristics of interviewees

Name	VET background	Foundation degree	Top -up degree	Current Occupation
Caitlyn	Makeup artist	Education (PT)	Education (PT)	FEC Lecturer
Eva	Beauty therapist	Education and Training (PT)	Education (PT)	FEC Lecturer
Niamh	Beauty therapist	Education (PT)	Education (PT)	FEC Manager
Roisin	Aesthetician	Beauty Therapy and Spa Management (PT)	Business Management (PT)	FEC Work placement consultant
Sinead	Retailer	Health and Social Care (FT)	Health and Social Care (FT)	FEC Full-time student
Orla	Teaching assistant	Children and Early Years Studies (FT)	Childhood Studies and Early Years (FT)	FEC Lecturer